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RAISING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT GRADUATION RATES:

A BEST PRACTICES STUDY OF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study sought to explore best practices at small, private liberal arts institutions that experienced large increases in African American graduation rates. Particular focus was on institutions that enrolled less than 17% minority students whose overall enrollment fell within the middle 50% of all SAT scores and the middle 50% of institutional full time equivalent (FTE) spending. Two colleges were selected for study via one-on-one interviews of key personnel, focus groups of students, and institutional document analyses. Themes from the data which participants felt contributed to the unusually large African American graduation rate increases are discussed.

PREFACE

Becoming educated occurs in many forms and can take many paths. Some benefit from the structure of formal schooling, others through the trials and tribulations of life. But the American higher education system is and remains the world's gold standard for postsecondary learning, scholarship, and knowledge sharing. As a first-generation college student, I have benefitted greatly from the blessings of a life-long pursuit of education. I believe everyone, regardless of family heritage, ethnic background, or other human difference, deserves an unimpeded path toward becoming educated. This paper seeks to illuminate particular ways salient to African American students via best practices in which small, private colleges can help create their path toward an educated life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honor, nor . . . for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge . . . therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. (2 Chronicles 1:11-12, New International Version).

The search for wisdom lies at the core of my daily life. God's word and wisdom has been my ultimate guide and for that I am eternally grateful. I am also deeply thankful for my parents who raised me to treasure divine truth and knowledge. Along the way, I have been blessed by the many teachers, coaches, mentors, and professors helping me persevere through decades of formal education.

Without the careful and patient guidance of my chair, Dr. Joshua Powers, this project would still be floating in my head instead of on paper. His encouraging, yet challenging feedback ensured the highest levels of scholarly standards were always top of mind. Of course, I am deeply appreciative of my loving wife who supported me from the moment we committed to this Ph.D. journey. Her love and anxious support were and are deeply cherished.

One key finding from my research included the motivational power peers have on one another throughout the educational process. As a first-generation college student, I am a statistical outlier. Earning just a bachelor's degree was an amazing achievement for me; the masters, a miracle. Were it not for the members of Cohort 8 banding together, I likely would have never made it past the first year. I benefitted immeasurably from their countless emails,

IHETS video discussions, and our personal friendships forged over those short years from 2004 to 2006.

To my committee members, I thank you for your sage and careful instruction. Dr. Hinton helped me question what it means to be truly “educated.” She modeled for me what a committed, determined, and genuine teacher can accomplish with her students: anything. Through the proposal defense, Dr. Tillery helped me sharpen my focus on the African American college experience at predominantly White institutions, a perspective that opened my eyes to the unfinished business yet to be done with underrepresented college students.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> A college degree has replaced the high school diploma as a mainstay for economic self-sufficiency and responsible citizenship. In addition, earning a bachelor's degree is linked to long-term cognitive, social, and economic benefits to individuals - benefits that are passed on to future generations, enhancing the quality of life of the families of college-educated persons, the communities in which they live, and the larger society. (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 540)

Kuh et al.'s (2008) statement reflects the reality of living in the new knowledge economy defining our society today. Fewer and fewer Americans can rely on a high school diploma to provide the education necessary for economic and social security. Yet a disproportionate number of African American students never earn a degree beyond a high school diploma.

Despite 58 years of higher education policy since the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* desegregation decision, African Americans still face significant challenges to earning a higher education degree. A key indicator in this struggle is the college graduation rate gaps. Tragically, the graduation gap between White and African American students continues to widen (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008). Many colleges address this persistent problem by designing aggressive recruitment campaigns, offering substantial discounts and scholarships, and advancing elaborate retention strategies. Nevertheless, graduating African American students at

rates comparable to White students remains one of the most pressing issues facing higher education today (Blake, 2006).

Overall graduation rates for first-time, first-year students enrolling at all four-year institutions of higher education in the United States is 57% ("Six Year Graduation Rates", 2011). If that statistic was the same for all racial groups, this paper would end here. Unfortunately, this country struggles to graduate African American students (39%) at rates near White students (61%). Although some historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, fare much better at graduating their students, they are not immune to attrition. Among HBCUs serving low-income students, less than one-sixth graduate students above the national six-year average for all higher education institutions (Hebel, 2007). At many predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the graduation gap is cavernous (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

Over the past 30 years, researchers have struggled to understand what phenomena influence students' desires to attend, stay enrolled in, and graduate from college. Among this vast ocean of literature lies a smaller yet rapidly growing body of research focused on minority student college success rates (Carey, 2008; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999a, 2004; Ford & Lang, 1992; Newman & Newman, 1999; Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1986; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Watson, Terrell, & Wright, 2002). Wading through the voluminous storehouse of information makes one wonder if, which, and how colleges are making sense of the data. This becomes an especially monumental task for faculty and administrators working at small, private PWIs with limited resources and often smaller minority populations than their larger public colleagues. Most private PWI budgets allocate little, if any, funds for comprehensive African American admissions or hiring programs. These campuses often lack a critical core of African American

students, faculty, and staff to offer attractive social and mentoring networks, key conditions most African American students and faculty consider when applying for admission or employment. Even when a critical core is achieved, sustaining that balance is tricky. Losing only a handful of students or faculty can result in dramatic population percentage swings.

Given this country's non-White population is expected to surpass Whites by the year 2020, this problem becomes increasingly important (U.S. Census, 2010b). In order to be a land of equal opportunity, the disparity between White and African American college graduation rates must be stemmed. At the core of this problem lie projected shortfalls in the American workforce. Demands on the American technical labor market grew from 138 million workers in 2000 to 155 million in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2010b). Among science and engineering jobs, the growth rate was more pronounced from 3.8 million to 5.7 million (U.S. Census, 2010b). In order to meet this growing demand, higher education must produce far more graduates than is currently achieved (Hrabowski, 2004). Interestingly, the most promising population segment for college admission growth over the next 10 years is African American students (Hrabowski, 2004).

Authors in the field of higher education research generally characterize this problem as a pipeline issue. Compared to their White peers, the gap widens for African Americans earning high school diplomas, entering college, persisting toward a degree, and completing a degree. "As compared to Whites, fewer African Americans take college admission tests and their postsecondary graduation rates are lower" (Gloria, Robinson-Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson 1999, p. 257). However, the problem is not college admission rates. African American students are actually entering higher education at higher rates than White students (Gloria et al., 1999). From 1997 through 2007, African American college enrollment increased from 29.7% to 33.4%.

Nor does fall-to-spring retention rates seem to be of great concern. African American student retention rates actually vary widely when comparing all Carnegie classifications. However, among predominantly White institutions, the retention gap is much narrower than overall retention rates (Furr & Elling, 2002). The issue is graduation.

African American students today graduate at significantly lower rates than White students at most private institutions. In 2006, 60% of White students graduated with a four-year degree as compared to 40% for African American students (Devarics, 2006). “At just the moment when governors and K-12 leaders are working so hard to reshape high schools so all of their graduates will be ready for college, our higher education system seems to be heading in the opposite direction” (Devarics, 2006, p. 1). Addressing this problem requires an in-depth understanding of conditions influencing African American graduation rates and the opportunities for improvement. This study, then, sought to uncover those conditions and opportunities being employed within the private higher education sector.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore African American student graduation rates. Particular focus was given to small, private, predominantly White, liberal arts colleges categorized as Carnegie Bachelors-Arts and Sciences with a minority enrollment of less than 17%. A discussion and implications section summarizes best practices in improving graduation rates for African American students.

Research Questions

This study addressed two key research questions. First, which small, private, predominantly White liberal arts colleges showed significant increases in African American student graduation rates over the four-year period 2004-2007? The second question built from

the first via deep engagement with persons involved with student success at those successful institutions. Specifically, what did members of those academic communities say explained their success in improving African American student graduation rates?

Significance of Study

The African American–White racial graduation gap is among the most pressing issues facing our nation's higher education system (Educational Research Service, 2001). For American society, the benefits of a well-educated population are numerous. Communities with highly educated citizens experience higher levels of civic engagement (i.e. voting), increased philanthropic giving, higher tax revenues, lower reliance on social services, and lower incarceration rates (Baum & Payea, 2005; Zhang, 2008). For the individual, a higher education degree offers, among other intrinsic benefits, increased earnings and a higher standard of living (Yau, 2009).

Over the past 30 years, the number of traditional age college entrants has seen steady and significant gains. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Figure 1) shows that the United States has experienced a 66% increase in traditional college-aged students since 1970 (Fry, 2011). In that time, the earnings gap between high school and college graduates has widened significantly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Today, as shown in Figure 2, a college graduate can expect to earn nearly double that of their peers with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011).

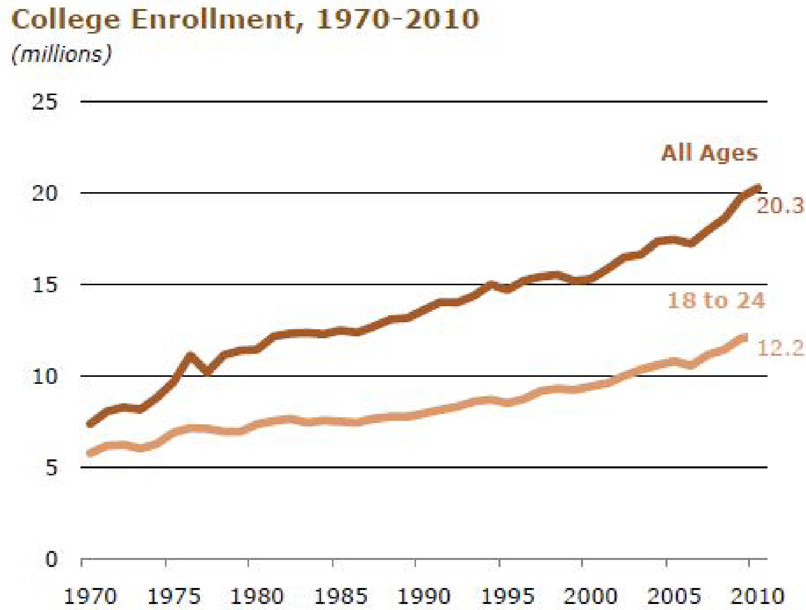

Figure 1. Percent of youth attending college 1970-2010. Source: Fry (2011). Graphic used by permission of the Pew Research Center.

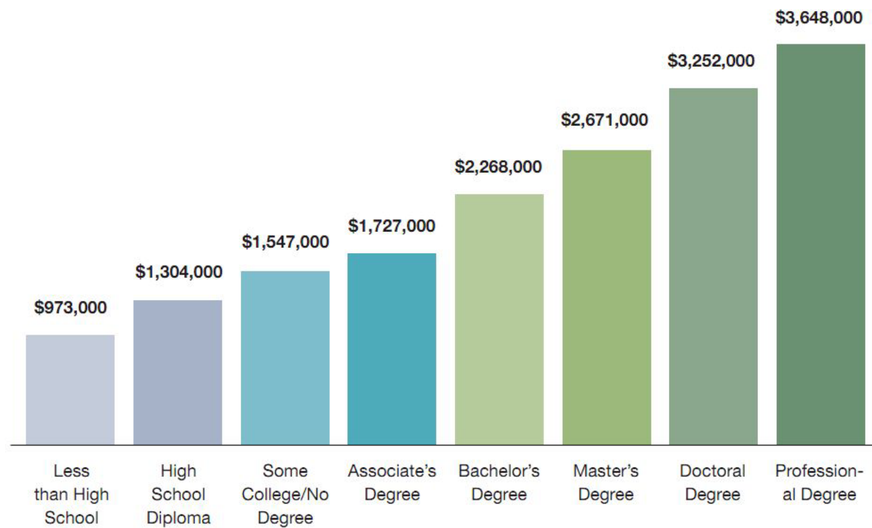

Figure 2. Median lifetime earnings by highest educational attainment, 2009 dollars. Source: Carnevale et al. (2011). Graphic used by permission of Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

These two figures alone paint a grim reality. More students are attending college, thereby earning significantly more than those with only a high school diploma. But to what degree are our African American students benefiting from these upward trends? The literature charts a course of African Americans struggling from a history of social and educational oppression toward a future where college degrees lag further behind their peers. This population, which already experiences disproportionate rates of poverty, incarceration, and voting participation compared to White Americans, is heading toward a crisis.

When considering the potential economic, social, and security benefits to our nation, improving higher education completion rates among African American students, even modestly, can have a significant positive impact on our country. Higher education should, then, aggressively explore best practices at retaining and graduating their underrepresented students. Better understanding such practices may help college decision makers close the racial gaps that continue to plague our industry.

All students deserve an equal chance at attaining a college degree. However, understanding the means and methods to achieving equity is difficult to establish. Little consensus is borne out through a review of extant literature. Among the most cited reasons for dropping out of college are (a) student financial hardship; (b) an African American culture that, in many communities, de-emphasizes the importance of higher education; (c) little institutional priority given to this problem; and (d) campus environments perceived by many African Americans as hostile (Carey, 2008; Fleming, 1988; Gloria et al., 1999; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Jones, 2001; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

Topping the list of graduation success is socio-economic status. There is a direct correlation between a student's socio-economic status and college completion (Bowles, Gintis, &

Groves, 2005). The wealthier the student's family, the more likely that student will earn a baccalaureate degree (Bowles et al., 2005). Although not the sole factor in explaining collegiate success, family income is a significant indicator. More and more, scholars are compiling research that shows how economic origins play a dramatic role, if not the main role, in determining a student's educational and social destination (Bowles et al., 2005). Plainly stated, as the rich get richer and the poor poorer, the effect on attending college, ostensibly the great economic and quality of life equalizer, becomes more pronounced.

Through the use of the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), higher education as an industry can track which colleges are narrowing, maintaining the status quo or experiencing widening graduation gaps. Researchers have a powerful tool to identify high performing institutions and examine the strategies, policies, and programs contributing to higher graduation successes. In recent years, graduation rates have become the tool of choice for national publications, state officials and families when ranking colleges (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008). For instance, the highly popular *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings issue bases 16 to 20 percent of its rankings consideration on this factor alone (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008).

The six-year graduation rate is the traditional benchmark and unit of study. It is the Department of Education's standard used to calculate graduation rates for first-time, full-time bachelor's (or equivalent) degree-seeking students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). The six-year time frame also accounts for the various and legitimate reasons traditional first-time, first-year students may take longer to attain a four-year baccalaureate degree: study abroad, changing majors, completing internships or cooperative study (co-op) terms, and

participation in pre-professional extended programs such as engineering and accounting (J. Collins & Porras, 1991).

Although six-year rates may be the national graduation rate standard, a four-year focus is often a more effective time frame when comparing graduation rates among small, private, liberal arts colleges. Cohorts entering these institutions tend to graduate in four years rather than six (Ewell et al., 2003; Kuh, 2003a). Factors driving quicker graduation rates at small, private, liberal arts colleges include higher tuition costs, stronger bonds nurtured within entering cohorts, fewer students working full-time or starting families until after graduation, and a higher percentage of students enrolled full-time. Most importantly, there is an institutional emphasis on a four-year academic experience (i.e., academic goals are generally set within a four-year target for degree completion) and a growing national emphasis on speeding time to completion.

A recent Education Sector report (Carey, 2008) best reveals the general answer to this study's problem of graduation rate disparities. "If there is a single factor that seems to distinguish colleges and universities that have truly made a difference on behalf of minority students' [graduation rates], it is attention." (Carey, 2008, p. 5). Carey (2008) suggested that institutional resources, programs, and services aimed to support African American student learning are key to improving graduation rates. This study sought to identify those small private institutions that are applying the best means and methods of student support and attention.

Definition of Terms

Retention, persistence, and completion rates refer to the benchmarks of progress students throughout their collegiate experience. Student *retention* generally measures the rate at which first-time, full-time students successfully complete their first year of college and continue enrollment at the same institution into the second year (Astin, 2005/2006; Seidman, 2004/2005).

Basically, first-year students are considered retained if they re-enroll for their sophomore year immediately following their first or "freshman" year. Continuous enrollment, with few exceptions, beyond the second year toward a certificate or degree refers to persistence. Completion is defined as graduating or earning a certificate or degree within three years for two-year colleges or six years for four-year colleges (Kuh, 2001). Each of these terms is the subject of numerous studies aimed at better understanding why students stay in college and why they leave. But it is graduation, or degree completion, that is the final puzzle many are trying to solve. In the words of Adelman (1999), "degree completion is the true bottom line for college administrators, state legislators, parents and most importantly, students—not retention to the second year, not persistence without a degree, but completion" (p. 5).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of research examining student retention to degree completion is immense. Major categories of research span the collegiate experience from first-year orientation surveys to post-graduate satisfaction research (Astin, 1977; Tinto, 1987). Thus, in order to provide the appropriate context for this study, a brief history of educational access is offered in this chapter followed by a review of germinal research on student retention, involvement, engagement and institutional characteristics as they impact student degree completion. From these broad theoretical frameworks, a more concentrated survey of African American experiences in higher education follows.

African American Students in Higher Education

History of Access

Understanding the current lag in African American graduation or completion rates warrants a brief history lesson in access to education. Since its ancient beginnings, formal education in any major civilization was initially limited to wealthy men of the dominant culture. Men were the exclusive beneficiaries of philosophical and cultural training for centuries. In the west, only boys from the most elite Greek families studied under Plato, Isocrates and Aristotle (Marrou, 1982). Young men or boys in the east learned from Chinese Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism through the One Hundred Schools period (551-523 BC); (Gernet, Foster, &

Hartman, 1982). On both sides of the globe, education emerged as a way of transmitting knowledge and culture to future leaders. However, women and ethnic minorities were categorically excluded from earning a formal education in virtually every society.

Education for the masses, or public education, began to emerge first in early 18th century Europe. Strong economic times and a growing sense of nationalism fueled a shift in educational philosophy from private privilege to public good. Germany (Prussia) was the first to nationalize education through public funds in 1717 (Paulsen & Lorenz, 1908). For the first time in history, public grammar and secondary schooling was offered to all citizens of a country without regard to social status or religious affiliation (Paulsen & Lorenz, 1908). The concept spread across the continent to France and the British isles. By the late 1800s, much of Europe provided free, universal access to its citizens.

African American Access

Equal higher education access for African Americans took nearly three more centuries to attain. From the first colonial settlers until President Lincoln's emancipation proclamation, Black families were excluded from formal education—in most cases by law—in all southern and most northern states (Anderson, 1988). The Presbyterians at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) in 1774 were the first to formally admit and educate African Americans (Westmeyer, 1985). The first college dedicated solely to the education of Blacks was founded by a group of Philadelphia Quakers in 1830. Originally named the Institute for Colored Youth, Cheney University of Pennsylvania today remains the nation's oldest HBCU, or historically black college or university. The post-civil war reconstruction granted new federal resources for public education. Access to public grammar schools was widely available for free children. However, Black Americans, largely concentrated in the southern states, struggled to find access.

By 1900, over 10 million students were enrolled in public schools benefiting from new federal legislation making school attendance compulsory (Westmeyer, 1985). Educating newly emancipated Black children alongside White, however, was still illegal in the southern states (Anderson, 1988). It would be another half century before African American families in those states could send their children to integrated public schools (Anderson, 1988).

Recognizing the potential to spur industrial and agricultural growth, Congress passed the 1862 Land Grant Act. States that had not seceded from the Union were granted large swaths of land to develop institutions offering study in agricultural, mechanical, and military arts. Twenty-eight years later (1890) Congress enacted the second Morrill Act banning discriminatory admissions practices and providing federal resources for separate “negro” colleges (Westmeyer, 1985). Out of this legislation sprang numerous HBCUs. Colleges such as Alabama State University, Jackson State University in Mississippi, and Morehouse College in Georgia remain among the most prestigious HBCUs today.

Perhaps no other federal government program expanded educational access as effectively as the G.I. Bill of 1944. This bill offered grants and services to educate American soldiers returning from World War II. By 1946, over 100,000 African American service men had applied for educational funding. Unfortunately, only one-fifth of those applicants enrolled. Reports of wide-spread admissions discrimination, artificial tuition inflation, and fraud meant higher education access would remain out of reach for the vast majority of non-White students for another decade (Herbold, 1994). Equal access to all federally funded institutions began when the Supreme Court issued its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954. That same year, Harvard celebrated its 328th birthday.

It was not until the Higher Education Act of 1965 and its reauthorization in 1972 that historically underserved populations including African Americans were afforded widespread access via Pell grants, government loans, and other support programs. Over the next 30 years, colleges and universities deployed affirmative action strategies to stamp out lingering discriminatory admissions practices. A few programs fell under legal scrutiny leaving a trail of ambiguity for the future of affirmative action. The University of California at Davis, for example, practiced parallel medical school admission processes in the 1970s. The "regular" admission process considered applicants strictly on their academic and personal attributes without considering race. Academic and test score standards were the primary factors for acceptance. The "special" admissions process aimed to achieve a more diverse entering class mix. Applicants who self-reported being economically and/or educationally disadvantaged received additional consideration (Kaplin & Lee, 1997). Those admitted under the special process were exclusively from ethnically diverse, or non-White, backgrounds and often reported lower academic and test scores than those admitted through the regular process. Although the special processes granted more non-White students access to medical school, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) that the dual admission process was unconstitutional. A similar verdict was reached in the *Hopwood v. the University of Texas* 1996 decision (Hendrickson, 1999). Both the *Bakke* and *Hopwood* cases made dual admission processes illegal, thereby limiting the means by which colleges and universities could consider race for admission. Although the Michigan affirmative action decisions ultimately afforded institutions the ability to take race into consideration in admissions, it was only under very narrow circumstances.

Earning a higher education degree today remains a significant pipeline challenge for most African Americans. Despite increases over the last few decades, African American college enrollment lags behind Whites by 10% (U.S. Census, 2008). For those who choose college, the enrollment gap widens considerably toward graduation. In 2002, African Americans graduated at a rate 20% lower than Whites (Berkner & Cataldi, 2002). Most concerning is that the graduation gap shows no signs of narrowing in the near future (Carey, 2004).

Predominantly White Private Institutions

Across all institution types, private colleges and universities consistently post higher graduate rates, on average, than their public counterparts (Ewell et al., 2003). This is true across all racial and ethnic demographics as well. Most notably, African Americans from the classes of 2002 posted graduation rates that were 11% higher than their public college peers (Education Trust, 2009). Despite these encouraging numbers, many studies report that African American students often face overwhelming challenges at small private, predominantly White institutions (Chang, 1999; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999b; Watson et al. 2002). Several factors contribute to these challenges.

Providing a diverse student body racial composition is a critical component to building a supportive educational atmosphere (Chang, 1999; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999b; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Watson et al., 2002). Both educational outcomes and student perceptions toward their college experiences are significantly impacted by how diverse or homogeneous their campuses are (Chang, 1999; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999b; Watson et al., 2002). Watson et al. (2002) interviewed 150 students from seven small, private, predominantly White institutions across the United States. Among their research questions was how the campus climate impacted their out-of-classroom learning. They concluded that "especially for the minority students, out-of-

classroom engagements . . . constitute perhaps the most important component in their collegiate experience" (Watson et al., 2002, p. 102).

Utilizing data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP), Chang (1999) analyzed responses from nearly 12,000 students from over 370 public and private four-year institutions. Among those attending highly diverse campuses, respondents reported higher interaction with other students of similar backgrounds, which promoted a sense of security and self-confidence. Highly diverse campuses were defined as student body compositions approaching near equal distribution of Latino, Asian, Black and White populations (Chang, 1999). Chang's work extended Astin's (1977) study in which he examined the effects of structural diversity on educational outcomes. Specifically, Chang reported that as racial composition approached highly diverse levels, reported student social interaction with those from different races also increased. As a result, these social interactions encouraged out-of-class learning from and about other cultures (Chang, 1999).

Kuh (2003a) found similar effects of structural diversity at small liberal arts institutions. Drawing from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), he found that students attending liberal arts colleges are "significantly more likely than their counterparts at other types of institutions to talk seriously with other students who . . . are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to report making more progress in understanding people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds" (p. 7). Although liberal arts institutions may offer rich cultural learning opportunities, their environments can be more challenging for African American students. "Students of color, especially African American students, do not find the liberal arts college environment as supportive as other students" (Kuh, 2003a, p. 6). It seems, then, that although small, private liberal arts institutions offer many opportunities for cultural understanding and rich

interracial dialogue, learning among non-White students can be impeded if the campus lacks a sufficiently diverse student body. Furthermore, these environmental conditions may also contribute to the differential rates in graduation between White students and African American students.

The importance of diversity for African American students attending predominantly White institutions cannot be overstated. Students with friends, mentors, and counselors who share their ethnic and cultural backgrounds seem to adjust easier to adversity and persist toward graduation with greater success (Fleming, 1988; Hu & Kuh, 2003). Fleming compared African American student experiences at both predominantly White and historically Black institutions (Fleming, 1988). Her findings suggest that HBCUs provide this supportive environment that offers a "buffer against the impact of . . . interpersonal trauma" (p. 68) almost universally experienced by African American students at PWIs (Fleming, 1988). HBCUs seem to do a better job than PWIs at engaging African American students in campus life and recognizing student achievement (Fleming, 1988).

Although high levels of structural diversity seem to have positive effects on student experiences, they may also contribute to in increases in racism (Horton, 2000). Increased admissions competition, swelling costs of college attendance and the perception that affirmative action unfairly disadvantages White students contribute to a culture of racist micro-aggressions (Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011; Horton, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Micro-aggressions are "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Solorzano et al. (2000) conducted African American student focus groups to study the effects of and responses to micro-aggressions at three college campuses. Utilizing critical race theory as a lens, they found

that the cumulative effect of micro-aggressions creates a hostile campus atmosphere. In many cases, participants earliest in their racial identity development contemplated dropping out or transferring to another institution. Those persisting through to their junior and senior years "adapted by finding supportive counterspaces in which to deconstruct these experiences" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 70). On college campuses, these counterspaces are integral to the racial identity development process. Such spaces include African American student organizations, fraternities, sororities and study groups (Cuyjet et al., 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2000; Tatum, 1997).

The Liberal Arts College Environment

Kuh (2003a) studied institutional types in their propensity to engage students in the educational environment. Among institution types, Kuh found clear differences in how well students and institutions connect. "Students at liberal arts colleges generally are more engaged across the board in effective educational practices than their counterparts at other types of institutions" (Kuh, 2003a, p. 4). What remains less clear is why.

One key factor may be that private liberal arts colleges tend to foster much higher levels of student-faculty contact. Increased contact naturally encourages casual and formal mentoring relationships, fosters a network of support and early intervention as students inevitably experience challenges (Fleming, 1988; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999a; Kuh, 2003a). By contrast, Kobrak (1992) noted the lack of institutional incentives for faculty at large research institutions to engage their students. He advocated for organizational and political shifts among faculty to aid retention and graduation rates of African American students. Specifically, he calls for more White faculty to actively mentor disadvantaged students. "A larger number of sympathetic White faculty members must become more actively engaged in working with such students and

in removing some of the excess burden now shouldered by Black faculty members" (Kobrak, 1992, p. 510).

Interestingly, not all students benefit from highly engaging environments. In a collaborative study, the NSSE survey was co-administered with instruments developed by the RAND Corporation and the Council for the Advancement of Education to gauge the outcomes of a liberal arts education (Benjamin & Hersh, 2002). Over 1,000 students from 12 colleges participated. Their results suggested that the highest achieving students (defined as those with SAT scores of 1,300 or more) tended to benefit less from engaging educational practices compared to those students of lower ability (Benjamin & Hersh, 2002; Kuh, 2003a). Thus, for institutions seeking to boost student engagement across the board, concentrating on lower ability students seemed to yield the greatest educational gains (Kuh, 2003a).

It seems, then, that highly diverse and engaged small, private liberal arts institutions may offer superior learning environments for African American students identified as lower ability (Chang, 1999; Kuh, 2003a; Watson et al., 2002). Understanding how they develop in this opportune environment requires deeper analysis.

The Importance of Dialogue

Offering the ideal learning environment may not be sufficient to ensure educational success. To fully support African American student learning and development, faculty, staff, and students must recognize the forces of oppression that permeate even the most diverse and engaged campuses. Specifically, a practice of authentic dialogue should be prevalent (Freire, 2004). According to Freire (2004), dialogue consists of discussions that invoke both reflection and action.

Students must critically think about the ways in which their environment supports or perpetuates oppression. From overt institutionalized discrimination to subtle, micro-aggressive behaviors, oppression on even the most diverse campus can stifle learning and development (Freire, 2004). Reflecting on these oppressive forces leads to an awareness of how their ability to learn, develop, and become fully human are impeded. Successful dialogue also reveals meaningful ways in which students may act and influence their environment ultimately allowing them to emerge from their oppression (Freire, 2004). Without rich dialogue among and between diverse groups, learning suffers and the forces of oppression are perpetuated (Freire, 2004).

For the African American college student, dialogue is essential to their racial identity development. Dialogue, or discussions involving reflection and action, is critical to help students progress through the five critical stages of nigrescence, the process of becoming Black (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1995). These stages include pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emmersion, internalization and internalization-commitment (Cross et al., 1995). In the pre-encounter stage, the student has not yet begun the racial identity development process. Identity is largely constructed in direct relation to the dominant group, typically Eurocentric, White society. Black identity is relatively non-existent or, worse, devalued. The encounter stage is marked by a significant experience or series of experiences that challenge his or her sense of racial identity. These experiences range from being a victim of overt racism, to campus-wide discrimination, to a series of micro-aggressive behaviors that cause the student to question his or her identity. Confusion, alarm, anomie, and depression are typical emotions in the encounter stage (Cross et al., 1995; Durkeim, 1997).

Following these encounters, students often immerse themselves in Black culture neglecting or abandoning non-Black friends and activities. Dialogue during this stage helps the

student explore and adopt a more Afrocentric identity while shedding his or her externally imposed Eurocentric identity. Emerging from this stage results in a powerful new Black world-view marred by intense anti-White sentiment (immersion-emersion stage). Role models eventually help the student internalize a more confident Black centered identity while releasing anti-White sentiments.

Without continued mentorship via dialogue, many students would remain stagnant in their development. Progression toward the final internalization-commitment stage requires the student to act. Both Freire (2004) and Cross et al. (1995) emphasize the critical importance of action through dialogue in order for the student to become fully human and, in this case, to reach full nigrescence. It is through activism and encouraging the oppressed and those struggling with their Blackness that helps one to fully experience humanization and nigrescence (Cross, et al. 1995; Freire, 2004). Progression through these stages is an important process for student retention, persistence and graduation.

Student Retention

Interest in retaining all students, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, is of utmost concern to the overwhelming majority of modern colleges. Lean economic times, shifting demographics and broader government oversight demand greater access to higher education, transparency, tighter budgets, and increased accountability (Anderson, 1985; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For those seeking guidance, numerous retention theories are available. Among them, Tinto’s theory on student departure stands as a monumental pillar and is one of the most referenced in the literature.

Tinto's Theory of Departure

To better understand how institutions might support students through graduation, Tinto (1987) examined why students depart. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto analyzed data from the first National Longitudinal Study (NLS) of 1972 to get a glimpse of student departure patterns as they leave their initial institutions. Before this study, there was no comprehensive, nationally representative profile to track student departure (Tinto, 1987). Of those sampled from the 1972 high school graduating class, nearly 45 percent entered a four-year institution that same academic year. However, less than half (only 44%) of that cohort ever completed a four-year degree (Tinto, 1987). Armed with this new data, Tinto set out to analyze and map the various factors contributing to students' decisions to leave college, or drop out. Central to his analysis was the interaction between students and their institutions and the careful distinctions made between the concepts of dropouts, stop outs, transfers, and completers (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto's (1975) college dropout theory draws clear analogies from Durkheim's (1987) suicide theory. Durkheim's suicide theory claims that individuals in a society are more likely to commit suicide when their personal values are misaligned with the larger values of the society in which they live or when they fail to integrate with other individuals in that society (Durkheim, 1987). In the college setting, student decisions follow similar paths to departure. Students who find themselves on college campuses with institutional or cultural values markedly different from their own tend to have higher rates of departure (Tinto, 1975). They often feel isolated and fail to successfully integrate with fellow students and faculty. In these cases, students often choose to voluntarily withdraw from college.

The college's unique academic environment also creates causes for departure. Students who fail in the academic environment (i.e., poor grades) are often required to leave college involuntarily (Tinto, 1975). In contrast to Durkheim's social theory, a student can become overly engaged in the social environment at the detriment of academic standards. In such cases, the students are placed on academic probation, suspension or permanently separated from the institution. Alternatively, many students fail to integrate with the social environment, yet thrive in the academic environment and therefore persist through graduation. The desire to fulfill academic requirements for occupational or other reasons can be quite effective in stemming dropouts (Tinto, 1975).

Integrating these two factors, the social domain and academic domain, was key to Tinto's (1975) original theory and continues today throughout his revised editions (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Another key attribute of Tinto's dropout theory is that it was predictive, unlike Durkheim's suicide theory which was only descriptive. Tinto advanced a predictive theoretical model by analyzing the individual student characteristics and integrating them with the broader social and educational domains.

Tinto (1993) theorized that a student's family background (socio-economic status, community of residence, value climates, and expectational climates), individual attributes (sex, ability, ethnicity, and race), and pre-college schooling (grade point average, academic attainment) formed a triad of inputs necessary for a baseline understanding of student departure decisions. From here, the student's commitment to academic goals and the institution's social system begin the decision process. High initial student commitments to both systems, the model argued, created a firm foundation for student retention from first to second year. Low

commitments to either or both systems increased the likelihood for an eventual dropout decision (Tinto, 1975).

Upon matriculation, students experience the college environment through both academic and social spheres of influence simultaneously. If the student integrates well with peers and faculty in the social system and performs well in the academic system, the likelihood for dropping out is low. Conversely, if the student's experience results in social misalignment and/or poor academic performance, the student fails to integrate with the academic system and/or social system. Thus, the student's commitment to academic goals and/or social systems is low. In these cases, the likelihood for dropping out increases significantly. Figure 3 presents this comprehensive model and its linkages.

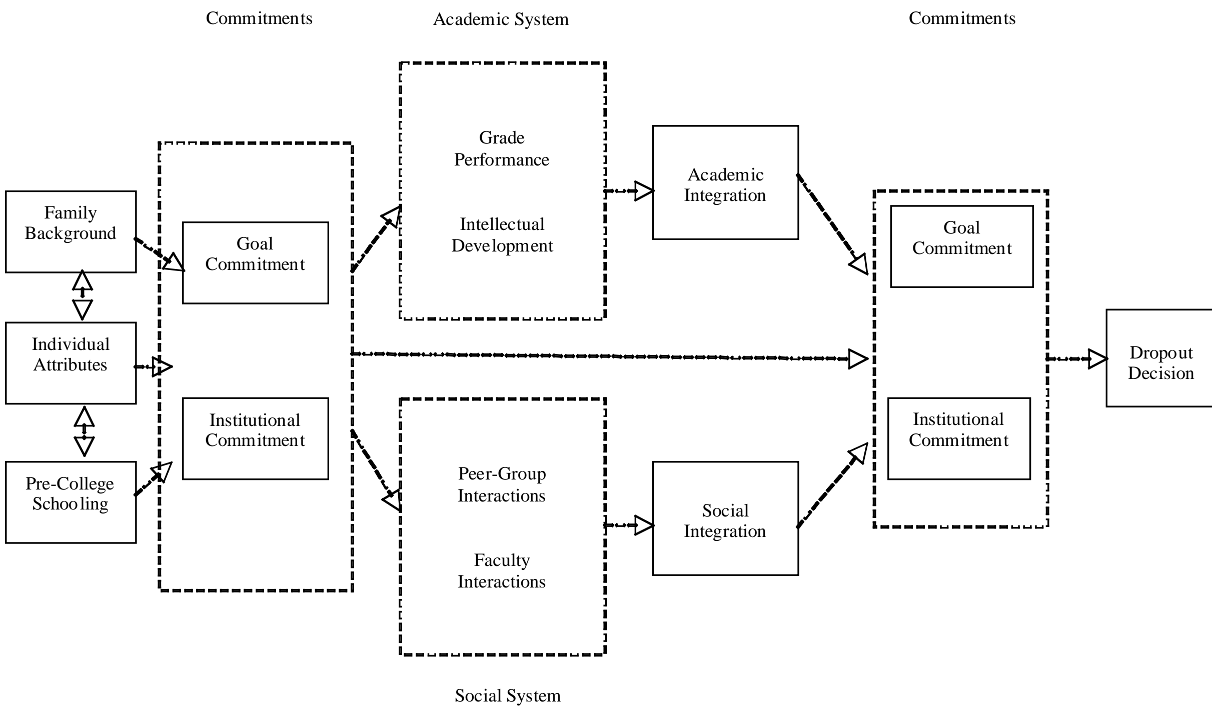

Figure 3. A theoretical model of student dropout behavior. Source: Tinto (1975). Graphic used by permission of Vincent Tinto.

From Tinto's (1975) analysis emerged a more precise definition of the traditional terms *dropout* and *withdrawal*. These terms described only a narrow band of students who left their first institutions prior to degree completion. Describing the numerous paths departing students take helped sharpen estimates on actual completion rates. It turned out that students were more tenacious than was previously reported in the literature. Prior to this study, higher education research labeled most departing students as dropouts. Tinto (1975) explained that many more students than was known simply transferred to another four-year or two-year institution. Others simply stopped out or temporarily dropped out. In fact, the NLS data showed that 59% of first-time, full-time students eventually obtained a college degree within six years. Completion simply took longer than the traditional four-year time frame and often occurred at institutions different from their initial entry institution.

Tinto's (1975) ground breaking study not only better labeled the non-traditional paths to degree completion, but helped explain why students leave their first institution and how college officials might retain them. He made careful distinctions between institutional departure and system departure. Students who choose to drop out from one college, his analysis showed, did not necessarily drop out of the higher education system. The former refers to students who chose to leave their initial entry institution but eventually earned a degree at some other institution. System departure described the true student "dropout" who never returned to complete a degree (Tinto, 1987).

The 1972 NLS data also illuminated institutional characteristics that factored into student departure. The data showed that institution selectivity, size, and control (private or public) are significant predictors of student persistence. "Not surprisingly, institutional selectivity tends to

be inversely related to rates of departure" (Tinto, 1987, p. 33). Highly selective institutions tend to have lower departure rates and vice versa. Two-year public institutions with open admission standards, for example, tend to attract students who are academically and financially less prepared for the rigors and expense of college. Selective, private institutions accept many more students with higher entrance test scores and high school grade point averages. Private college students tend to be better supported financially through personal means or financial aid than two-year college students (Zemsky & Shaman, 1997). Thus private institutions tend to retain their students at higher rates than most public institutions (Kuh, 2003a; Tinto, 1987).

Institution size tends to vary more than selectivity in its relationship to student departure. For private institutions, the most selective colleges tend to admit fewer students than less selective private institutions. By contrast, selective public or state institutions often surpass, by significant margins, the enrollment of less selective state institutions. For example, the highly selective University of Michigan-Ann Arbor posted a 57% acceptance rate in 2006 with a full-time enrollment (FTE) of 24,786 and a graduation rate of 87% (Education Trust, 2009). That same year, Michigan Central University admitted 74% of their applicants enrolling 18,412 yet graduating only 57% of the 2000 entering class (Education Trust, 2009).

"A detailed analysis of these interrelationships suggests that the independent association between size and rates of departure is curvilinear, perhaps even 'U-shaped' in character" (Tinto, 1987, p. 33). Thus students who attend the very largest and very smallest institutions, regardless of control, tend to have lower departure rates. Discovering these new institutional-departure relationships shed only dim light on the seemingly infinite paths of student departure. Missing was a detailed understanding of the individual student experience as it related to a student's

involvement in the college experience, a key contributor to his or her retention and graduation. It is here that Alexander Astin's work provides additional insight.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Until the 1960s, little was known about the impact college had on students. The body of available research to that point included mostly cross-sectional studies affording only snapshots of student experiences and attitudes. Few offered data on multi-institutional population samples. Even fewer compared college entrants to non-college goers (Astin, 1977). This void of knowledge left a substantial gap in understanding how the college experience impacted student academic and non-academic development. To address this gap, the American Council on Education introduced the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) in 1966. For the first time, higher education researchers could analyze student data from a national survey of more than 300 postsecondary institutions. CIRP remains the oldest and largest study of higher education harboring data on over 13 million students and 300,000 faculty from 2,000 institutions (Higher Education Research Institute, 2009).

Astin (1977) used the first decade of new data (1966-76) to collect over 80 different measures of student cognitive and affective development. Data were analyzed using a three-way taxonomy of student outcomes including "type of outcome—cognitive and affective, type of data—psychological and behavioral, and time—during college and after college" (Astin,1977, p. 7). Given the vast diversity of institutions and wide range in college attendance, exposure to the college experience ranged from registering for classes and never showing up to completing a four-year degree. A key assumption in his study was that people learn, grow, change, and develop whether they go to college or not. Critical to understanding college impact, then, was to isolate and assess the difference as it related to the scope and depth of the college experience.

Drawing from the CIRP data, Astin reported on seven major areas of impact attributed to college attendance.

Central to Astin's (1977) conclusions was that students changed significantly as a result of attending college. Increases in interpersonal and intellectual self-esteem, academic competency, hedonism, and liberalism showed the greatest differences. Decreased interest in music, social status, religion, athletics, and business seemed to be less associated with college attendance and attributed to the maturation process in general (Astin, 1977).

Broad variations were observed in the amount of change among students during these early years. Sex, ability, race, and age were reported as defining factors contributing to change. Men were more likely than women to see increases in liberalism, graduate degree aspirations, athletic interests, and physical fitness; publish original writing; and acquire technical or scientific competencies. Women were more likely to excel in foreign languages and culture, music, typing, and homemaking (Astin, 1977). Stereotypical roles of the time for men and women tended to be reinforced through the college years, according to Astin's findings.

Ability as measured through college entrance tests was also a significant predictor of change. The highest achieving students became more politically liberal and showed much higher career and societal aspirations over their college careers than moderate to low ability students. Similarly, high ability students earned better grades and demonstrated greater academic growth, deeper student involvement, and increased likelihood of attending graduate or professional schools than their less able cohort members (Astin, 1977).

Perhaps the greatest contrast in differences in change occurs between races. Astin only compared the largest college populations of the time, Black and White. His analysis showed that "Black students became more politically liberal and . . . abandoned their religious affiliations"

more than White students (Astin, 1977, p. 217). Increases in self-esteem, altruistic tendencies, involvement in demonstrations, student government participation, general cultural knowledge, and sports and fitness knowledge were more likely among Black students than White (Astin, 1999). Differences in age had a moderate effect. Older students achieved higher grades, interacted more with faculty, were more likely to graduate with honors and start careers at higher salaries than their younger colleagues (Astin, 1999).

The single greatest contributor to student involvement was the quantity and quality of effort devoted to the college experience. In essence, students who invested more time and energy in their college experience changed, often for the better, through their college career (Astin, 1999). Astin's (1984) pioneering student involvement theory emerged in the 1980s, spurning traditional teacher-centered, passive-learning pedagogies. Throughout the history of higher education, and in many classrooms today, knowledge was primarily transmitted via faculty-centered, authority-driven, one-way teaching. Students were seen as empty vessels passively receiving expert content from the sage on the stage. Students who were bright and motivated enough to stick with the curriculum eventually earned a degree. Recognizing a gap in student departure literature, Astin studied learning from the student's perspective. He turned his attention from what faculty were or were not doing and began studying what students were and were not doing. Ultimately, his conclusions suggested a shift toward a student-centered, active, knowledge-seeking style of learning, a pedagogy that is widely practiced today.

Astin's research was not the first to shift attention to the student, however. Bloom (1974) was a pioneer in student-centered scholarship examining how much time students spent on their studies. Bloom maintained that "all learning, whether done in school or elsewhere, requires time" (p. 1). Although spending time studying was a well-known part of any student's

discipline, careful examination of how much time was Bloom's focus. In general, Bloom's theory proposed that the more time a student devoted to educational tasks, the more he or she would learn.

Thus the "time on task" theory emerged from Bloom's literature as a benchmark for student success. Astin's (1984) approach expanded this theory and developed a more nuanced understanding of student learning. Time on task, or the quantity of time dedicated to educational pursuits, is only one factor in the student involvement equation. The *quality* of learning, Astin argued, was equally vital to learning and developmental success. Astin combined these constructs into a concise "student involvement" definition that included "the amount of physical and psychological energy [students devote] to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518).

Core examples of physical and psychological energy include considerable time and concentration spent on academic study, time on campus, meaningful student organization memberships, and genuine relationships built with others (Astin, 1999). Relationships with faculty, fellow students, administrators, coaches, alumni, staff, and even off-campus community members form a web of support and resources critical to a productive student experience (Astin, 1999). Although a student's intentions and attitude about the academic experience is important, Astin (1999) placed critical emphasis on observing behavior. Studying observable behavior as a methodological approach rather than attitudes or intent can produce stronger relationships between variables (Toomela, 2008). An emphasis on studying behavior, therefore, made Astin's involvement theory quite robust.

Astin's (1999) student involvement theory consists of five basic postulates:

(a) the physical and psychological energy invested in various “objects” (generally, the student experience or specifically, serving as a student organization treasurer, for example);

(b) students manifest different degrees of involvement in objects at different times;

(c) the quantity and quality of student involvement; (d) “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportionate to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program; and (e) the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Among the traditional pedagogical theories like subject-matter, resource, and eclectic theory, Astin’s model (1999) emerged as an inter-theoretical link between them. From the Yale report in 1828 to modern curricular debates, subject-matter educators believe learning is most effective when faculty teach a fixed curriculum of carefully selected subject matter or content. In essence, students learn best when they are exposed to superior subject matter: specialized knowledge acquired via intense lectures, rigorous tests, and expository writing. The limitation in subject theory is that students learn passively. The expert faculty member transmits knowledge one way to the assumedly ignorant student. Astin’s involvement theory shifts the burden from the faculty who teaches to the student who learns. It encourages faculty to re-engineer their classrooms from lectures where students passively sit as receptacles of learning to learning labs where students are active agents of discovery.

Resource theory claims that effective learning is achieved through superior resources: healthy endowment, star faculty, high achieving students, state-of-the-art facilities, and libraries. Astin (1999) argued that limited resources mean the majority of institutions and their students

will inevitably be shortchanged since top students and faculty are finite. Even if institutions can acquire top resources, no emphasis is placed on how those resources are used. By incorporating student involvement, educators can gauge how well their students are utilizing resources through time spent in the library, quality relationships with faculty (stars or not), and interaction with fellow students.

Eclectic or individualized theory proposes using subject matter and resources to maximize educational freedom. This theory assumes students learn best when they are allowed to customize their educational path through electives, independent studies, and individual counseling and advising. Although this theory combines the best of both traditional approaches, the infinite variations of programs, teaching methods, and subject matter make assessing learning nearly impossible. In addition, individualized education demands considerable staff and institutional resources, making this approach impractical for only the smallest or wealthiest of institutions. Consequently, student involvement observations of resources, namely time and energy, are shifted from the institution to the student (Astin, 1999).

Astin's (1999) involvement research illuminated the influences of higher education in all corners of the college experience. Most notably was the influence of residential learning. "It is obvious that students who live in residence halls have more time and opportunity to get involved in all aspects of campus life" (Astin, 1999, p. 523). Students participating in honors programs, social fraternities or sororities, or extracurricular activities or who work part-time on campus also tend to be less likely to leave college. Thus, students who invest their time and energies in their institutions in and out of class are more likely to graduate.

First-year Experience

For centuries after the first class entered Harvard College in 1636, the freshmen experience was characterized as a time of sink or swim (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Little if any institutional value was placed on retaining students for those who did not or could not succeed (Westmeyer, 1985). Thus, the concept of student retention was largely foreign until the early 1900s (Westmeyer, 1985). But significant decreases in high school graduate populations and a rapidly changing student demographic after World War II required colleges to better retain the students they had (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Studies urged reform specifically during the first-year (Boyer, 1987).

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) believed that freshmen success was defined not merely as surviving the first-year, but "fulfilling their educational and personal goals" (p. 2). In 1989, they and their associates released a groundbreaking book that proposed conditions under which the ever diversifying freshmen population could succeed. From orientation through the end of the first year, their approach emphasized the critical significance of sustained, genuine support from both faculty and their peers (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Within the first six weeks of school, students must make real and lasting connections with their chosen institutions (Gardner, 1986). "Freshmen who can name a campus-affiliated person they can turn to with a problem are more than twice as likely to return for the sophomore year as someone who cannot" (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 72). Orientation programs and meaningful peer interactions via co-curricular activities are vital to ensuring early connections. Gardner (1986) also emphasized enhanced academic advisory roles in the first year to nurture the budding student–faculty relationships. Regular, positive advising helps students form the academic habits that will help or hinder their intellectual growth (Garder, 1986; Upcraft &

Gardner, 1989). Ultimately, connecting to the institution is incomplete unless the student connects to the environment, successfully transitions during the first few weeks, works toward their academic major and career goals and achieves success in the classroom (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

These benchmarks, Gardner (1986) claimed, are best achieved when institutions offer a wide array of interventions such as freshmen-only seminars that teach effective study techniques, time management skills, and stress coping approaches; peer mentoring networks and academic support programs that offer a safety net for those who struggle socially and in the classroom; vibrant residence halls where social and intellectual development is interwoven; and a wide selection of campus activities that link students with similar interests. More recently counseling and health and wellness programs have become significantly more important as first-year mental health concerns and substance abuse have increased (Gardner & Siegel, 2001). Dedicated administrative staff for each of these areas was recommended to ensure continuity of services.

African American freshmen, as with other underrepresented groups, face unique challenges in their first year of college (Cuyjet et al., 2011). They are often burdened with intense feelings of isolation, cultural dissonance, and lack of available mentors above and beyond the struggles typical of most first-years. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) encourage institutions to

> assess their students' academic preparation and provide appropriate support services (advising, mentoring, study skills training), to develop an integrated and inclusive environment that includes a "critical mass" of African American faculty and peers, and to develop academic courses and co-curricular programs that reflect diverse perspectives and encourage ethnic and cultural inclusiveness. (p. 284)

Engagement Theory

In an effort to make deeper and broader connections between student learning, institutional educational efforts, and the needs of society, the student engagement movement took shape in the 1990s (Boyer, 1990; Edgerton, 1997; Kuh, 2003a). Boyer (1990), in his book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, presented a new vision for higher education. A critical component of this new framework was a scholarship of engagement. Boyer argued that the creation of knowledge through scholarship is insufficient in serving our students or society at large. Instead, scholarship should aim to solve real world problems and create a more civically engaged citizenry (Boyer, 1990). From this vision spawned a new field of research around student engagement. Over the next decade, higher education scholars fine-tuned Boyer's vision with more concrete strategies. A white paper produced by Edgerton (1997) introduced the phrase "pedagogies of engagement" (p. 37) that helped to refocus the industry's study of student learning in higher education. In his remarks, he stressed the critical need to carefully examine the student learning process and then re-engineer the business of teaching from that perspective (Edgerton, 1997). It was not until the new millennium that student engagement theory gained widespread support however.

Kuh (2003b) had examined institutional culture associated with student success for nearly 20 years when Edgerton presented his landmark paper. Kuh widened the scope of student learning research from individual behavior to include institutional policies and practices that influenced student learning and persistence. With funding from the Pew Charitable Trust, he embarked on a massive effort to survey how students engaged with their college environments.

Kuh (2003b) defined student engagement as "the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside the classroom and the policies and practices that

institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (p. 25). The vehicle by which this study was delivered was called the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

The NSSE survey began in 2000 with 276 participating institutions. By 2008, participation had more than tripled with 774 institutions (NSSE, 2009). Results from this survey are widely used to benchmark against peer institutions and monitor student engagement nation-wide and within participating institutions. Results were reported through five engagement categories: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment, and student faculty interaction (Kuh, 2003b). Nearing a decade of existence, this growing database of information has produced volumes of insightful results about what types of students and institutions are highly engaging.

Institutions that engage their students in academically challenging courses and provide comprehensive support tend to retain and graduate their students at higher rates than their peer institutions (Kuh, 2003b; Nelson Laird, Chen, & Kuh, 2008). Nearly a decade of research has also identified which students tend to be more engaged. Kuh (2003b) found that women, full-time students, students living on campus, students who graduate from the institution at which they first matriculated, learning community students, international students, and students with significant diversity experiences tend to be more engaged.

Student Engagement and Student Expenditures

Researchers often examine institutional spending per student as a predictor of student retention and graduation rates. These data report the amount of funding provided from the endowment, foundations, or scholarships that the institution spends on its students. Figures like those reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* are often used as control variables to best illuminate what independent variables actually explain higher or lower retention and graduation

rates. However, student expenditures alone have an inconsistent track record in the literature (Pike, Smart, Kuh, & Hayek, 2006). “To date, the few studies of expenditures and college outcomes have produced inconsistent findings, making it impossible to derive a robust theoretical or conceptual framework for guiding research in this area” (Pike et al., 2006, p. 849).

Student engagement theory provides an in-depth look at the interplay of variables guiding students through their higher education experience. Missing from this early research, however, is a broader understanding of how the entire system of higher education influences graduation rates, especially for African American students. For this we look to Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) comprehensive work on institutional effects on students.

Inter/intra Institutional Effects on Students

Reporting on their third decade of research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) broke down the college experience by examining five areas of student learning and development as reported in studies throughout the 1990s. These areas included (a) verbal, quantitative and subject matter competence, (b) cognitive skills and intellectual growth, (c) psychosocial change, (d) attitudes and values, and (e) moral development. Within each developmental area, the effects of college experiences were organized to include changes during college, net changes from freshmen to seniors, changes between- and within-colleges, conditional changes, and long-term effect changes. Their work also reported on the overall effect of educational attainment and persistence, career and economic impacts of college and student quality of life after college.

Verbal, Quantitative, and Subject Matter Competence

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found data that both supported and expanded their 1991 published theories on the effects of college. Overall, the net effects of college resulted in substantial gains (*SD*=.25) in verbal and quantitative skills development as compared to those

completing only high school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When controlling for confounding variables, men seemed to make nearly one and a half times greater gains than women in most areas of learning. However, women "had significantly higher levels of writing skills after two years of college than did men" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 136). The literature was inconsistent, though, in learning differentials among race or ethnic groups within the same college. When comparing colleges, attending a highly selective college, same-sex college, or HBCU had little effect on the acquisition of knowledge or cognitive growth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions with highly diverse environments seemed to enhance learning for students of color as compared to more homogeneous campuses (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Over the long term, college graduates were more likely to be life-long learners (i.e., continuous education), better skilled at finding and analyzing new information (i.e., critical thinking skills), and instill stronger academic skills in their children (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Cognitive Skills and Intellectual Growth

College students make significantly greater gains in critical thinking and reasoning than gains in knowledge acquisition and skills development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In essence, college seemed to better affect how students learned (and thought) than what they learned. Critical and reflective thinking, post formal reasoning, epistemological sophistication, and intellectual maturity showed one to two standard deviations in growth. Most of this growth appeared in the first three years of college. However, such gains seemed unaffected by factors such as college selectivity or characteristics of the institution (i.e., same-sex, two-year, four-year, institutional enrollment size); (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). African American students attending HBCUs reported significantly greater gains in cognitive development. But this apparent difference evaporated when the authors used standardized tests rather than self-reported

scores. Also seemingly irrelevant was the student's area of study. Among the factors that enhanced cognitive and intellectual growth were close relationships with faculty who were concerned for their learning and co-curricular interactions with racially and culturally diverse peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Conditions surrounding student learning differentially affected those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. African American students, for instance, made smaller gains in critical thinking during their first and third years compared to their White peers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Psychosocial Change

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported on five areas of psychosocial development: identity formation, self-concept and self-esteem, autonomy and locus of control, interpersonal relations and leadership skills, and general personal development. Generally, students experienced greater levels of intellectual and academic self-confidence, experienced shifts from external to internal locus of control, and saw growth in leadership skills throughout the college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although the 1990s saw an increase in racial identity development studies, none illuminated the unique effects of college attendance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Nor was there solid evidence to show significant differences between different types and sizes of college on overall psychosocial development. But within-college effects showed that taking diversity courses and engaging in racial or ethnic student organizations, workshops, and activities may have promoted racial identity development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). African Americans who reported diverse groups of friends showed a "highly positive net impact in intellectual self-confidence but a small negative impact on the same trait among White students" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 267).

Attitudes and Values

College also seemed to have a significant effect on student attitudes. "The evidence from national studies consistently indicates that attending college has a statistically significant, positive net effect on students' racial, ethnic, and multicultural attitudes and values" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 336). Specifically, students in the post-1990 literature reported consistent increases in positive attitudes toward racial equality and tolerance. Steady increases in campus structural diversity (the racial and ethnic composition of a student body) seemed to increase direct interaction with others from different cultures. With more opportunities for racially focused dialogue and cultural sharing, most campuses witnessed decreases in racial distancing, which better fostered racial understanding (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

An institution's size, control, or mission seemed to be irrelevant in affecting student racial and ethnic attitudes. Instead, interactions with diverse faculty and students played the strongest role influencing how and to what degree their attitudes were shaped. HBCUs as an institution type did, on the other hand, influence other attitudes and values. Students who attended HBCUs attached greater value to learning for self-understanding and reported greater appreciation for the arts than those who attended PWIs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Other within-college factors positively influencing racial and ethnic attitudes included academic environments with diverse faculty and classmates, living in a residence hall, and participating in community service (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Moral Development

Prior to the college experience, most students exercise moral reasoning based on extrinsic, societal structures or standards, also called conventional judgment (Kohlberg, 1976). But during the college years students show higher levels of intrinsic or principled reasoning

based on universal principles (Kohlberg, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moral development within this study was not differentiated along ethnic or racial lines. However, students of all backgrounds seemed to make the greatest gains at small, private, liberal arts colleges.

Analyzing Retention Efforts

In addition to Tinto, there has been some other valuable research in retention best practice and the assessment or retention efforts which informs this study. The first of these is by Borland (2001), who offered a six-step model of assessment for cross-cutting retention programs. He identified four paradigms of retention that are reflective of value, purposes, and outcomes of programs dependent upon student perspective and position. He labeled these learning, development, economic, and students' purposes which are usually associated with the faculty, student affairs personnel, administrators, and the students, respectively. Borland argued that to effectively assess retention programs these four paradigms must be included in the process. Once assessment is successfully conducted, the college administrator must have some means to improve programs and processes that are ineffective.

Drawing from organizational theories, Berger (2001) provided insights for improving retention on college campuses. His synthesis of several models included five perspectives of the college campus: (a) the bureaucratic institution as a formal structure with rules, regulations, and hierarchies; (b) the collegial institution as a collaborative organization concerned with human resources and equal participation as well as the use of consensus to establish goals; (c) the political institution that emerges out of competition for resources and varying interest groups; (d) the symbolic institution that focuses on institutions stories, myths, legends, ceremonies, and traditions in creating meaning within the organization; and (e) the systemic institution

organization that sees the organization as an open system that interacts with the broader external environment.

Berger's (2001) research suggested that student success varied significantly depending on the environment. Bureaucratic organizational behavior, for example, seemed to have negative effects on student persistence, but collegial organizational behavior, symbolic behavior, and systemic organizational behavior seemed to have positive effects on student satisfaction and persistence (Berger, 2001). His research suggests that highly political campus environments can have negative impacts on student persistence, but this may not be a causal relationship. His recommendations to maximize student persistence in any environment included (a) provide students with clear lines of communication about goals, policies, and values; (b) provide opportunities for students to participate in organizational decision-making; (c) build a campus environment characterized by fairness toward students; (d) create a balance between structure and responsiveness; (e) engage students in political activity on campus; (f) provide advocates for students; (g) build shared meaning through symbols; (h) build on structural and symbolic connections with the external environment; (i) understand the nature of the organizational environment on campus; and (j) assess student perceptions of organizational behavior on campus (Berger, 2001).

Braxton and Mundy (2001) analyzed and synthesized 47 approaches and retention recommendations. They classified their suggestions according to the three principles of effective retention espoused by Tinto (1975): (a) effective retention programs reflect a commitment to the students they serve; (b) the commitment of effective retention programs to all, not some, students; and (c) the commitment of these programs to the development of communities that are socially and academically supportive of all students who are then integrated as capable

constituents (Braxton & Mundy, 2001). Implementation of these recommendations was also discussed by the authors according to institutional domains (e.g., administration, enrollment management, and student affairs).

Retention Case Studies

The following studies represent a few highly relevant examples of retention best practices. Upon reviewing field literature and local needs, Kutztown University created the Student Support Services Freshman Year Program to help at-risk freshmen acclimate to the campus environment and succeed in college. Colton (1999) presented a five-component program that has improved retention at the university. Academic advising and counseling served as the cornerstone for academic support. Students gained a sense of group identity and experienced a rite of passage with a freshmen colloquium. On-going support from student mentors helped freshmen cope with the challenges of their first year. Academic skills such as notes and test taking were offered through workshops. Finally, social support activities like student organizations and activities helped create bonds between individuals (Colton, 1999).

As a reaction to concerns over the attrition of their students, Johnson (2000) evaluated whether or not retention programs at a small northeast public college were worth their administrative costs. After two years of implementation, she examined four program models. These were (a) the conditional contract student program, (b) Project 100: Early Alert Early Intervention, (c) the First-Year Alternative Experience (FYAE) program, and (d) the Russell Scholars Program (RSP). The first two programs were less structured, less expensive, non-learning communities. FYAE and RSP both integrated living and learning in a unique learning community but were significantly more expensive to administer. She found that after two years, the learning communities were significantly ($p < .05$) more effective at retaining students and

improving the quality of their college experience (Johnson, 2000). "Furthermore, retention rates for the non-learning communities . . . were lower than the [all-student] retention rate" (Johnson, 2000, p. 233).

Graduation Rate Metrics

In the high stakes game of higher education ranking, graduation rates have become the gold standard of college comparison metrics (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). This is by no means a recent phenomenon. As early as the 1980s, reports such as *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) observed that "in some colleges, maintaining enrollments is of greater day-to-day concern than maintaining rigorous academic standards" (p. 14). The public's appetite for high graduation rate performance is understandable given the benefits of a college degree. The economic and social benefits of college degrees afforded to both individuals and society is well documented (Baum & Payea, 2005; Carey, 2004; Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008) and reflected in Figure 4. College graduates earn nearly double the income of high school graduates (Carnevale et al., 2011). Although those who complete some college or earn an associate's degree earn slightly higher salaries, earning a bachelor's degree is key to financial security (Carey, 2004; Cohen & Ibraham, 2008). Furthermore, national and state tax coffers also benefit from higher income tax revenue and increased civic engagement (Astin, 1999; Carey, 2004). Thus, the public's interest in graduation rate performance seems justified and not likely to diminish in the near future. It is prudent then to discuss the various metrics by which graduation rates are calculated, analyzed, and published.

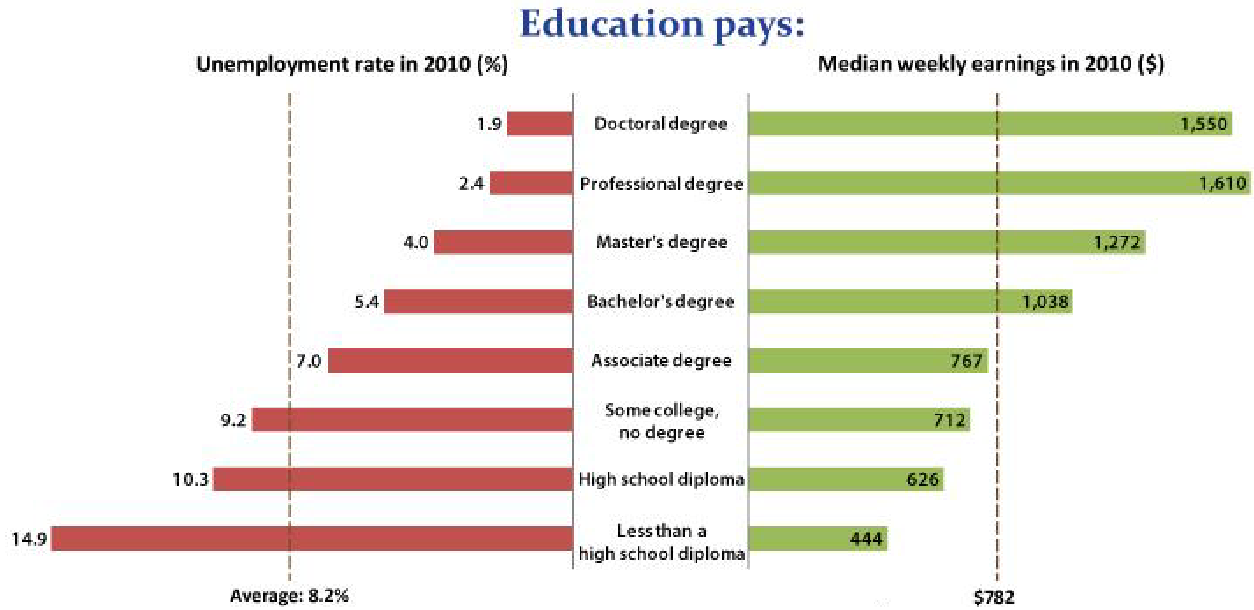

Figure 4. Unemployment and earnings for workers 25 and older by educational level. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010. Graphic available as public domain.

The standard graduation metric used by the majority of institutions, government, accreditation bodies, and ranking publications like *U.S. News and World Report* is the six-year graduation rate. The federal Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act (1990) defined the six-year institutional graduation rate in these terms:

> In calculating the completion or graduation rate . . . a student shall be counted as a completion or graduation if, within 150 percent of the normal time for completion of or graduation from the program, the student has completed or graduated from the program, or enrolled in any program of an eligible institution for which the prior program provides substantial preparation. . . . Institutions may exclude . . . students who leave school to serve in the armed services, on official church missions, or with a recognized foreign aid service of the Federal Government. (p. 493)

Because of its widespread adoption in government, private, and public institutional research, the six-year graduation rate is the standard of higher education graduation rate analysis.

African American Challenges at Predominantly White Institutions

No matter what graduation metrics are used to calculate student success, the means and methods by which students persist demand a deeper analysis beyond quantitative measures. For African American students attending PWIs, college can be difficult at best and dangerous at worst. Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) conducted a series of separate focus groups of upper class students and parents. Thirty-six juniors and seniors from a public PWI were asked about their experiences, views of campus racial relations and perceptions of admissions efforts. Sixty-one percent were men, 39% women. Separate groups of urban parents were also interviewed. The parents were from urban areas and included 39% men and 61% women from both blue- and white-collar careers. Among the parents emerged some interesting conclusions ranging from the college selection process all the way through graduation (Feagin et al., 1996).

First, parents of African American students generally valued the importance of education. They saw, as White parents did, the critical importance of obtaining a higher education degree and the benefits affixed thereto (Feagin et al., 1996). White parents, however, rarely struggled to help their students choose between PWIs and HBCUs. If you are White, you send your child to a PWI. However, this decision for African Americans must be carefully weighed. Does the student require the additional support, cultural envelope and mentoring available at HBCUs? Or can the student navigate the obstacles and hurdles omnipresent at PWIs (Feagin et al., 1996)? According to the researchers, if the decision was made to attend a PWI, African American parents often had to help their children deal with racial bias prevalent in Eurocentric teaching, overt prejudice by students, and the overall hostile environments PWIs often unwittingly

cultivate (Feagin et al., 1996). Perhaps most frustrating was the fact that African American parents contributed to the tax base that supports these hostile environments.

African American student experiences at this particular PWI ranged from feeling invisible to threatened physically and psychosocially. Immediately after arriving on campus, one student felt a sense that "Whites really rule the campus" (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 38). Students reported that both the academic and social cultures reflected a Eurocentric orientation. For those outside that cultural sphere, namely non-White students, "you were . . . just an unseen person" (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 42). Student athletes were more broadly accepted and better treated but with the caveat that sports was "their appropriate place" (Feagin et al., 1996, p. 43).

Conclusion

Foundational retention literature discussed in this chapter offered a broad understanding on why students choose to leave college and why they stay. Analyzing the numerous paths through which students depart higher education helps explain the retention and degree completion problem (Tinto, 1987). With the departure problem in clearer focus, the literature review explored the challenges of retention, persistence, and degree completion in more detail (Astin, 1977; Borland, 2001; Gardner; 1986; Kuh; 2001; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). However, this foundational literature did not fully illuminate the specific challenges faced by students from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups. Thus, a deeper exploration into the challenges and supports African American students experienced in higher education was presented.

African Americans in the United States are entering college in proportions closer to Whites. That is the good news. Unfortunately, graduating African Americans at the same rate as Whites remains stymied by a significant margin. With approximately 40% of four-year

institutions controlled privately and predominantly White, the greatest gains in closing this graduation gap must come from PWIs (Furr & Elling, 2002; Gloria et al., 1999; Holmes, Ebbers Robinson, & Mugenda, 2000; Kuh, 2003a). This presents a critical problem for many small private institutions with increasingly limited resources, and pressures to hold down costs and simultaneously improve graduation rates. Efforts to close retention and, ultimately, graduation gaps require focused programs and strategies to ensure the African American experience includes sufficient resources, educationally rich and engaging experiences, and sufficient support through the many challenges these students often face. Studies that explore how this may be done effectively in small, private institutional settings represent an important advance for the literature.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study explored best practices within two independent higher education institutions that realized substantial gains in African American graduation rates over a four-year period. These institutions were selected from a search of the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Once identified, a multiple case study approach sought deeper understanding of the conditions by which such increases occurred.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions.

1. Which predominantly White, baccalaureate, arts and sciences institutions posted the highest increases in African American graduation rates over the four-year period 2004-2007?

2. What did members of those academic communities say explained their success in improving African American student graduation rates?

Methodological Approach

Identifying institutions that meet the graduation success criteria for this study required mining data from the IPEDS system. For this, the Education Trust College Results Online web site was utilized (Ewell et al., 2003). This website allows users to input search criteria based on a myriad of student and institutional inputs. Outputs include overall graduation rates and graduation rate-gaps by ethnicity. The latter was the study's focus.

Among the limiting criteria chosen for this search were control (i.e., private), Carnegie type (i.e., liberal arts colleges), location (i.e., rural), enrollment size (i.e., 1,000-5,000 students), student standardized test scores (i.e., middle 50%), and student expenditures per full-time equivalent (i.e., middle 50%). Private, liberal arts institutions tend to enroll a higher percentage of White students than public institutions. Without a critical core of other African American peers and mentors, the institution's programs and services would likely play a stronger role in student retention and graduation rates. Such environments can also present difficult, if not hostile conditions for many minority students (Fleming, 1988; Holmes et al., 2000). Furthermore, small, rural, private institutions usually attract few African American faculty and community members. PWIs smaller than 1,000 are prone to dramatic graduation rate variations as African American enrollments inch up or down by just a few students. Private campuses larger than 5,000 students are often located in urban areas where larger African American social networks can have stronger effects on graduation rates. As such, these campuses were not considered. Thus, this study concentrated on campuses enrolling between 1,000 and 5,000 students in rural settings.

Student characteristics, or inputs, can account for more than "two-thirds of the variation" (Astin, 2005, p. 7) for higher education graduation rates. Consequently, elite institutions that primarily enrolled the top 25% or open institutions serving the bottom 25% of SAT students were not considered, nor were the wealthiest or poorest colleges. The wealthiest institutions (top 25%) can afford to fund the "high touch" student experience including very low student–faculty ratios, elaborate counseling and advising centers, and deep tuition discount rates. Such expensive service would likely not be available to the vast majority of small, private institutions with limited resources.

Four-year graduation rates associated with the classes of 2000-2003 cohort years were used for this study (i.e., the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students enrolling in a four-year institution in the fall of 2000 that graduated by the spring of 2004). A four-year time frame was selected to match IPEDS standard for graduation rates used by participating institutions. Identifying institutions with significantly high African American graduation rate increases was the first step for the study but not enough to explain why these campuses had experienced such noted above average performance improvements. For this, a qualitative, multiple-case, case study design was used.

Qualitative Paradigm

The qualitative or naturalistic paradigm is uniquely designed to answer "why" questions that laid at the heart of this study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry seeks to answer questions through a holistic, interdependent approach where the investigator is the instrument who actively, rather than passively, simultaneously observes and, in some cases, influences the very phenomenon under question. Reality is assumed to be contextually based, time specific, and inherently dependent upon perspective (Merriam, 2002). The qualitative paradigm assumes that

> meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. (Merriam, 2002, pp. 3-4).

Rather than attempting to support or refute a pre- conceived truth, or hypothesis, the qualitative inquirer discovers a unique perspective as it emerges, naturally, through the course of study.

Unlike positivist, quantitative inquiry, qualitative studies do not seek to generalize to broader populations beyond the unit of analysis. Instead, their primary functions are to describe and explore or explain, examine, document, understand and discover the phenomenon and only the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009).

The complex phenomenon of student graduation or degree completion warrants the qualitative inquiry paradigm. College campuses are complicated, integrated systems that defy segmentation and singular analysis. Rich student experiences along with the spectra of institutional policies and practices require extensive interviews, observation, document analysis, and validation strategies to accurately capture how colleges influence their students' success.

Case Study Design

Creswell's (2009) case study approach is valuable for digging deeper and exploring the underlying campus policies, personnel, and broader environmental and communication pattern contexts that may be at the root of these significant graduation achievements. Understanding the complex, interrelated nature of student success within college settings lends itself well to a case study approach. "Case study design, because of its flexibility and adaptability to a range of contexts, processes, people, and foci, provides some of the most useful methods available in educational research" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 394).

A wide range of observations and data collection from a variety of perspectives and sources are required to construct a comprehensive story (Creswell, 2009). Yin (1994) recommended six forms of data collection spanning from interviews, direct observations, participant observations, documents, and archival records that collectively provide the rich, multifaceted perspectives necessary for deeply understanding the unit of analysis. These were

explored in the case investigations for this research study where the unit of analysis was the campus.

For the case study phase of the study, two campuses were selected from among the 25 high performers identified. Given that the purpose of the study was not generalization but rather understanding a phenomenon in depth, two campuses allowed for rich investigation at each place while also providing opportunity for comparing and contrasting the institutions' approaches that may have similarities and differences that explain their success. Starting from the top performer, the two selection choices were made based on my and the dissertation committee's insights about the institutions that do not have other obvious or suggestive locational, resource, selectivity, or similar advantages or circumstances that place them outside the mainstream of the majority of liberal arts colleges in the United States that fell within the criteria group.

A wide variety of data sources were collected to construct a 360-degree perspective that might inform the reader of patterns, themes, and practices that encourage African Americans to graduate at these colleges. Interview transcripts, institutional documents, researcher observation notes, and visual materials were collected for analysis (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Initially, key college officers were identified for one-hour interviews. This person was typically the chief enrollment officer, the senior academic officer, or the dean of students. Referrals from them helped to identify others who helped to contribute to the research such as the officers just mentioned, others who were suggested, and students. I also surveyed the institution's campus directory, organization charts, and other campus resources to identify potential participants.

Semi-structured interview questions were modeled after Kuh, Schuh and Whitt's (1991) Involving Colleges Audit Protocol (ICAP; Appendix A). Questions addressed general areas such as institutional mission and philosophy, campus culture, campus environment, policies and practices, and institutional agents (academic affairs administrators, student affairs administrators, faculty and students; Kuh et al., 1991).

I provided potential interviewees a letter of invitation (Appendix B) and then the required informed consent forms and study overview materials via email attachment, fax, or mail (Appendix C). Upon receipt of the participant's signed agreements, an interview date on the participant's campus was scheduled. Interviews were audio recorded to maximize accurate collection of audible data. Observation notes augmented verbal discussion to capture non-verbal cues, physical environment details, and participant use of space. I also made personal notes after each interview to assist with perceptions and memory recall.

University documents that addressed overall student, minority, and African American graduation efforts were identified, and optically scanned, and electronically stored for analysis. Searches within university document indexes yielded historical summaries of college retention efforts and current practices.

Verification

Interview statements, evidence, and emerging themes were triangulated with corresponding data uncovered through document and archival research. Member checking occured twice (once with raw transcriptions and again to see if interpretations were accurate) to increase analysis accuracy.

Information Analysis

Interview transcripts included two separate columns: one for thorough, objective descriptions (verbatim transcripts, room layout, records of my sensory data) and a second for interpretive comments and suggestions for further study. Reviewing the data this way revealed patterns and themes that were condensed into overall naturalistic generalizations about successful retention efforts.

Plan for Narrative

This study presented data in an embedded rhetorical structure (Creswell, 2009) for each campus. Beginning with the broader environment, descriptions and analyses were linked to specific campus programs, services and policies that were successful in retaining African American students.

Participants

Interview participants received a call or email requesting an initial meeting to describe the study's purpose, publication intent, and potential benefits of the study to the participants. After securing a verbal commitment to participate, interview and focus group participants received a formal, written invitation via cover letter and consent to participate form (Appendices B & C) as noted earlier. Consent forms were signed and secured before participants were interviewed.

Personal Statement

I enjoy a broad range of privileges in this culture just for being White. Consistent with McIntosh's (1988) characterization of White identity, my "Whiteness" affords me many invisible, free and pervasive "rights." For example, I feel protected by police while in public, not harassed. If I wish to relocate my family to another city, I can easily move to the safest

neighborhoods and enroll my children in the best school districts. My ideas or opinions are more likely to be accepted as credible in work or social circles and within the legal system. The media constantly reflects my culture and values as the norm. Nothing I do is ever automatically a credit or discredit to my race (McIntosh, 1988). In essence, I enjoy the benefits of a rich inheritance of privilege.

Many African American and other non-White students do not receive this inheritance. Moreover, many constantly battle the vestiges of a shared, oppressive history. After 40 years of life, I am beginning to understand this, but not fully. As a White man, I still do not understand the full scope of my privilege while many others around me, specifically those trying to earn a college degree, must overcome barriers I have never seen. To that end, I embarked on this topic with the humble hope of better understanding how African Americans are being challenged and, of highest interest here, best supported through their college experience.

Focusing on graduation rates was the result of two recent events in my life. In the spring of 2006, a civil rights activist, Dr. Elias Blake, made a virtual visit to my graduate class via a teleconference meeting. His remarks shed light on the disappointing gaps that still exist in African American college graduation rates. He boldly claimed that this was perhaps the greatest challenge facing modern colleges and universities (E. Blake, personal communication, March 17, 2006). His claim is echoed within the literature review (Carey, 2008; Educational Research Service, 2001). Given this problem's widespread acknowledgement, it seemed an intriguing choice for further study. But as with many dissertation topics, my loyalty to this question wavered somewhat as the months and years ticked by. That is, until I saw up close how far even the most diverse and inclusive colleges must go to better support African American students' education.

In the fall of 2009, a group of White, male, student athletes at a private, northeast, liberal arts college dressed up as slaves during a Halloween event. Disguised with black face paint and wigs, the team convinced the only African American teammate to reluctantly serve as their coxswain (or master), thus completing the *Amistad* spoof. As was tradition, the crew's coaching staff judged both the men's and women's skits and awarded prizes, a decision that ultimately led to formal censure of the coaches.

The African American coxswain spoke out in a student newspaper the following day. News of the incident quickly spread throughout campus sparking student and community-wide outrage. A series of impromptu forums gave voice to the many who said they felt lonely, outcast, embarrassed, and humiliated. Among the chorus of voices was an African American Student Trustee. Widely popular and elected by his peers, this talented student leader stated that he had never felt so alone. The student protests resonated with the literature depicting campuses as hostile to most underrepresented minorities at PWIs. Hearing these students' raw emotional outcries boosted my interests to continue. It helped me realize that higher education still has much unfinished work in building inclusive learning communities.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore African American student graduation rate increases. Particular focus was given to colleges categorized as Carnegie Bachelors-Arts and Sciences with minority enrollments of less than 17%. The first research question asked which small, private, predominantly White, liberal arts colleges have shown notable increases in African American student graduation rates over the four-year period 2004-2007. The second question built from the first via deep engagement with persons involved with student success at those high performing institutions. Specifically, what did members of those academic communities say explained their success in improving African American student graduation rates? Institutions were selected for study via a search of the Department of Education's IPEDS database. Once identified, a multiple case study approach sought deeper understanding of the conditions by which such increases occurred. Best practices among these two colleges were then explored.

African American Graduation Rate Improvement Results

As described in Chapter 3, the IPEDS data via the College Results online search tool (Ewell et al., 2003) were used to answer Research Question 1. An initial filter of all available institutions was run to select colleges with FTE enrollments between 1,000 and 5,000 students. HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) were omitted. This initial search netted data

tables totaling 691 institutions in 2004, 782 in 2005, 709 in 2006, and 814 in 2007. Next, four data tables were imported as Excel documents, one for each year studied. The samples were then narrowed using the following sequence of limiting criteria: (a) privately controlled, (b) Carnegie Bachelor's-Arts and Sciences, (c) less than 17% minority enrollment, (d) full-time equivalent student expenditures (FTE spending) in the middle 50 percentile, and (e) average SAT scores in the middle 50 percentile. Finally, only institutions located in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau *and* posting relevant data *all four years* were considered. These criteria focused the sample in a way that helped to explain away what might be locational, wealth, and critical mass advantages as well as to select those institutions that were neither elite nor open access. Institutions meeting all criteria all four graduation years from 2004-2007 were analyzed for both African American enrollment and graduation rate trends.

Unfortunately, no institution satisfied the search criteria all four years. As a result, search limits were widened to include institutions residing in rural, small and large town communities defined as non-urban with populations between 2,500 and 250,000 people. FTE spending and SAT limits were expanded from 50% to 60% as well. This resulted in a list of 11 institutions that met all revised search criteria and posted African American graduation rates for all four years. These institutions were then ranked by their African American graduation rate performances, which ranged from 32.1% increases to 31.2% decreases. The three highest performing institutions were then invited to participate and are identified in Table 1 using pseudonyms.

Table 1

Annual Enrollment 2004-2007 for Three Institutions

Institution	2004	2005	2006	2007
Crossroads College (Northeast)				
Overall Enrollment	2,756	2,727	2,797	2,800
African American	83	90	101	109
Rural University (Midwest)				
Overall Enrollment	2,339	2,370	2,366	2,305
African American	133	128	130	136
Middletown College (mid-Atlantic)				
Overall Enrollment	2,344	2,310	2,330	2,321
African American	47	44	40	51

Crossroads College posted consistent African American enrollment growth all four years both in numbers and as a percentage of their total enrollment. Rural University and Middletown College also experienced growth but had slight declines in the middle years (2005 and 2006).

Graduation rate data appear for the three institutions in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Graduation Rate Percentages 2004-07 for Three Institutions

Institution	2004	2005	2006	2007
Crossroads College				
Overall	86	89	89	88
African American	72	82	72	83
Rural University				
Overall	71	75	79	78
African American	53	57	73	68
Middletown College				
Overall	76	81	83	79
African American	43	64	73	75

Middletown College's African American graduation rates were most pronounced, nearly doubling over this time period. Both Rural University and Crossroads College also experienced African American graduation increases, although with less consistency.

Explanations for African American Graduation Rate Improvements

To answer Research Question 2, formal invitations to participate in the study were sent to chief academic or institutional research officers at each of the three campuses. Middletown College and Rural University accepted the invitations and agreed to participate. Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval letters were secured for each college.

A combined total of 24 participants including students, faculty, and staff participated in 11 interviews and two student focus groups. Responses to semi-structured questions were modeled after Kuh et al.'s (1991) *Involving Colleges* interview format and adapted for the purposes of this study (see Appendix A). Kuh et al.'s interview model offered a comprehensive, peer-reviewed, and published structure to explore and report on campus phenomena from its broad mission to specific programs and policies, suitable for application to this study's focus on African American student success. Although Kuh's interview structure helped to focus data collection, findings ultimately emerged from a careful process of discovery. In some cases, themes emerged from follow-up questions entirely separate from the original set of questions. All responses were recorded via digital voice recorder, transcribed verbatim, and content coded using the following notations: Mission; Campus Culture; Campus Environment and Resources; Programs; Policies or Practices; and Institutional Agents.

Mission responses reflected the institution's vision and core values such as liberal arts, residential learning community, or religious heritage. Campus culture responses described the day-to-day norms, traditions, and unique identity of the campus. The campus environment and

use of resources explored how spaces, buildings, and other campus resources encourage academic and social success. Institutional programs, policies, and practices described the vehicles by which the campus mission and priorities are delivered. Driving each of these vehicles were the institutional agents such as faculty advisors, administrators, and student mentors, among others who directly support student success through teaching, mentoring, advising, and, when necessary, correcting.

Case Study 1: Middletown College

Founded in 1848 as an Evangelical Lutheran seminary, Middletown College is a selective, four-year, private liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic region. The institution maintains its Lutheran heritage and small size with 2,200 undergraduate students enrolled in 40 areas of study including the humanities, fine arts, social sciences, natural sciences, and pre-professional studies. A predominantly White campus, underrepresented students make up 8.2% of undergraduates including Latino (3.7%), African American (2.1%), and Native American (0.2%) ethnicities. Some of the nation's brightest students attend Middletown, which posts median ACT scores of 27 (composite) and SAT verbal and math scores of 600 and 610 respectively. FTE spending averages a modest $17,216, well within the middle 50% of liberal arts colleges considered for this study.

Reverend Samuel K. Brobst, a Reformed Lutheran minister, is credited with its founding and leadership through three institutional name changes. Its humble beginnings included just four students and one faculty member with plans to become a premier professional preparatory school for ministers, doctors, and lawyers. However, financial strains through the 1860s and Civil War required the young college to seek additional support from the Lutheran ministry. In

return, the board of trustees agreed to change its name after an American Lutheran patriarch and appointed as its first president the patriarch's grandson.

For 40 more years the college held classes in a single, multipurpose building in the heart of town, a mansion and former home of the city's founder. Adult extension courses were introduced to city residents who needed additional career training during this time. As the college curriculum and enrollment expanded, Middletown quickly outgrew its home, requiring the purchase of 51 acres west of town where it could educate its 94 students. By 1928, Middletown enrollment grew to 438 full-time and 900 extension students, some of whom were women. However, it would be another 29 years before women would be admitted as regular students. At the urging of the Lutheran Church, who wanted their daughters as well as sons educated, over 100 women entered full-time study in 1957.

Access for ethnic minority students grew through the latter half of the 20th century as well. In the 1970s, 6% of Middletown students identified as non-White minority students with about 2% identifying as African American. Steady growth justified the addition of a full-time minority affairs staff in 1989. By 2004, the minority student population grew to 8%, prompting the college to purchase a house on the edge of campus to serve as a multicultural center. Since then the Black Student Association, Pride student organization, and *Communidad Latina* members have operated from this common space.

Today Middletown College is located in a highly diverse community of 107,000 residents (U.S. Census, 2010b). This makes it the third largest city in its state. At this size, it is not considered rural but a non-urban "large town" (Ewell et al., 2003). Eight percent (7.8%) of residents reported African American ethnicity in a city that is 72% White and 24% Hispanic or

Latino. Median household income is just over $36,000 with a family poverty rate of 18.5% (U.S. Census, 2010a).

Dutch immigrant farmers first settled the area in the mid 1770s. It thrived in the early 1900s as a manufacturing center but suffered post-depression economic losses through the service industry. Over 11 colleges and universities now help fuel the information age for this region (Visitors Bureau, 2011).

The Middletown Physical Space

To get a broad sense for the campus, I participated in an admissions guided campus tour. During the tour, I made field notes and took photographs to capture the form and function of the campus's major buildings. These were later analyzed to explore student space utilization. Specifically, I examined how spaces might encourage formal and informal learning, host as venues for large or small social gatherings, and serve as cultural expression centers (i.e., displays of original art, architectural dynamics, and varieties of food options in dining halls). Interview and focus group responses were then cross-referenced to identify spaces that best support student learning and development.

The campus is laid out like many small, private American colleges. Major facilities cluster in its center and are intersected by ample green spaces. Admissions, executive offices, and the student union are accessible through the college's "front door" via a large main circle driveway. New athletic fields, modern residence halls, and parking form the campus's perimeter. Figure 5 displays the Middletown campus map.

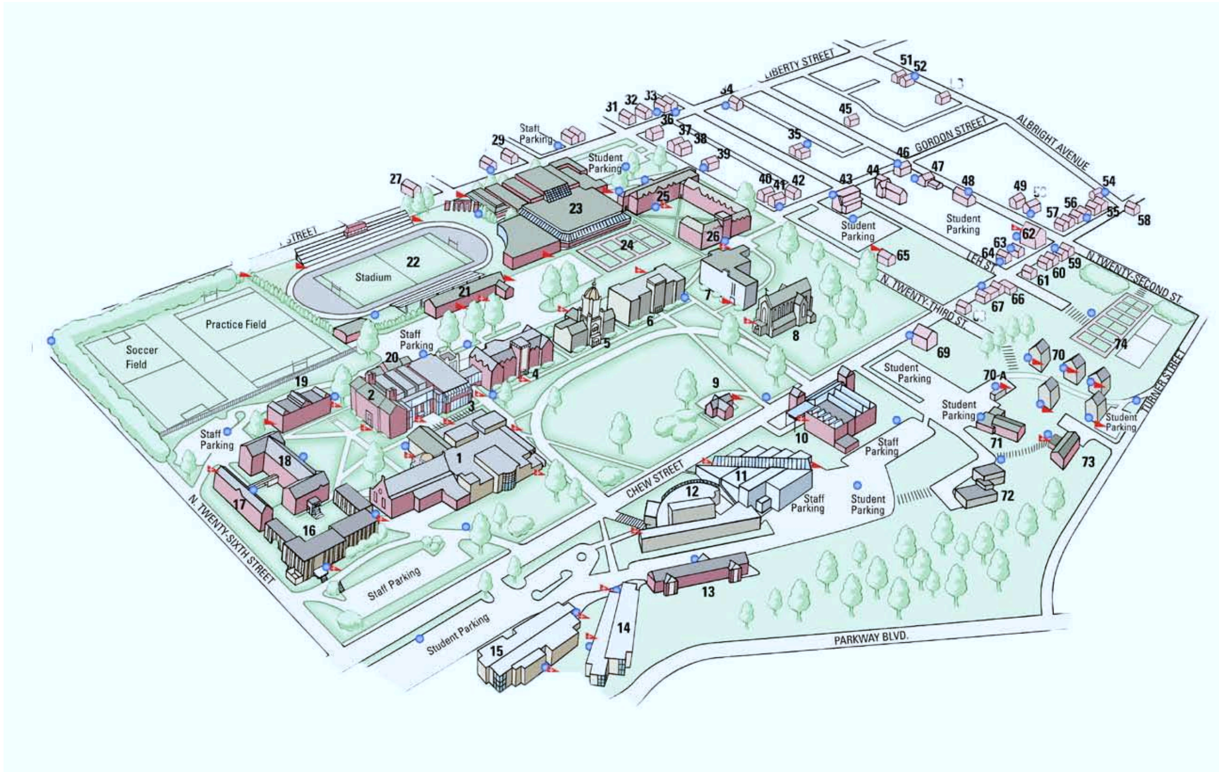

Figure 5. Middletown campus map.

For a relatively small campus, the architecture throughout Middletown is, in a word, grand. The heart of campus hosts a fully renovated and expanded student union. Included in this 2010 project is a brand new 610 seat student "restaurant." Not one, but two kosher kitchens satisfy Jewish and Muslim preparation requirements. Open, common dining spaces are available on the first floor. For private dining, faculty and small groups may choose more intimate seating areas or meeting rooms on the second floor. Three additional dining units housed in the union are food court, sandwich shop, and coffee shop options. Middletown offers a total of six separate dining locations from fine dining in the student union to a recreation center grab-and-go smoothie station. Photographs of the student union are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Student union.

Source: Exterior photo used by permission of Middletown College.

The most visually striking campus building is an ultra-modern theater and dance pavilion completed in 1999. Middletown's commitment to cultural expression can be seen throughout this complex space. Visitors are first welcomed to the building through its sweeping curved glass façade called the "fishbowl." Student and faculty artwork line the central atrium throughout which there are no visible 90-degree angles, another unique architectural feature. A 365-seat proscenium theatre serves as its centerpiece surrounded by state-of-the art classrooms, rehearsal studios, and costume shops. A walking bridge connects an adjacent fine arts building.

Figure 7. Dance pavilion and theatre.

The library is an aesthetically complex yet functionally simplistic building. This three-story, three-tiered structure was completed in 1988 and designed to offer large instructional, small group, and individual quiet learning levels. Focus group students and staff alike described this facility as a highly active campus space serving as the primary study spot while offering a host of wellness and educational programs including meditation sessions, film screenings, luncheons, and faculty-student trivia events.

Figure 8. Middletown Library.

Field house facilities for sports and recreation are spacious and modern and provide two floors of work-out rooms. Renovated in 2004, a system of floor dividers was installed to allow more students to simultaneously play a wider variety of sports. Game courts along with modern weight rooms are located on the first floor with aerobic equipment on the second.

Figure 9. Field house facility.

Middletown Administrator Participants

As noted earlier, Middletown experienced marked graduation rate increases during the years of interest to this study. Their African American graduation rates jumped from 43% in 2004 to 75% in 2007. These gains were realized while their African American student enrollment increased slightly from 47 to 51 during the same time frame.

To explore the phenomena contributing to these increases, key college officials were invited to participate in one-hour, on-site interviews conducted over two days in the fall of 2010. A number of artifacts, archival documents, and other institutional data were also collected to provide a comprehensive picture of the campus environment and to help triangulate findings (Yin, 1994). To protect interview participant identities, I created pseudonyms by which all participants will be referenced. Six administrators agreed to participate in one-hour interviews (Table 3). Each offered critical insights and archival resources to support this study.

Table 3

Middletown University Administrative Participants

Participant	Title	Race and Gender	Years of Service
Amiee Anderson	Vice President for Student Affairs	African American, man	4
Beth Benson	Associate Dean for Institutional Assessment	White, woman	27
Dana Davis	Dean of the College for Academic Life	White, woman	14
Earl Easton	Chaplain	White, man	11
Colleen Caffey	Director of Multicultural Life	African American, woman	2
Farrah Feinestein	Director of the Academic Resource Center	White, woman	18

Amiee Anderson joined Middletown in 2006 and serves as the first African American Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students. She completed her Master of Divinity from Emory University in 1997 and began her higher education career. Throughout the next decade, Dean Anderson served in residence life, student activities, orientation, multicultural affairs, and judicial affairs roles before earning the Dean of Students title at Wells College. There she partnered with a student leader in the fall of 2001 to create "Appointed," an all-student college gospel choir. Upon arrival at Middletown, Dean Anderson founded another gospel choir called "Rejoice." Students from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds rehearse and perform in the town's many churches, synagogues, and community centers.

Colleen Caffey, Director of Multicultural Life, joined Middletown College in 2009 and was one of six African American employees at Middletown and one of only four African American women. Relatively new to the campus, her two years of service helped strengthen clubs that cater to underrepresented groups including the Black Student Association (BSA), Comunidad Latina, Asian Student Association/International Student Association (ASA/ISA) and Pride, Middletown's gay student advocacy group. Through workshops, focused recruiting efforts, and community outreach, she helped rebuild student membership to and engagement with these groups. Her commitment to multicultural awareness in the broader community included a role as Commissioner of the local Human Rights Commission.

Dr. Dana Davis had the longest record of service among all study participants. She began her career at Middletown in 1983 as the Director of Career Development. For 27 years, she served multiple administrative and faculty roles teaching English, French, and women's studies before taking on her present appointment as Dean of the College for Academic Life. Dean Davis

earned her Ph.D. in English Literature from Indiana University, Bloomington with a scholarly focus on women authors.

Beth Benson joined the Middletown psychology faculty in 1983. She currently serves as the Associate Dean for Institutional Assessment tracking student retention and persistence trends. Under her leadership, Middletown collects and reports on a wide array of data on entering first years through post-graduation seniors. Major surveys include the CIRP, the NSSE, and the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) survey. Her research includes studies of campus pedagogies that facilitate student engagement, gender role identity, and religious beliefs on health and well-being.

Chaplain Earl Easton entered Middletown in 2000. As a Lutheran minister, he leads the college's diverse religious life mission in developing students' spiritual lives. His close relationships with students and direct report to the President gave him a comprehensive perspective on campus culture as it intersects with campus policies and the institution's mission. Of all the administrators interviewed, Chaplain Easton most clearly expressed the heavy burden African American students bear on a predominantly White campus.

In his interview, Chaplain Easton strongly recommended that Farrah Feinstein, Director of the Academic Resource Center, be interviewed. Her role in pioneering a comprehensive academic tutoring program proved to be highly valuable in understanding how students are supported academically through carefully implemented programs. Ms. Feinstein began her career at Middletown in 1992 and collaborated across the campus to build the center to its current operations. The center now serves over 80% of students through student assistance, writing programs, and a broad offering of academic content and skill building workshops.

Unique in her approach, she requires her student assistants (i.e., tutors) to complete a bias and prejudice training, an activity guiding students to explore their own biases and assumptions.

Middletown College Findings

Mission. Middletown's mission is focused on cultivating a diverse and highly supportive residential learning community. Its largely traditional students are classically trained in a liberal arts education via a broad offering of modern curricular and co-curricular programs. Students develop essential skills in leadership and service that augment their academic learning.

According to Vice-President Anderson, "diversity is front and center" at Middletown. Indeed, the value of diverse perspectives is referenced throughout the college's mission statement:

> Middletown College aims to develop independent critical thinkers who are intellectually agile, characterized by a zest for reasoned and civil debate, knowledgeable about the achievements and traditions of diverse civilizations and cultures, able to express ideas with clarity and grace, committed to life-long learning, equipped with ethical and civic values, and prepared for lives of leadership and service. The College is committed to providing an intellectually rigorous undergraduate education within the context of a supportive, diverse residential community. We are also committed to educating the whole person through experiences within and beyond the classroom. Our curriculum integrates the traditional liberal arts with selected pre-professional studies.
>
> Our faculty are passionate about teaching, value close relationships with students, and are committed to the pedagogical and intellectual importance of research. Honoring its historical heritage from the Lutheran Church and its continuing connection with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Middletown welcomes and celebrates a variety

> of faith traditions on campus and encourages members of the College community to value spiritual life. (Middletown College Catalog, 2010-2011, pp. 1-2)

Published in March of 2006, Middletown's diversity statement extended the mission by expounding on the central role of diversity.

> Middletown College believes that diversity, in many forms and expressions, is essential to its educational mission and to its success as a community. We believe that a broad range of human perspectives, experiences, backgrounds, and opinions enriches the academic experience, stimulates intellectual rigor, enhances the quality of life on campus, and prepares our graduates for lives of leadership and service in a democratic, pluralistic society and a diverse world. We believe that our academic program is not able to achieve the goals set in our mission statement unless each member of the community recognizes and understands the benefits, conflicts, tensions, and intersections that are inherent in diversity. Diversity is, therefore, a fundamental Middletown value.

Chaplain Easton described Middletown's primary mission as preparing students for lives of service, which springs from its close affiliation with the Lutheran church.

> Leadership through service does come from, I think, our Lutheran heritage. [Students aren't] just getting a business degree so they can go work on Wall Street. Now, [they] may do that. But ideally that work on Wall Street is going to be embedded in a life of leadership and service.

Faculty and staff make servant leadership a relevant experience for all students. It permeates the campus. "To better equip the Middletown student for lives of leadership and service, [students] leave the ivory halls and go into a community that is more than likely very different form their frame of reference," according to Anderson.

Middletown also advances a firm commitment to the liberal arts. Students experience a highly interdisciplinary curriculum inside and outside of the classroom. Dean Davis described it this way: “We really want to expose students to as many varied different academic disciplines and experiences . . . [so that] they will become well rounded, productive citizens.” Lifelong learning qualities such as critical thinking, a zest for reasoned and civil debate, embracing the traditions and cultures of diverse civilizations, and the lucid expression of ideas form the backbone of the intellectual experience. In the liberal arts tradition, the Middletown faculty emphasize “breath of knowledge versus depth, discipline versus flexibility, continuity versus change” (College Catalog, p. 2). Often cited among study participants as one of the College’s most valuable campus assets, the Academic Resource Center (ARC) “fosters the development of ‘learning to learn’ skills” (Middletown At-A-Glance, 2010, p. 1).

Colleen Caffey, Director of Multicultural Life, placed academic life at the core of their liberal arts mission embedded in a supportive community. “I believe foremost [regarding our mission] is intellectual inquiry and developing the skills within our students for civil debate within an inclusive, welcoming community.” According to Ms. Caffey, building and sustaining a close community is not without its challenges. Chaplain Easton explained that such a focus on community is both a blessing and a curse for many non-majority students. “Like a lot of colleges, we talk about community and the closeness of that community. Our notion, our understanding, and our lived value of community both sustains us and is a thicket for us.” Easton went on to explain that the campus cultivates a culture called *Middletown nice* that helps maintain a supportive learning environment, but often at the behest of progressive cultural change.

Campus culture. Participants described the campus culture in terms of its character, the unspoken rules, traditions, norms, and customs that define Middletown (Kuh et al., 1991; Schein, 2004). Responses in the arena of culture clustered around three sub-themes: community, academics, and student social culture.

In the first sub-theme of community, the notion of a *caring community* defined the overall Middletown culture, a message that was repeated frequently in printed materials and by study participants. For instance, the word *community* appears 129 times in the college catalog (Middletown Catalog, 2010). Admissions materials also prominently display their pride in community. One brochure described the campus this way:

> People really care about each other. . . . Many colleges *say* it, but at Middletown you can *feel* it. There is a real sense of community here. Students care about each other. Faculty care about their students. The potential for human connections and for lifelong friendships that enrich a college experience is tremendous. (Admissions Viewbook, 2010 p. 3)

Participants spoke to how Middletown seeks to foster community. Associate Dean Benson captured the notion this way:

> We really pride ourselves on the strong sense of community here at Middletown. . . . There's a focus on providing students with this solid liberal arts education, but within a solid and diverse community. I think one of the things that makes us unique from our competitors, and I probably know this more than others.

Benson went on to suggest that institutional survey data reinforces this perspective.

> We see this with our assessment data. Students come here because they think we do have a strong sense of community. We have our seniors [via the senior survey] telling us and

> usually we're significantly higher than our peers, that yes indeed there was a strong sense of community here. And you just see it. I mean, people say hi to one another. For someone from the Midwest that may not be unusual. But even at other small liberal arts colleges where small equates with community, you don't always see people who don't really know one another saying hi. And we hear this all the time with our admissions evaluations, our tour guide evaluations too. It's like, wow, this is an amazingly friendly place.

The notion of caring for one another as a component of their culture seems to be highly valued at Middletown, more so than at other liberal arts colleges where participants had previously worked. Vice-President Anderson described it this way: "People seem more caring here. People seem more giving. People seem more welcoming. And if we knew what it really was, we'd bottle it and sell it. We'd be millionaires. We wouldn't need a capital campaign."

Students enjoy more than just a close community with their faculty at Middletown College. They are often full partners in shaping the campus culture. Associate Dean Benson said this on the topic:

> There's a question I think that NSSE asks about students working with faculty and administrators on being on committees and other projects. We're higher on that compared to our peers. . . . Our curriculum committee, our academic policy committee, they all have student representatives; two student representatives who have voice *and vote* on those committees.

In the second sub-theme, academics, both informal and formal systems of academic alerts help identify and support students in need before serious issues arise. When students are

struggling in class for whatever reason, the academic culture is to intervene. This culture of support is campus-wide, according to Dean Davis.

> Does every single professor call in? No. But many do. Especially for first year students who we know are very . . . vulnerable. I've just been corresponding about one of last year's Jumpstart students, who seems to be getting into some bad habits. But we know of a good point person to communicate with that student. And the student has sat down with one of his professors. So you know, students know that we're there and taking it seriously.

Administrators are an integral part of the Middletown College support network as well and seem to freely share concerns with faculty. Chaplain Easton captured this notion when he relayed this:

> I can call up a professor and say, "Hey, what's going on with so-and-so? Do you notice something in your class? Because, I'm getting a vibe." You know, or vice versa. I've had faculty call me and say, "Do you know this kid?" I think on a larger campus, that's much more complicated, much more difficult.

When asked if this intervention practice had a name, such as an early alert program, Dr. Davis characterized it as more of an organic process. "It's a system, but we don't have a name for it. I don't know if it's a tradition, but it certainly is a part of our culture." Later she elaborated adding more breadth to this habit of support.

> There's a culture of excellent teaching and really caring about students and how we make sure that they're making progress. And I don't mean somebody's just checking off their number of credit hours . . . so they can really thrive. And I think we've got a really great network for that.

Faculty interaction with students appears quite high at Middletown. Although interaction alone does not guarantee student success, frequent and meaningful interaction can significantly impact student engagement and overall satisfaction (Astin, 1999). Staff and student participants alike suggested that faculty often develop meaningful, long term relationships with their students.

When Dean Anderson was asked about the frequency and quality of faculty–student interaction, she gave the campus high marks.

> Oh, well, this is what we're good for. That one-on-one, that being invited to professor so-and-so's house for dinner. "They took me under their wing. I couldn't have made it without that individual." That's across the board with all students at Middletown. I do hear that from the multicultural students because I don't think they thought it would happen. I don't think they thought faculty would take that kind of an interest in them. And that's why many of them will say, "We are successful now." Professor so-and-so said, "You need to be doing this. We need to work on your resume. Bring that in and I'll critique it and then I'll write a letter of recommendation." And then, when they either got into a profession or got into a graduate program, those [faculty] stayed in touch with them. "Is there anything else you need?" You know, "Let us know what we can do to be helpful." So when [alumni] come back, they like to make the rounds to see who is still here. You don't always find that.

Associate Dean Benson described a culture of rich faculty–student relationships.

> Faculty–student interaction is very, very high. I see this anecdotally and also in our assessment data. Faculty are accessible, and students are very satisfied with the

interactions with faculty. I think this is also a place where students are more positive about administrators than maybe at other institutions.

As it regards the third sub-theme, student culture, it is important to first note that although Middletown's cultural roots lie within the Lutheran Church, only about 20% of its current students affiliate with a Protestant faith. Even fewer (5%) claim a Lutheran background. About one-third (31%) identify as Catholic and another third (32%) as Jewish (Middletown Source Book, 2010-11). Religious diversity is supported in part by Middletown's Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding (IJCU). This organization seeks "to enhance Jewish-Christian understanding by helping Christians understand Jews and Judaism more clearly, more deeply and more appreciatively, and by helping Jews understand Christians and Christianity more clearly, more deeply and more appreciatively" (IJCU, 2011). During the site visit, IJCU flyers and posters were visible around campus. Participants described in more detail the interplay of religion in campus life.

Farrah Feinstein, Director of the ARC, explained that "a lot of these kids come to us with a dedication to some spiritual aspect of their lives. And Middletown has a lot of opportunities to support that no matter what your religion."

Of particular salience to the culture of support for diversity at Middletown is the relationship between African American and Latina/o students. Over 25% of Middletown city is Spanish speaking Latina/o residents. On campus, one of the most influential student organizations is Comunidad Latina. Colleen Caffe, Multicultural Life director, mentioned that African American students sometimes "pass" as Latina/o. "Some students feel more comfortable identifying as Latino than might be as an African American or Black. And I believe there are some students who can pass. They sort of think it's a passing kind of thing." Indeed, during the

focus group, one African American and White biracial student mentioned that she often passes as Latina. Focus group participants were also asked to provide their racial or ethnic identities. Few in the group who were recruited for this study by Colleen Caffee, Director of Multicultural Life, said they were African American or Black. Instead, five out of the ten non-White students reported biracial, Caribbean, or Jamaican American identities. It seemed from study participant responses that racial and ethnic identities at Middletown took on more nuanced meaning.

For many African American students, the local community also contributes to the hometown campus feel. Chaplain Easton explained that even though the town's African American community is small, it is closely connected.

> African American students know where to get their hair cut. [Students] have a number of African American churches or Pentecostal churches which are mixed. Middletown is an hour from big population centers where many of our students come from. And when . . . the going gets tough here, it's easy to get back home.

College traditions also play an integral role in shaping and sustaining an organization's culture (Schein, 2004). Increasing multicultural student enrollment over the past decade has fueled rich and new traditions specific to the African American community. Vice-President Anderson offered the Martin Luther King celebration as one example.

> One tradition I know that speaks to the African American community is the way that the college celebrates the Martin Luther King birthday and holiday. We never have classes on that day. And we always have a campus-wide celebration of some kind where we're either having a guest speaker, or a faculty member, or a member of the local Middletown community comes to speak–a time to get people together and to pause and reflect on the life of this gentleman. But also what it means to be a Middletown student.

About five years ago, students began a new tradition of addressing critical social issues of the day. The Black Student Union created regular student forums called a Shout Out which serve as student organized and moderated topical forums. Typically, a shout out is offered only when an issue arises necessitating some community-wide dialogue. Earlier in the fall, the students responded to a racial profiling incident and debriefed its impact on the community. According to Vice-President Anderson,

> The second weekend of the semester, which would have been Labor Day weekend, we had three armed robberies in less than a two and a half hour time period, which is very unusual for Middletown. Unfortunately, the description of the perpetrators was one Latino individual male, and the other was a six foot African American male. Well, one of our six foot African American [students] had gotten a text message that we'd had two robberies and that people were being encouraged to stay in. And he was over at the multicultural center, and this was about 1:00 a.m. at night on a Saturday. He called for an escort and thought, "You know what, I know [Campus Safety is] busy trying to figure out what's going on with these robberies. I'm just going to go on back to my residence hall because it's not that far." Too far that night.
>
> As he's walking down the street, he's surrounded by not one, not two, but five [city] police cars. And being a New Yorker, he understands that. So he maintained his cool and immediately said, "I'm a Middletown student" and showed his [student] ID. That should have been enough. They didn't accept that. And it wasn't until our Chief of Security got there and said, "That's Michael, he's one of ours." was he then let go. And that left not a good taste in his mouth, nor with the community.

> So the African American student association decided, "We're going to do a Shout Out about racial profiling: what it means, what it feels like to be profiled, let people share their stories." And I was really pleased that we had representatives from our own Campus Safety and one of the commanders that were responsible for this area came, from the Police Department, which I thought was astute on their part. It was a very difficult session to sit through for him. But I give him credit for coming, for listening and understanding the concerns of the students. And then, at the end of the session he said, "I want to take off my policeman's hat and I want to tell you my story." And he said, "If you'll notice my skin is a little darker. I'm Syrian. And when I say to you I know what it feels like to be profiled," he said, "I am on a no fly list." And he said, "I'm a police officer and I'm on a no fly list. So I can say to you, I know about profiling . . . and I'm gonna do my best to make sure that we get more training."

Shout Out was mentioned in each administrative interview as a means for intercultural dialogue. Colleen Caffey recalled that White students often repeatedly attend:

> A Shout Out is an opportunities for students of color to bring to the campus at large issues that impact them as African Americans. And they're well attended. And sometimes, I think it's the same young White students who are really grappling with the issues of identity and race who attend and are generally very quiet. But they're there. And then the faculty and staff try to encourage their sociology, psychology, [and] African Studies [students to attend], whatever it might be, for more information.

Dr. Davis, Dean of the College for Academic Life, shared that she "was deeply touched by how thoughtful these students were and how they presented difficult situations. What respectful listeners they were. I really, really respect these students." Beth Benson, Associate

Dean for Institutional Assessment, emphasized how Shout Outs symbolize Middletown's efforts to include all students into these difficult conversations.

> The Black Student Union just had a Shout Out . . . that was not housed at the Multicultural Center. It was actually over in the Union. That was very well attended, from what I understand. So I know you're focusing on African American students. But to be honest, and even I think what you'll hear from Colleen (Caffee), and maybe from Amiee (Anderson) too, is that we focus on issues of diversity in terms of all of our students. And making sure all of our students are part of the conversation.

Campus environment and resources. Most of what we understand about student success can be attributed to personal characteristics or student inputs such as academic aptitude, study habits, and socio-economic status (Tinto, 1987). But without effective campus resources, even the most prepared and disciplined students can struggle. By the same token, less prepared students often benefit the most from intentionally designed and effectively delivered campus resources (Carey, 2004). Such resources may include bricks and mortar facilities, lab equipment, outdoor spaces, access to specialized services (on or off campus), and the full spectrum of library resources. To that end, Middletown offers to all students a comprehensive ARC.

Administrator participants referenced the ARC as a significant factor in explaining recent student academic success, especially for underrepresented students. Established in 1987, the ARC offers individual tutoring, content workshops for 27 courses, a first-year academic success workshop, and a writing center. The center focuses heavily on peer-to-peer support. Students are selected through a faculty nomination process, then trained for an entire semester in cognitive theory, or metacognition, student development theory, peer tutoring skills, discovering personal biases, disability awareness, and interpersonal relationship building. Student Learning

Assistants, as they are called (not tutors), attend previously completed courses with the task of modeling productive student habits such as asking appropriate questions and taking thorough notes.

Over 80% of students take advantage of the ARC at Middletown according to the center's latest utilization report. High student use effectively dispels the remedial stigma often associated with academic support resources at other institutions, according to the ARC director, Farrah Feinstein.

> I think what cripples a lot of other [college ARCs] is that they are seen as remedial and [they think] "who needs those kids anyway." Whereas our faculty understand that some of these kids have been real outstanding students in certain disciplines and real leaders even though they're impaired in other areas. So I think they don't see us as remedial. [Rather] they [and the faculty] are concerned that our reputation is bringing *too many* numbers, that we'll reach a tipping point. And we might be at that tipping point right now.

Middletown's ARC enjoys a reputation of being highly valued, even necessary for top academic performance. Chaplain Easton had this to say on the subject:

> There is nothing shameful in participating in the programs at the Academic Resource Center. African American students are standing in line next to Hispanic students and White students and rich students and poor students. They just line it up because we have such a variety of different needs. We've done a pretty good job recognizing those needs and responding to them. . . . Nobody thinks, "Oh, you're over there. What's your learning disability?" You know. "No, I need help with my chem lab." You know, "I need chem support because I want to do well, because I want to succeed." So that's the value.

In 2002, the ARC staff realized too few high performing students of color were getting nominated as Student Learning Assistants. So director Feinstein and her staff explored ways to boost recruitment.

> Our nomination process is done by professors. So the kids that are outspoken, or talk a lot in class, or hang out with [faculty] during office hours or go with them for coffee get nominated. And these kids who sit in the back who really don't feel part of the culture completely get missed. So we deliberately started sending them letters from our office congratulating them on their performance and inviting them to be tutors, which meant they had to go and pursue a nomination. And they were flattered. And so all of a sudden, we started increasing the number of tutors we had of color.

Other campus resources serve to encourage student engagement among and between students of color. The Multicultural Center provides both formal academic classroom and informal study and co-curricular spaces. Completed in 2006, the Center filled a gap in the campus environment before which students of color had no dedicated place to congregate. Now, "students will talk about the Multicultural Center as being a place that is theirs," according to Dean Anderson. In fact, the Black Student Association holds their weekly meetings, most Shout Outs, and other social gatherings in this facility. Comunidad Latina, ASA/ISA, and Pride also regularly meet in this space.

Although Middletown seems to be well supplied with campus resources (highly trained faculty, engaged professional staff, and modern campus facilities), it appears to be the implementation of key programs such as the ARC, as well as related practices and policies noted in the next section that helps to encourage African American student success.

Policies, practices, and programs. Middletown College offers a wide range of academic and co-curricular programs that support student learning. A rich curriculum forms the core of the Middletown experience. Students may choose from 40 different areas of study including a relatively new African American studies minor introduced in 2007. This new program's interdisciplinary approach allows students to explore the unique history, culture, and socio-economics of African Americans. Courses span eight academic departments including anthropology, communications, dance, English, French, music, political science, and theatre. Six required courses and two electives are necessary for completion.

As part of their general education requirements, all students must complete a D-Requirement, or diversity requirement (Middletown Catalog, p. 38), through courses exploring diversity and difference. Students may choose from 30 interdisciplinary courses that examine cultures and perspectives different from their own. One of the most popular courses is *Introduction to African American Studies*. In 2010-2011, over 200 students enrolled, exploring questions such as, "Is there such a thing as a 'Black' experience? How African is African-American culture? What new insights do postmodern and postcolonial theories offer on all these subjects?" (2010-2011 Catalog, p. 103). Dean Anderson explained how some instructors incorporate local businesses and culture into their courses.

> We have several faculty members who teach some courses that presently in the curriculum are called D-requirements, [which are] tied to diversity. We've got a professor of sociology who does the Sociology of Food. They visit lots of ethnic restaurants . . . and introduce them not only downtown and how it's not unsafe, but to let them know that there are a lot of fabulous little stores, and shops, and restaurants and bodegas owned by multicultural people in the [area].

Other courses fulfilling the D-requirement include ATH 260: Vodou in Haiti and the Diaspora, DNC 150: African Dance and Cultures, and ENG 232: African American Drama. These courses emerged only within the last 10 years as the African American student population began to see sustained growth. The diversity and difference requirement was added to the curriculum in 2003. Although this program was lauded by Dean Anderson, participants also shared some criticism. Caffey recounted stories told by students of color who were frustrated with the global focus of the classes, saying,

> They didn't feel like [D-requirement courses] really paid enough attention to the issues of difference domestically. And when class discussions did focus on those incidents of difference here domestically, it was very shallow. Either students of color felt like they had to represent that particular population in the community, or they thought they had to educate the majority population. So students felt comfortable with that. And some felt like that's not my job. And because there's so few of them in the classrooms spread out, they became the focal point of the conversations. So anything that wasn't necessarily domestically related, they felt like it really did not do justice to the D-requirement.

In 2007, Middletown further expanded its ethnic studies offerings by creating an African American Studies minor. Additional ethnic study courses, stronger African American faculty and staff recruitment and broader co-curricular programs are helping Middletown experience a tipping point in campus diversity, as observed by Dean Anderson:

> [Middletown is] feeling very good nowadays [in] that . . . we have the Vice President and Dean, and we have the multicultural center, a newly formed academic requirement, and a African American Studies minor. That only came on the books less than three years ago. We have tenured an African American male in dance, an Asian woman in Sociology. We

> just hired this past year another African American woman to serve as the chair of the African American studies program. So we're beginning to see movement in the ranks of staff and faculty to mirror the student experience. But the students are still saying, "We don't see enough of us." And that's true. But when they get together with alums, like we did over the weekend and hear their stories, I think our students' light bulbs went off and it's like "Oh, it is better than it was." It may not be perfect. We may not be where we need to be. But we certainly aren't where we were.

Two academic programs that seem to attract a significant number of African American students are theatre and dance. Consistently ranked nationally as a top ten undergraduate theatre program, Middletown hosts 8-10 main stage productions a year and multiple black box, or mini-theatre productions with minimal set designs produced and directed by students only. The college's close proximity to major cities like New York City and Philadelphia affords frequent visits by diverse professional artists to host master classes. According to Chaplain Easton, Middletown College has the 4th ranked theatre program in the nation.

> So if you want to be a theatre kid, this is the place to go. You know, so you're gonna stay even if it's a little bit uncomfortable. Sometimes you're going to stay because of the program. You know, and students have said that, "I'm here for the program."

A strong performing arts program combined with state-of-the art facilities draws a highly diverse pool of urban student applicants each year, many of them African American.

Another key program in support of African American student success is the Middletown Jumpstart Program. Recognizing the need for additional support for at-risk students, a number of whom are African American, the Dean for Academic Life launched the Jumpstart program in 2009. Participants are selected based on pre-enrollment variables categorized as at-risk. Such

variables including high school GPA, class rank, and college entrance exam scores. Once selected, students are invited to participate in, among other initiatives, an early advising session in June and a one-week pre-orientation program. Students get a “jumpstart” on their orientation by participating in a library scavenger hunt, engaging in placement testing, and meeting with a core group of campus learning specialists, mentors, student tutors, and faculty advisors assigned to them for the first year. Preliminary assessment data, according to Dean Davis, shows that this bridge program helps students more quickly adapt to the often confusing cultural and academic challenges. Its success earned it a well-supported spot in the institutions’ new 2010-2015 strategic plan.

In additional to the theater and Jumpstart programs, other social and non-academic programs appear to help African Americans succeed. For example, African American students, like all students, are encouraged to explore non-academic interests and have a wide variety of co-curricular programs from which to choose. Middletown offers 83 student clubs, club sports, fraternities, and student organizations. At the hub of African American student life is the BSA. The BSA hosts weekly meetings, events, speakers, and other activities that revolve around African American student social-political interests and multicultural awareness. The BSA established the Shout Out discussion forum program. The program offers a campus open discussion forum illuminating issues and current events that impact the Middletown community. Another medium of dialogue is the Psychology Department Brown Bag Discussion series. Faculty and students assemble weekly over lunch to present and discuss diversity-related research.

Perhaps the most impactful academic policy and practice involves Middletown’s Academic Early Warning policy. Introduced in 1999, the Dean of Academic Life realized that

many students slipping below the academic minimum 2.0 shared similar characteristics. Namely, students in otherwise good academic standing often withdrew or posted incompletes. Previously, those students would go largely undetected until they failed out or were applying to transfer. Now, these students are placed on a watch list. Early warning students receive a letter from the Dean inviting them to meet one-on-one. At this meeting, the Dean builds a comprehensive picture of the student's needs, recommends appropriate campus services including the ARC, and helps the student devise a plan for success. The practice soon spread across campus resulting in a current network of faculty and staff who routinely refer students for intervention well before it is too late.

Institutional agents. For most students, succeeding in college requires a strong network of support. Generally, these points of campus support come from the faculty, administration, and staff in addition to close friends and classmates. For underrepresented students at a predominantly White college, a strong network of institutional agents is even more critical. Faculty in particular serve as a resource beyond the classroom to provide cultural support through co-curricular activities as described by Vice-President Anderson earlier in her example of a professor who teaches the sociology of food and how the professor uses that topic to explore diversity.

Middletown appears to have reached a critical mass of multicultural students that will provide an even stronger network of support. Vice-President Anderson explained it this way:

> This year, in the freshmen class, we have the largest percentage of incoming multicultural students. We're now getting a significant critical mass. And when you get a critical mass, be they African American, Latino, Asian students, or however they self-identify, they're going to become empowered.

Environmental conditions seem to be improving for underrepresented students as well to the point where alumni are noticing. Vice-President Anderson had this to say regarding alumni. "We just came off alumni reunion and homecoming last week and have these alums coming back and saying, "We wish we could re-enroll."

Data collected at Middletown College reflects a supportive campus learning environment for all students. Senior administrators, faculty, and students reported that the institution's mission, culture, and resources are working in concert to successfully transition new students to and graduate seniors from the institution in increasing numbers. A growing multicultural presence in both the student body and the faculty show that a cultural tipping point may be imminent, a trend that has not gone unnoticed by students whose comments are captured in the next section.

Middletown College Focus Group Results

Students were identified and recruited by the Director of Multicultural Life, Colleen Caffey, who did not attend the focus group. Most of the students participated in a Black Student Union meeting immediately prior to the focus group in the same building. This timing was intentional and helped minimize scheduling conflicts among participants.

Eleven undergraduates participated in a one-hour, moderated focus group and were all members or officers of multicultural student groups. Five African American, two biracial, two Caribbean American, one Jamaican American, and one White student participated. More women than men participated at 7 to 4 respectively and the findings are again organized via the themes just discussed. Table 4 summarizes the student participants.

Table 4

Middletown Student Focus Group Participants

Participant	Race	Sex	Class
Ben	African American	Male	Senior
Fred	African American	Male	Sophomore
Eve	African American	Female	First-Year
Darlene	African American	Female	Sophomore
Carrie	African American	Female	Senior
Adam	Biracial (AA/White)	Male	Sophomore
Felicia	Biracial (AA/White)	Female	Senior
Kea	Jamaican American	Female	Sophomore
Greg	Caribbean American	Male	First-Year
Tawni	Caribbean American	Female	First-Year
Sophia	White	Female	Sophomore

Mission. Participants were asked to describe in their own words Middletown's mission and core values. Their responses focused more on campus reputation and cultural observations, which are covered in more detail below. However, Adam, a biracial sophomore theatre major said, "I'm usually quick to throw out we're the 4th best theatre school in the nation." Although not necessarily an observation of the College's mission, per se, it was something Adam was proud to announce. His peers reminded him that Middletown was ". . . actually 6th among other small liberal arts colleges," according to Tawni and Kea. Middletown's performing arts

reputation seemed to be a badge of honor among the participants, especially for Fred. In fact, it was the determining factor for his decision to choose Middletown.

> I originally was going to [enroll in] a conservatory as well. But Middletown gave me the option to double major in two of the things I like to do, which was dance and theatre. That's why I came.

Darlene, an African American sophomore, shared how students really try to fit in, as if it was their mission to not stand out.

> I sometimes feel like everyone wants to be the same. Like, if you can fit in on campus, like that's the goal. You know, I don't know. I start to feel like people want to be carbon copies of the other people on campus so that they can fit in. As opposed to expressing oneself and getting the most of the college experience and what that would be for them. And I feel like if you don't stick out, that's better. I don't know if that's how I personally feel. I've never seemed like fitting in. That's the feeling I get. That's my personal feeling.

Campus culture. Study participants talked at length about how they experienced campus culture. The students described Middletown as a friendly community and a place where students enjoy close relationships with several faculty and staff. Felicia, a biracial senior noted that "people are quite friendly. Doors are open for you" at Middletown. Faculty and staff of color were described as often going above and beyond their roles to teach by regularly reaching out to students in need. Felicia said this on the subject:

> I feel supported because I have close relationships like Dean Anderson and Colleen, our Multicultural Life Director, who's another faculty member here, a person of color. Like, they're all supportive of us and they know what we're going through. And they always,

> you know, check in on us to make sure we're okay. And . . . more times than not [they] go out of their way to make sure we're getting what we need while we're here. . . . They'd do anything for me. . . . I feel comfortable here.

One student (Greg) said that the friendly staff made him take notice of Middletown when considering his college choice.

> This originally wasn't my first choice school. But . . . when it came down to, like, financial aid stuff, and the administration, and the people who were really dealing with getting me here, I had the least amount of trouble from the Middletown staff. They actually were willing to go to bat for me as opposed to they just want my money.

Faculty members seem to genuinely care about their students' lives in and out of the classroom. Eve, a first-year African American woman, explained how faculty are fully vested in their students.

> I feel like teachers here can be really open, interested, and really invested in your learning experience. Professors are more interested in what your experiences are on campus and they're more open-minded.

Faculty are also known to support students by attending important multicultural events. Darlene agreed by saying, "they're interested in our activities on campus." Ten faculty members showed up for a Shout Out discussion forum earlier in the term. According to Adam, that support resonated with him when he said, ". . . seeing that many faculty really gave me a boost."

An increasingly diverse student body has helped improve the campus culture for African American students over the past seven years. Some participants noticed a significant difference in recent years. Ben's comments capture this observation and its impact:

> There's just a lot more Black people this year. I think, like, one thing that we probably all notice this year is you can . . . walk in the day and see more than four Black people a day now. Which is like, might not seem like a big deal [to] some people. [But] that's like a huge deal when you can see you know more people. And like, you don't even have to talk to them. Just the fact that they're walking down the road makes a difference.

Darlene agreed saying "It's good to be surrounded by Black people. It makes me feel good."

Other students said that while strides had been made, Middletown's campus community was far from diverse. In fact, most participants perceived Middletown as an environment lacking true diversity. Greg, for instance, said, "I knew as soon as I stepped on campus what I was getting myself into." He conducted some on-line research before visiting Middletown through rating services like College Prowler. This site offers college reviews by students for students. Broken down into categories such as academics, campus dining, diversity, nightlife, weather, etc., the web site assigns traditional grades to each area from an "A+" to "F." Middletown had a grade of "C" for its diversity according to Greg. When he visited the campus for the first time, he brought up this score to an admissions counselor who reportedly said "You know, it's getting better." Greg made this statement with obvious sarcasm in his voice. He went on to say:

> But I knew that diversity here was not good. And I guess my point of view is that if I don't go, that's not going to change anything. So if no Black people go because there's no Black people there, then there will *never* be any Black people. So I was like, alright, I'm cultured so to speak. I went to a rich private school. What's the worst thing that can happen? (brief pause) And this is worse.

Ben agreed. "I went to a White prep school too. And like, when I was there I thought there was absolutely no diversity, and I hated it. And then, like, now that I'm here, [I'm thinking] 'That was the most diverse' (laughter from the group)."

Others were able to adjust to the small diverse community, embrace it, and now say they love Middletown. Adam had this to say on the subject:

> I think the reason I almost left last year was [because] Middletown is small. Like, it's really small. And having a small community inside of a small community is really hard. Cause like, this is it for the most part. There's not that much of a multicultural population [here]… But like I got used to it, and like I love it now. And I can honestly say that I love it here now.

Campus environment and resources. Study participants were asked to describe Middletown's campus facilities, spaces, and how the overall campus environment supports student success. Although some facilities like the Multicultural Center were mentioned as key resources, most described a marginalized, rather than supportive, environment for underrepresented students.

Student participants also described the college's web environment as not too representative of their reality. Darlene had this to say, for instance:

> On the website, they take a picture of like certain Black people. And then it's like every picture has the same Black person like this in this pose (The student posed with a wide smile and hands folded under her chin.). Like, every picture! And you're like, "Oh, diversity!" And so they try to create this illusion. Like, "look, we're diverse. Look at our community, and it's diverse and wonderful and accepting." Then you get here, and you're like, "Where are all the Black people?"

Sophia recalled an example of how a friend's photograph made it to the web during her first year.

> There was [an Asian] student who basically lived on my floor last year. And the first week into our freshmen year his picture was up on the website. And I was like, how did they get him up there that fast. (laughter) They just like (finger snap) found him. And they were just like, up, okay there we go. Okay, that's going up. And like on the student admission page too. I think it's on the prospective student page. Like right there.

Multicultural Center. Although several participants reported a less than diverse campus environment, the Multicultural Center (see Figure 10) seemed to be a space that helped create a home for underrepresented groups. Located one block from the campus proper, the two-story center offers a seminar room, living room, full kitchen, and basement for studying and social activities. Multicultural clubs such as the Asian Students Association and International Students Association (ASA/ISA), BSA, Comunidad Latina, Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), and the Soul Sound Steppers were based there. Prior to the focus group meeting, the BSA held its weekly meeting in the living room which easily accommodated the 15 students who attended.

Figure 10. Multicultural Center.

Although the center was cited as a campus resource supporting student of color, its location on the campus perimeter was not considered ideal. Felicia had this to say:

> I feel like there are a lot of resources um, that, you know, students of color can use . . . like . . . the Multicultural Center. But then it's like, what's the Multicultural Center here at Middletown? It's a house that's kind of far away from the campus. So these are like, these are our resources, but they're kind of still in the margins.

Student Union. A popular space that *is* located in the geographic campus center is the Student Union. With three dining locations, study lounges, and a coffee house, it serves as the campus living room. The campus "restaurant" offers a large 600-seat dining hall with a variety of small and large group table arrangements. The facility supports flexible environments for socializing, studying, and entertaining. Two kosher kitchens ensure both Jewish and halal kosher meals are available every day. Figure 11 shows an additional view of the Student Union.

Figure 11. Student Union Dining Hall.

The Red Door Café located in the basement of the Union provides individual meals-to-order. A theatrically lit stage area provides programming space for open mics, small music acts, and events. The Black Student Association (BSA) hosts their Shout Out discussion forum programs in this space. Most recently, and as noted earlier, they offered a November forum,

responding to the incident where an innocent African American student was accosted by a city police officer. The event sent shock waves throughout the community, prompting the best attendance at a Shout Out that year.

Figure 12. Red Door Café.

Policies, practices, and programs. When asked what policies, practices, or programs played the most significant role in their decisions to attend and remain enrolled at Middletown, participants listed financial aid and academic programs.

As it regarded financial aid, according to the College Board (2010), 77% of Middletown students received some level of financial aid with 5% receiving federal aid. Among first-year students, 54% had their full need met in 2010-2011 (College Board, 2010). Ben's views on the subject were archetypical of the other participants:

> Middletown is really good at giving a lot of financial aid. Actually, I hadn't heard of Middletown until like a month before school started. And they just gave me a lot of money. So I was like, alright.

Ben went on to say that financial aid and the college's reputation is a big factor for most choosing to stay enrolled.

> I think that's the major reason why most people stay at Middletown. A lot of people think about transferring. Middletown is a good school and has a good name. And like if you were to transfer, you would have to think about, "Can I transfer to a school with the same status as Middletown *and* get the same amount of money?" And usually the answer is no. So you would have to probably like go to a lesser tiered school.

In regards to academic programs, participants also noted the popularity of academic programs as a significant factor in their decision to attend and remain at Middletown. About 17% of Middletown students major in visual and performing arts, which includes theatre, dance, and studio art programs. Visual and performing arts are ranked second only to business and marketing degrees as the most popular majors (College Board, 2010). Darlene originally considered only theatre conservatory schools. But after hearing about Middletown's theatre program from high school friends, she also applied.

> I had some conservatory schools in mind . . . but I ended up coming here. A couple of friends who did theatre in my high school came here. I talked to them. And when I came, they talked a lot about the community atmosphere. And I was really invested in that because I had that in my high school. So that's why I originally came here.

Institutional agents. Meaningful connections with others in the Middletown community also seemed to have an impact on student support. Participants cited the Multicultural Life Director, Dean of Students, and dance faculty and other students as key institutional agents they have and could turn to for guidance and encouragement. Felicia had this to say on the topic:

> I feel supported because I have close relationships [with] Dean Anderson and Colleen Caffey (Multicultural Life Director) and [my dance department faculty] who is another

> faculty member, a person of color. Like, they're all supportive of us, and they know what we're going through and they always, you know, check in on us to make sure we're okay.

All three institutional agents Felicia cited above are African American. But that fact alone did not seem to be the main reason for her feeling supported. It was the fact that these individuals go above and beyond to help students through their difficult times that most impressed her. She went on by saying,

> More times than not they go out of their way to make sure we're getting what we need while we're here. I know they would do anything for me. So that's why I feel comfortable here.

Darlene remains committed to Middletown despite the apparent lack of diversity. When asked what kept her here, she explained that "some professors really try to reach out and understand the multicultural community. . . . So I feel like it's worthwhile to try back." Students found that their upper-class peers often serve as encouragers and help them persist. Carrie shared the importance other friends have played in her decision to remain at Middletown saying,

> I feel appreciated by the friends that I'm able to talk to. And if you feel like you're gonna take the time out to not only talk to me, but talk to me about personal stuff, I feel appreciated. It makes me feel more welcomed. And it makes me feel like I have more of a reason to stay.

Carrie considered transferring but reconsidered after talking with her upper-class mentors. "I definitely thought about transferring," Carrie explained. "But I had some upperclassmen who were all graduating last year as seniors who were like, 'No, we're here for you'."

Case Study 2: Rural University

Rural University (RU) is a Carnegie Bachelor's-Arts and Sciences institution. Privately controlled, it is a traditional four-year, liberal arts, residential institution in the heart of the Midwest. RU offers 42 majors and three degree programs to its 2,400 students from 46 states and 36 countries. The university enrolls a relatively diverse student body with 34% reported as non-White. About 18% of students identify as domestic underrepresented minorities from African American (9%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian (3%), Multiracial (6%), and Native American (1%) backgrounds. Another 10% claim international citizenship (College Results, 2010). Underrepresented minority enrollments were at or below 17% during the years included in this study.

Academically, RU's students were among the best and the brightest in America with median class rank, ACT, and combined SAT scores of 90%, 28, and 1,200 respectively. RU's endowment of $442 million dollars allowed them to significantly discount tuition and fees for those with the greatest need. Total FTE student-related expenditures in 2007 topped $22,000, placing the institution at the top of the mid 50% FTE spending criteria.

RU maintains its Methodist affiliation 173 years after its founding in 1837. Nearly all of RU students (98%) reside in traditional campus residence halls, college-owned "village" apartments or houses, and Greek chapter houses.

The college resides in a small, Midwestern, rural community of 10,000 residents. Over 93% of the town's population is White, with only 2.5% African American. Median household income is $39,950 with 10% of families living under the poverty rate (U.S. Census, 2010b). RU's hometown has served as the county seat since its founding in 1821.

A summary of RU would be incomplete without a brief account of their Greek organization heritage, the present day location of the houses shown in Figure 13.

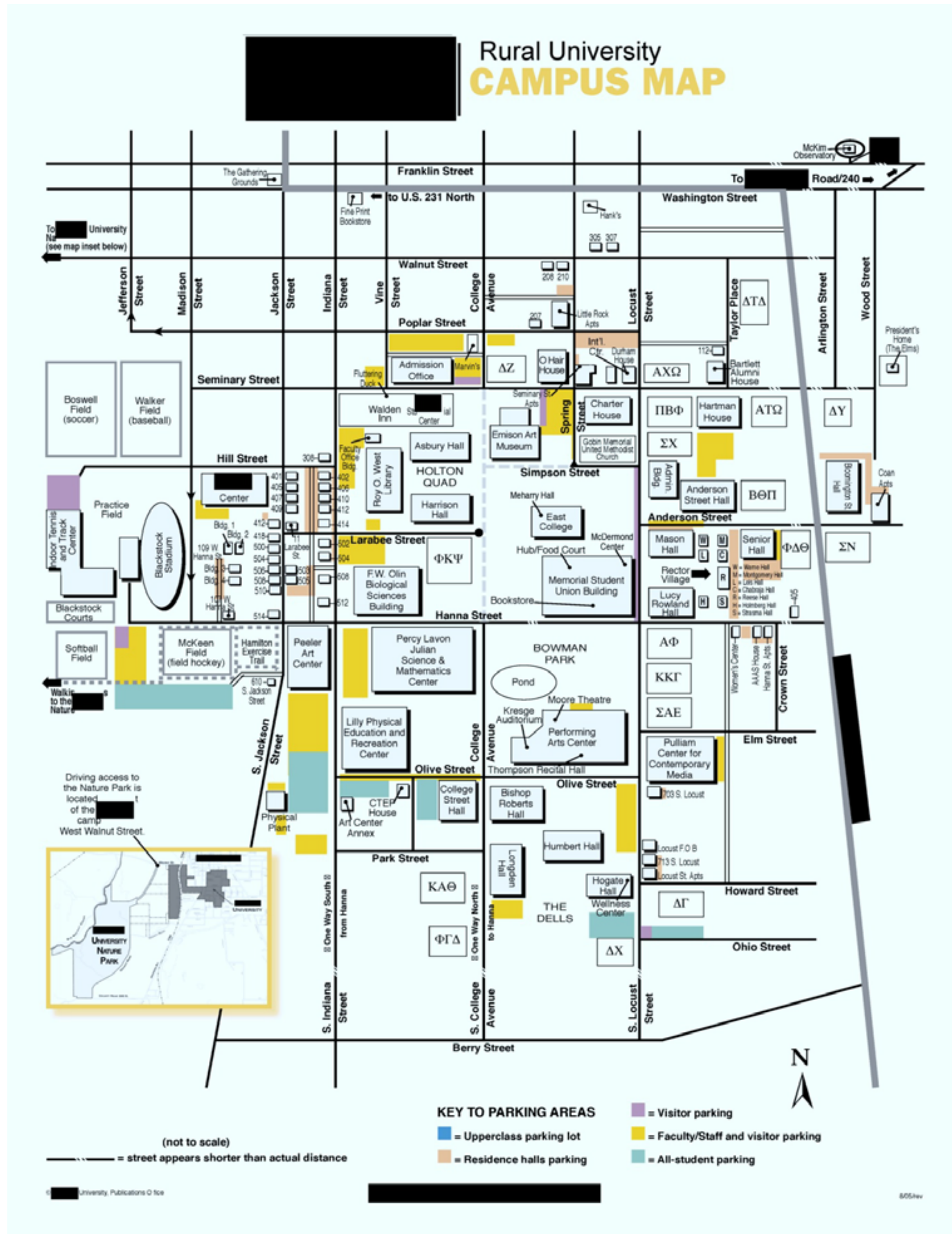

Figure 13. Rural University campus map.

Founded only eight years after the institution's birth, RU's Greek-letter societies have a long, rich history. The first male fraternity at RU, Beta Theta Pi, was founded in 1845. After women

were admitted in 1867, the nation's first sorority was born with the Philomathean Society. Today, RU is home to 24 social Greek fraternities and sororities whose membership claims 70% of students. Among them are two multicultural Greek chapters and a multicultural Greek council (MGC). In 1999, RU moved to deferred recruitment (spring-only recruitment) while simultaneously instituting a first-year experience program and increased non-Greek housing options. Since then, Greek membership and its influence on campus have waned.

Eighteen Greek houses dot the landscape, nearly surrounding the campus. RU does not have a typical "Greek row," as most chapter houses line the south and east borders of the campus and others intermix with academic and other residential buildings along the north perimeter as well as central campus. Both the number of houses and campus-wide locations help make the Greek presence ubiquitous at RU.

Figure 14. Sigma Chi and Delta Zeta Greek houses.

The Rural University Physical Space

I participated in a campus tour guided by an admissions student ambassador. Field notes and photographs were recorded to help capture the university's prominent campus features including interior and exterior spaces. These were later analyzed to explore student space utilization. Specifically, I explored spaces that might support learning, serve as venues for social

gatherings and cultural expression centers. Interview and focus group responses were then cross referenced to identify spaces that best supported the student experience throughout the campus environment.

RU's campus spreads out over 175 acres. Notwithstanding the fragmented Greek residential layout, RU offers a compact living-learning environment. Most facilities are within a 10-minute walk from one another. Academic buildings and faculty offices cluster in the center of campus with athletic and exercise facilities along the east side.

Memorial Union serves as the central gathering place for most student clubs and organizations outside of Greek life. Thus, students spend a great deal of time meeting and hosting events in the Union's dining area called the "Hubb." During the warmer months, large scale events such as orientation, club fairs, and spring concerts stretch out on the East Lawn and Bowman Park green spaces, both located in the heart of campus.

Figure 15. The Hubb Dining Hall and Bowman Park. Source: Photographs by permission of Rural University.

At the heart of campus sits the institution's first building, East College. Erected in 1884 and rededicated in 1981, this historic building appears in most publications as the college's symbol of academic excellence. It currently houses a journalism hall of fame as well as the

economics, modern languages and history departments. Meharry Hall's 400-seat chapel hosts their traditional freshmen convocation, prominent speakers, and other campus-wide events.

Figure 16. East College and Meharry Hall. Source: Photographs by permission of Rural University.

Directly to the west of East College is the Academic Quad. Three buildings form its border including Harrison Hall, Roy O. West Library, and Asbury Hall. Nearly all of the humanities classrooms and lecture halls are located within these three buildings. Roy O. West Hall is the main campus library with a digital media lab, RU archives, and Roy's Café.

Nearly a quarter of RUs students major in the performing arts. In 2007, they received a state-of-the-art facility with the expansion of the Green Center for the Performing Arts. The

Figure 17. Academic Quad and Center for the Performing Arts. Source: Photographs by permission of Rural University.

renovations added 20,000 square feet of music instruction, studio, and performance spaces. The music, theatre, and communications departments are located here.

Rural University administrative participants. A total of five administrators participated in the interview portion of this case study. Three were women and two men, representing White, Latino, and Mexican American ethnicities. Once again, pseudonyms were used to reference participants.

Dr. Gabby Gustafson, a White woman with nine years of service at RU, serves as the Vice President for Student Affairs. Her responsibilities include oversight of all student life departments and programs including athletics, campus activities, campus living and community development (residence life), community standards, first-year experience, Greek life, multicultural and international student life, the campus nature park, public safety, spiritual life, the Posse Program, wellness center, and the women's center. After her promotion in 2008, Dr. Gustafson moved the vice president's office from the main administration building to the Student Union. Her goal, now largely realized, was to centralize the student services personnel to maximize daily contact with RU students.

José Hernandez, a Latino man, is the Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Services. He joined RU in 2008 after earning his master's in higher education from Buffalo State University in New York. Hernandez's close relationship with RU's domestic students of color helped shed light on the challenges and supports influencing the institution's African American graduation rates. He was also instrumental in recruiting the student participants for this study.

Directly overseeing residence life and student life areas, Dean of Campus Life Ian Iverson, a White man, is serving his 12th year at RU. Under his leadership, RU simultaneously

launched a first-year experience program while moving to a deferred Greek recruitment cycle (from early fall recruitment of new members to the spring term). Iverson serves on a number of campus committees including the Student Life and Academic Atmosphere Committee that solicits student feedback on the campus culture, issues, and new initiatives.

Kelli Kaufman directs the Women's Center and various cultural resource centers. With 13 years of service at RU, Kaufman presented the longest institutional history of all participants. She holds a B.A. in political science and philosophy from the University of Texas-El Paso and an M.A. from Duke University. She identifies as a Mexican-American lesbian with a strict practitioner leadership style. Her concentrated experience with underrepresented students gave nuanced insights into conditions impacting African American graduation rate success.

RUs Associate Dean of Academic Affairs is Lynn Leffler, a White woman with 11 years of sociology course instruction and student advising experience at RU. Her interview responses shed light on the unique academic challenges and support programs her students experience.

Table 5

Rural University Administrative Participants

Participant	Title	Race & Gender	Years of Service
Gabby Gustafson	Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students	White, woman	9
José Hernandez	Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Services	Latino, man	2
Ian Iverson	Dean of Campus Life	White, man	12
Kelli Kaufman	Director of Cultural Resource Centers & Women's Center	Mexican American, woman	13
Lynn Leffler	Associate Dean of Academic Affairs	White, woman	11

Rural University Findings

Mission. Rural University, a residential liberal arts college, provides a diverse living and learning community which is distinctive in its rigorous intellectual engagement and international and experiential learning opportunities. RU teaches its students values and habits of mind which serve them throughout their lives as each of them makes a positive difference as an active citizen of the world (RU Catalog, 2010-2011).

Participants highlighted a range of mission focal points at RU. Experiential learning, civic engagement, diversity, critical thinking, and residential life emerged as core values. Although discussing RU's emphasis on experiential learning, Dr. Gustafson had this to say:

> RU has a unique niche in the liberal arts world because for years and years and years and years we have believed strongly in the experiential component. So even before it became kind of a buzz word among other liberal arts colleges, we had a management fellows program and a media fellows program where our students were going out and doing semester-long internships. We've had a strong component of service work in civic engagement here forever. We were one of the first Bonner scholar schools. So we've had a Bonner scholars program for years and years. So I think that we have for years done a good job of melding kind of that real world experience with a liberal arts curriculum.

In terms of diversity, RU has increased efforts in recent years to recruit diverse faculty and staff domestically and from across the globe. Gustafson recounted strategic initiatives from the top executive office.

> The president that was here [prior to] this president . . . had strong initiatives in terms of diversity, even before that was very widely spoken about. And then a couple of years before he retired, we also created an internationalization effort. And that's what you can see when we talk about total diversity on campus. It has dramatically increased.

Providing an inclusive and welcoming place for all students was reflected in the founders' educational philosophy. RU has a long history of diverse student recruitment efforts. Kelli Kaufman, Director of the Women's and Cultural Resource Centers, commented on the earliest mission of the institution:

> From the beginning, . . . RU's mission has been to be an ecumenical, welcoming, and affirming place in many respects towards folks from historically underrepresented groups. Our founding fathers were intentional about making our institution an ecumenical college at a time when that was not all that common or popular. Although we don't have as lengthy a commitment to diversity as compared to some of the colleges we compare ourselves to, notably Oberlin College, we became co-ed very early in our history. We recruited international students very early in our history. And we desegregated very early in our history.

That mission continues today. RU's recent success in diversifying the campus is evidenced through increases in underrepresented employees and students. According to information on the RU Human Resources website, in 2000, the institution employed 51 racial and ethnic minority and international faculty and staff. Ten years later, that figure jumped to 79. Domestic students of color enrollment increased from 8.2% in 2002 to 9.5% in 2007.

Jose Hernandez, Assistant Director of Multicultural Student Services, described civic engagement through diversity as a core value at RU. In the context of a global community, he pointed to the emphasis RU places on their students to be social change agents.

> I think Rural University, which can be seen through our demographics, really recognizes that today's community is not a [local] community, it's a global community. So RU prepares students to be members of that and to be social change agents within that context.

The ability to think critically is a hallmark of the liberal arts education (Ramaley, 2002). For RU's mission, preparing students in the liberal arts has been a longstanding tradition according to Dean of Campus Life, Ian Iverson, who had this to say:

> We're a liberal arts college focused on critical thinking and communication skills, making connections between disciplines, between ideas, and concepts; doing it in a residential setting. [Students] learn with and from one another.

In a statement approved by the faculty, the institution's purpose and aims reinforce RU's "habits of mind" liberal arts mission by cultivating independent critical thinking and personal values clarification (RU Catalog, 2010-2011). These values were ratified with a new community covenant established in 2004. Entering students since then voluntarily sign what is known as the *Pillars of Community Covenant* upon matriculation. The four pillars help to frame a context supportive of student success, including African American students:

> [Rural] University has a rich tradition of cultivating exceptional experiences by providing an environment of continual learning. We promise to accept, share, and uphold the following principles as the pillars of our community.

Intellectual Engagement - We value academic excellence and the ongoing pursuit of knowledge gained through challenges and achievements. I take responsibility for my learning and developing a path for seeking wisdom, and I will carry out my academic and lifelong endeavors with honesty.

Unique Opportunities - We value distinctive programs, resources, and facilities that promote ongoing progress and growth. I am respectful of all that my community has afforded me and will use these gifts to advance my commitment to my own self-exploration and development.

Supportive Relationships - We value personal connections and dedicate ourselves to ensuring that our individual actions reflect community integrity. I celebrate diversity and respect and honor the differences among our members.

Community Engagement - We value a spirit of community and civic involvement through dedication to others. I share a passionate commitment to service, leadership, and justice while maintaining balance in my own life.

In affirming these principles, I choose to live my life with dignity, show care and respect for all community members, and ensure that my actions do not harm myself or others. I will take an active role in creating a community culture of responsibility and will carry these principles with me beyond my time at Rural University.

A permanent monument symbolizing the four pillars of this covenant rests outside the Student Union. The brushed steel plaque displays its engraved text mounted on a base of granite.

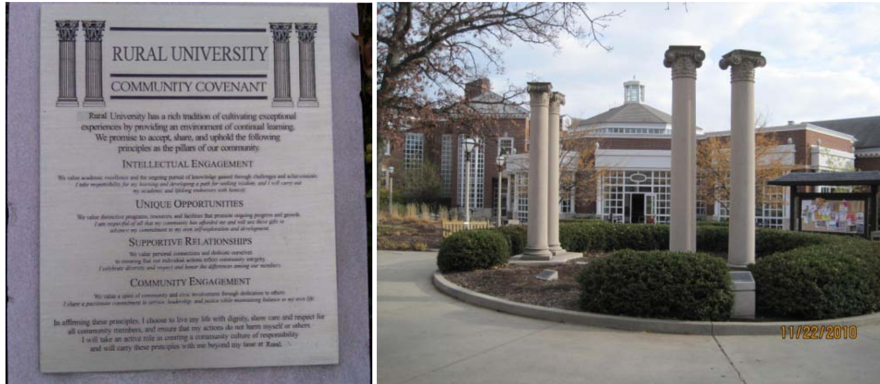

Figure 18. Community covenant monument.

Campus culture. Participants were asked questions exploring the campus culture. Specifically, questions solicited how campus traditions, norms, and unspoken rules supported and encouraged African American student success. Emerging as dominant cultural themes were the powerful, yet diminishing influence of Greek life, changing social and residential housing options, and the January or J-term.

In terms of Greek life, “Greek life at Rural University is huge,” according to Dr. Gustafson, Vice President for Student Affairs. Membership comprises 67% of the student body and is largely made up of traditional-aged White students. However, that cultural influence is waning as the percentage of students who are Greek has declined considerably over the past decade. Prior to 2000, RU offered few housing options outside traditional residence halls. Students could join a Greek organization, though, during their first semester and immediately move into one of the more attractive fraternity and sorority houses. In 2000, the landscape changed. The university launched their first-year experience program and simultaneously began buying up local houses and apartments. In addition, RU instituted delayed Greek recruitment requiring first-years to wait until February to join a Greek organization. With these changes,

independent students who are largely racial or ethnic minority and international students now have a wider variety of non-residence hall living options. According to Dr. Gustafson,

> before 1997-98, if you were an independent student, you lived in a dorm for four years. You had few other options. So in '97 we bought our first little house and it housed sixteen students. Now [13 years later] we have 500 spaces in apartments, houses, or suites. . . . So if you decide not to go Greek, you have the choice of living in a suite or apartment, basically your junior and senior years. And I think that is huge in student satisfaction. Even our Greek students . . . are saying, "Hey, I'd like to go live in that duplex."

In terms of social and residential life changes, by 2004, increased housing options seemed to influence the student social culture. Instead of attending large Greek parties, independent students began relaxing with their housemates in smaller gatherings. Iverson, Dean of Campus Life, offered this observation of the shifting campus social scene:

> It's no longer [a] social scene being dominated by these 300-person fraternity parties. [Students are thinking], "You know what, I can just have a party with my 20 friends." . . . And so the entire west neighborhood is kind of a different social connection area. There's a big difference between hanging out with 300 people and hanging out with 30. You can make different connections.

Given that most fraternity and sorority houses include their own dining facilities, few Greek students eat on campus. As a result, the main dining hall called "The Hubb" largely serves independent and underrepresented students. This was evident during the site visit. Notes recorded during lunch at the Hubb reflect a largely non-White crowd around 11:30 a.m. on a Monday. According to Dr. Gustafson, growing numbers of independent students are eating on

campus, a trend that has led to greater visible diversity at the Hubb during meal times in recent years.

As a residential community, faculty and staff seem to foster very close relationships with their students. Participants likened the campus culture to that of a family. Jose Hernandez captured this sentiment well.

> One of the things that I think is unique here at Rural University is when you look at how our students are supported it really feels like a family type of environment. And so you know, you may have the crazy uncle that's your faculty member . . . or the Vice President of Student Affairs that is kind of like a mother figure to you or whatever. You can find those support networks and those individuals who are willing to not only support you, but also challenge you, throughout your academic career here.

Another cultural influence referenced by participants was the winter January academic term, or "J-term." Students must enroll in one J-term course three out of their four years, one of which may be an off-campus study or study-abroad program (RU Catalog, 2010-2011). This experience purposefully exposes students to diverse cultures, languages, and environments quite different from their own. It's another means by which the RU culture of diversity is displayed by reaching every student at least three times in their academic career.

Beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year, RU allowed first-year students to participate in short-term off-campus study and service opportunities during the winter term. Hoping to capitalize on the higher retention rates experienced by those serving regionally or studying abroad, the institution opened the doors to first-years.

Campus environment and resources. From 1997-2010, RU greatly expanded campus resources to match their growing diversity of students and faculty. Housing, cultural

programming spaces, and centralized administrative offices were developed. Gustafson recalled the beginning of RU's housing expansion, saying, "In '97, we bought our first little apartment house and it housed 16 students. Now we have 500 spaces that are in apartments, houses, or suites."

Today, RU owns and operates 95 small houses and apartment units, according to information from the RU Admissions Office. Increased properties meant expanded student living options for those not interested in Greek Life. The majority of non-Greek students at RU are African American, Hispanic, Asian, or other ethnic minorities. According to Dean Iverson,

> so now our students, if they decide not to go Greek, have the choice of living in a suite or apartment, basically their junior or senior years. And I think that is huge in student satisfaction. . . . That has also played into our [improved] retention rate.

From 2004-2008, women and ethnic minorities received dedicated, permanent facilities and programming spaces through the RU Women's Center and Cultural Resource Centers (CRCs). Now students have four dedicated spaces to meet, plan and host events, and eat together. Spaces, staff, and resources dedicated specifically to women, African Americans, internationals, Latinos/Latinas, LGBTQs, and Asian perspectives are now available. The Association of Afro-American Students moved into their first, four bedroom house in 1988. But the growing number of African American students necessitated a move in May of 2001 to a larger house. In 2010, multicultural student affairs staff consolidated offices from around campus into one central union building office. Bringing the staff together into the center of campus helped to symbolically elevate the importance of multiculturalism at RU, according to Kelli Kaufman. This was "another strategic choice [by RU] to put multicultural identities at the

literal center of campus instead of some outlying building on the fringes." No longer were the ethnic and cultural groups out of sight and out of mind.

Other cultural groups received dedicated rooms and spaces as well. Ms. Kaufman had this to say on that subject:

> This year we have a new space that's the International Student Center, but the other spaces are the CLC room, the Committee for Latino Concerns room, the Career Center that serves as our LGBT student group space, and the Pan Asia room that primarily serves the Asia Club.

Another facilitator of African American student success sourced in the campus environment is the fact that there are four historically Black fraternities and sororities on campus. Two chapters have their own houses. According to Kelli Kaufman, providing housing was intentional. "On this campus, space is power. And so we were intentional about that when we bought up little houses in the neighborhood."

Policies, practices, and programs. Participants described the array of programs, policies, and practices used to help students connect with others immediately, retain them into their sophomore year, and keep them on track toward graduation. Of particular focus were the First-Year Seminar, Greek recruitment policy, Posse program, and Bonner Scholars.

Launched in 1999, the First-Year Seminar connects 12 to15 freshmen with an academic advisor and an upper class student mentor. This one credit course helps students navigate their college transition through four programmatic goals. According to information on the RU website, these goals include to

1. Create a sense of intellectual community for the students and faculty member involved, using discussion as the primary basis for classroom learning;

2. Emphasize critical thinking and critical reading;
3. Encourage the academic growth and development of individual students, and;
4. Use a variety of writing, research, or problem-solving assignments designed to give students skills and modes of analysis that will serve them well in their other courses at RU.

Although the seminar class only meets during the fall semester, the group forms during summer orientation and continues to meet informally throughout the first-year. Students design their own programmatic calendar, participate as a class in campus special events and field trips, and assist one another through the rigors of college life. Gustafson credited this program with being a major factor in first-year retention success.

> The first-year experience program was really big. We rolled it out in 1999 and I think that's made a huge difference for retention of all students. It's really been critical for our students. . . . As soon as we put the first-year seminar program in place, retention rates went up.

Parallel to this change was a policy shift in Greek recruitment. The same year RU launched the first-year seminar program, they required first-years to wait a semester before pledging a fraternity or sorority, also known as delayed recruitment. The decision was controversial, but proved to be necessary to ensure the First-Year Seminar could take root. Gustafson went on to describe the strategic timing of these changes.

> In conjunction with implementing our first-year experience program, we deferred recruitment. We knew that we couldn't do it without it. We would totally lose them if we didn't move it back. So it was extremely controversial. But after getting the seniors and juniors and sophomores out of here, all the first-year students were like, "You're

> kidding me. You used to do rush four to six weeks in? Like, that would be crazy!" So now it's kind of old hat. Our alumni still complain about it sometimes. But for the most part, I don't think there are any students who would say we should go back to it.

RU's campus culture has also been impacted by the Posse program. Now in its 15th year, Rural University is one of 39 participating colleges. They accept a total of 20 students each fall from urban high schools in New York City and Chicago. Posse students represent a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, most identify as African American. All are admitted with full scholarships.

Prior to enrollment, these students undergo an extensive pre-collegiate training program from January to August of their high school senior year. These weekly, two-hour training workshops prepare them for the cultural, academic, and leadership challenges and opportunities awaiting them (Posse Foundation, 2011a). Describing the impact Posse has on student culture, Gustafson said this:

> The Posse Program is a big deal. We bring in 20 new Posse students every year. So at any given time, 70 to 80 students are Posse students. They are brought in as leaders and have some expectation to make an impact on campus. That has been, I think, instrumental in changing the campus culture.

Each posse group of 10 students is matched with a faculty and upper class student mentor. The mentors meet weekly with the group and provide encouragement and support.

By way of brief background, in 1989, Vanderbilt University (TN) accepted the first ever Posse class of five New York City students. Four years later, all five graduated with honors. Since then, the national Posse Foundation has sent over 3,600 students to 39 colleges and universities awarding over $400 million in full tuition scholarships (Posse Foundation, 2011b).

Rural University accepted their first New York City Posse in 1995 and is currently accepting its 16th for 2011-2012. The national graduation rate for participants is 90% (Posse Foundation, 2011b), although RU's rate is not yet that high. Although Gustafson expressed doubts that the Posse program had a major influence in their recent student retention rate increases, she nonetheless saw it as a valuable program.

> I think we had some bad years. I think that our increase in retention rates overall and our increase in students of color retention rates were due to [other] institutional features than to the Posse program specifically. . . . [However], it's a really good program. I think Posse students have changed our campus in fundamental ways.

Gustafson went on to say that the Posse program has likely boosted retention and graduation rates in a different way, namely by helping RU grow a critical mass of African American students that in itself helps with retention.

> So part of this is a numbers game, I think. It's easier to increase your graduation rates when you have more students. When we have 170 African American students this year, it's a lot easier for them to find community and to see themselves as a visible part of Rural University than when we had only 120, and in [some] years, a little bit less than 100. So I think just the numbers have helped us both mathematically and from a comfort level, from a "Hey, I'm a visible part of this" level.

Dean Iverson agreed, saying,

> I honestly think one of the big things about the Posse Program was getting a critical mass. . . . The fact that they had their Posse, you know, their peers; the fact that they [had] other people from New York [and] Chicago . . . it made a huge difference.

For African American men, RU offers a forum-based support group called the Black Male Initiative (BMI). Founded in 2006 by two African American faculty members, the group meets weekly to discuss topics relevant to the African American college student experience. Specifically, the BMI seeks to discuss "why so many African American males are leaving and when it comes to academics why they don't reach out for help" (Lee, 2011, p. 1). Iverson credited the BMI with increasing African American mens' GPAs.

> A lot of our African American males were not coming back because of grades. They weren't allowed to come back, not permitted to come back. And so we're really focusing on how we connect them to the Black Male Initiative. That's with staff. It's with faculty. All about making more personal one-on-one connections and really trying to help. And the GPAs have gone up. The data shows this from the last five years. You know, it's gone up.

Institutional agents. Participants described the impact institutional agents including faculty, professional staff, and student mentors have on the student experience. Efforts to increase the number and diversity of student mentors and diversifying the employee pool emerged as important steps taken to retain and graduate their students.

Rural University is an advisor- and mentor-rich environment. Throughout their four years, students often have not one, but multiple faculty and staff advisors and upper class student mentors. Upon arrival, new students are assigned to a first-year seminar (FYS) course with 10 to 15 other students, a faculty advisor, and an upper class student mentor. Gustafson highlighted the importance of first-year mentoring through both faculty and students.

> The first-year seminar faculty are also the first-years' faculty advisors. So it's really been critical for our students, I think, to have contact with that faculty advisor on an ongoing

> basis their first semester in college. And then attached to every seminar is an upper class student who has been trained in mentoring skills. So the students, when they come in, kind of have this ready-made group that then meets with its mentor on an ongoing basis throughout the first-year.

New students often retain their FYS faculty advisor throughout their four years. But in most cases, students select additional faculty advisors in their specific areas of study. RU also provides a highly trained and diverse resident advisor (RA) staff for each residence hall floor or wing. The RAs work in tandem with the FYS mentors to host weekly discussions and programs focused on college life. Dean Iverson explained how discussions cover a wide range of college topics.

> This week is about international exploration. This week is about, you know, wellness. . . . It might be a mentor group meeting. It might be doing a tunnel of oppression [program], or an all group program. So it's a whole co-curriculum laid out for the semester.

Posse students and African American men enjoy an even broader network of support. In addition to the mentor network afforded to all students, Posse groups are paired with another RU staff advisor and a Posse foundation mentor. These mentors offer the nuanced advice and guidance unique to the urban, minority student perspective. African American male students may also choose an African American male faculty or staff mentor through the BMI. Both groups meet weekly. According to Dr. Gustafson, about 80% of RU's African American male students are also student-athletes. This provides another important layer of support via multiple coaches and upper class student teammates. Finally, students may join one of 120 recognized student organizations. Each offers a faculty or staff advisor and upper class student officers to

guide organization activities and student leadership development. Among the most active are the 24 social Greek fraternities and sororities, four that are well-established, historically African American chapters.

Dean Iverson described this rich network of relationships as “nets” built to support the unique needs of a diverse student body.

> Different people need different things. So it is okay to have different nets. Certain people are going to get more support from the mentors and certain people are going to get more support from the RAs. It’s okay, you know. People are going to find the niche that is right for them.

This layered network creates an extended web of support, according to Kelly Kaufman, Director of Cultural Resource and Women’s Centers.

> For those students you do see who are finding it difficult to take care of their academic priorities, [we offer] the academic support and tutoring. It is the culture that surrounds them: friends, mentors, and key faculty. There are intervention programs that are formally and informally just happening.

Among the “family” members are an increasingly diverse faculty and staff. Nearly “half of the faculty has turned over in the past decade,” a number of whom were replaced by racial and ethnic minority faculty, according to Dean Iverson. Today 33% of full-time faculty members are reported as minority and international on the RU website. According to Ms. Kaufman, “We had a real push for the recruitment of faculty of color in the last twelve or so years. . . . Our [past] President [1986-2008] had had a very sharp commitment to the hiring of faculty of color.” Several new diverse faculty from diverse backgrounds entered RU’s ranks via the Newcombe Doctoral Fellowship program. Launched in 1981, RU inducted its 30th group of fellows in

2010-2011. Both pre- and post-doctoral students are selected for two to three year appointments. Many of these new faculty members serve as formal and informal mentors for domestic students of color. Ms. Kaufman also had this to say on the diversification of the faculty:

> We've had some really dynamic and invested faculty of color on this campus who have framed themselves as advocates for students and have worked hard to create support systems for students. It was the doctoral fellows program where we would have faculty, particularly young faculty here, of color, who would be here for two or three years and with a reduced teaching load. So they could work on their research or finish their doctorates.

Rural University Focus Group Results

Four students participated in the Rural University focus group representing African American (3) and Caribbean American (1) ethnicities. Gender was evenly split with two sophomore men and two women, one sophomore and one junior. Two students were Posse program participants. All are referenced using pseudonyms.

Table 6

Rural University Student Focus Group Participants

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Class
DeShawn[P]	African American	Female	Sophomore
Sharon	African American	Female	Junior
James	Caribbean American	Male	Sophomore
Ennis[P]	African American	Male	Sophomore

[P] = Posse Program participant

Mission. Students participating in the focus group said that critical thinking and community building were most evident in RU's mission. When asked why they stayed at RU, DeShawn cited the college's reputation for teaching critical thinking skills.

> Somebody on the plane on my way back from break said to me, "You go to Rural University? That's excellent. They teach a lot of critical thinking there. You'll be able to do anything when you graduate from there." And that was kind of the message I got from my Posse mentors, from the professors on campus, and from other scholars. You learn how to think in different situations, how to apply yourself to different things with more than just what's on the surface.

Although participants did not mention the RU *Community Pillar* statement described above, Ennis explained how building community is a high priority for the campus.

> I think critical thinking is large. But I also think a big thing is community as well. Um, since I've been here, you know, we've gotten a new president. And I feel like a big thing he's been promoting is a closer, tight knit community. Not only academically, but socially, as well. I believe that RU sets you up with a lot of networking opportunities. Opportunities to get out there meeting people and things like that. I also like programs like the BMI, meeting folks across campus. You know, strong and bringing communities together. Um so yea, I think community is a large aspect of RU.

For others, RU's community building mission is not that evident day-to-day. DeShawn shared that the feeling of community can be fleeting.

> Although President Williams has made this initiative to push people to form this sense of community among different groups, you can form something, but it doesn't stay. I've

> met people, and we've had great conversations. But they'll walk past me maybe three days later like they've never met me before.

DeShawn continued saying that the prospect of an RU degree with its reputation is a stronger motivating factor than, perhaps, fitting in to the community.

> I've been promised that when I graduate with this RU name on my degree I will be able to do great things. I will be able to join companies that might not be as possible with a degree from a city CUNY school or a SUNY school. That's my biggest thing because I like nice things. I need to have a nice job. I have much older parents. And for them, they want me to be able to have that promise where I can graduate and give them all that they've been able to give me, even if they don't ask for that. For me, it's being able to do that because they've been so great for me. So like having that promise and being here is very important.

Campus culture. Study participants discussed the forces that shape campus culture at RU. Of these, four emerged as most significant: Greek life, RU traditions, student organizations, and academic engagement.

Greek life is an important part of the RU experience. DeShawn explained that Greek affiliation drives the student culture.

> The biggest thing on RU's campus is Greek life. Are you independent, or are you Greek? Are you independent and becoming Greek, or just staying independent? That is the biggest thing. And I feel like that drives the culture of RU's campus. . . . People thrive on what's next from what Greek house. I feel like that is where you feel the biggest community at RU's campus.

After settling in during his first semester, Ennis described how joining or not joining Greek life became the central focus of his student experience.

> It initially starts off with who's in your dorm. I lived in Holgate my first year. I felt like that was the best place I could've ever lived freshman year. It got me to know so many people. . . . From there, you know, you go to the Hubb (dining hall) and you meet whoever you meet in the Hubb. You become friends with them. From there, it goes to like DeShawn said, it's Greek, Greek, Greek life; whether you're staying independent or becoming a member of the Greek community.

African American students have the added pressure of choosing between "majority" (predominantly White) or historically African American Greek organizations. Those who choose majority over African American sometimes face sharp criticism from their peers, according to DeShawn.

> If someone was to go majority Greek here, and they're Black, they'll automatically get the stare. Because they're like, "Oh, why did you join a house versus going to an historically Black Greek letter organization?"

Building community around the current Greek culture remains a challenge for RU. Although Greek membership is declining, most Greek houses still provide their own dining facilities. The vast majority of students, then, share their meals in not two or three large dining halls, like many small liberal arts colleges, but in 24. This creates an atmosphere where White students are nearly non-existent in the main dining hall called the Hubb. Ennis described the Hubb as "the most segregated place on campus." DeShawn agreed and explained how rare it is to see White students eating there.

> I feel like the Hubb is just a big representation of how this campus lives. [In classes] we are mixed . . . and you have great conversations with people in your class. As soon as you exit the doorway, you huddle up with people who look like you. When you go to the Hubb, you huddle up with people who look like you.
>
> This one girl came and sat at the table with like a group of my friends. And everybody just looked at her, like "Whoa, why are you over here?" And she was White. And so like, it just is weird when you have somebody that's not like Black or not Asian, not Hispanic who's sitting at the table with you.

Despite perceptions of segregation around meal times, RU hosts several annual campus-wide traditions that bring the entire community together. An historic rival football game and student bike race were specifically mentioned by DeShawn.

> The Monon Bell [football game], that's a huge thing. Monon and Little 500 weekend [bike race], like you . . . everyone [gets] together. And I feel like that's very important to have those events where they bring everyone out. Like, you have these two very special things that everyone participates in. It's just that school spirit. And I guess that also is a driving factor at staying at RU. Because, you feel like a part of the RU community. No matter how disconnected you are from people individually. Like, it's just having that brand on you that says "I go to Rural University."

Figure 19. Little 500 bike race and Monon Bell football game. Source: Photographs by permission of Rural University.

Student organizations also play a critical role in shaping the student culture. Many African American students are members of the Association of African American Students (AAAS). This organization plans a full calendar of social and cultural events throughout the year. Although members are mainly African American, their events attract a wide spectrum of students. Ennis described an event at the AAAS house.

> The AAAS house yesterday, for example, had a Thanksgiving dinner. People of all ethnicities came out and supported one another. We ate, talked, listened to music, watched the Colts game, things of that sort, and just enjoyed it.

James noted that ethnic student groups are not always so integrated. Speaking of the international student club culture, James showed concern in this regard.

> I think this campus is, uh, fairly segregated. . . . I'm a member of the Asian club, and I'm also a member of AAAS. I've approached some African students about coming to AAAS events, and they were like, "Well, we're not African American, so why should we join?" And I'm like, "Yeah, but it's not just an African American organization. It's an

> organization for everyone, but specifically for Black people." And I told them, "We're Black." Of course, in Africa, they have a different concept, you know, they're broken up ethnically and not racially.
>
> And then, even within Asian Clubs there's just an array of Asian cultures. And not all of them feel connected. You know, Filipino might not feel connected to a Chinese student.
>
> And that's another thing, within the Asian community there's a large population of Chinese students on this campus. And they sort of overwhelm and dominate the international community. We have an organization called ISA (International Students Association). And some members of ISA, such as Africans, feel like they're not being represented. Because, I think this year we brought in maybe three or four Africans as opposed to like 30 Chinese students. So there are some [cultural] divides.

African American students at RU also face difficult cultural barriers in the academic setting. Often the only non-White students in class, participants shared their hesitation to engage in class. Sharon, an African American junior, chose not to speak in class for her entire first semester.

> So you get to a class and you see the professor's White. My first class here I looked around and I could name every Black person in the class. And I would go back and be like, I'm the only Black person in this class. Or, it's like, me and this other Black girl, I would compare. So you already have these bad perceptions like, okay, I'll stick out. My professor notices me more than they notice the other 15 White people. So if I don't do the reading, they know me. And then, that's how they are gonna see me . . . like, I'm a slacker.

> We come in knowing that we're minority, and we see all these White people around us. And we feel like the professor notices them. But I feel like they notice us more because we stick out like a sore thumb. I mean, I'm pretty dark. If I'm sitting in a class with a lot of White people, I feel kind of awkward. So I'm not gonna talk. . . . I don't have the biggest vocabulary in the world. I talk the way I talk. And sometimes [White students] use these big words, they use their experiences of going abroad, or being this place or that place, and it makes you feel inferior. So you don't wanna say anything in class.

DeShawn echoed similar experiences.

> I know from my freshmen year when I first sat in a classroom, I suffered dramatically grade-wise, because I just wouldn't speak. And that wasn't me as a student in high school. But it was a hindrance feeling like these other students . . . were White. Not really thinking about the fact that they could come from different economic backgrounds. Like, I was just looking at the fact that they were White students. I was looking at strictly color. And I was like, they probably went to prep schools. And they very well could have just been giving a bunch of B.S., for lack of a better term, for their answers [in class discussions]. But really, for some reason, I felt like their B.S. would be way better than mine.

The other participants erupted in laughter at DeShawn's comment. Sharon went on to explain how unprepared she felt during her first year at RU.

> I had the same experience. I'm from the *city* of Chicago. So like I went to school in the city. But I was in private school my entire life. So I thought that being in private school would help me be a very good student here at RU. I was [also] valedictorian in eighth

grade and high school. So when I got to RU I was like, "Oh, I got this." But honestly, when I got here, it was the total opposite. My first three weeks here I cried and I was ready to leave, because I did not think I was on the same level as these other kids who probably came from boarding schools. So I felt even though I had like a private school background, it still wasn't sufficient for Rural University.

Ultimately, Sharon, like other participants, decided to lay low in class and not draw attention. However, in January, she enrolled in an African studies course with several other African American students and began to find her voice.

> Later that winter term, I took an East African culture class. . . . I had a lot of Black people in my class for some reason. So I spoke up a lot in there and I was like, wow, my opinions do matter. I took that and I was just like, I have to focus on me and not what other people say. Because, people do value what you say. Just because someone is looking at you crazy doesn't mean they don't value [your opinion]. They may just not like the class.
>
> So I had to stop taking it so personal and just start like, just being me. And whatever I had to say, I knew it was valuable. Now, I do B.S. sometimes. But I wasn't gonna just not say anything and risk my grade. I wasn't gonna stop myself just for other people.

It took Ennis nearly a full year to find his voice. But once he did, he said he found his passion.

> I suffered a lot my [first year] too because I was so reluctant to talk and speak up. So I definitely learned my lesson since then. Once I found a class that I was passionate about,

my juices just started flowing. Then talking in class and being outspoken made me feel more welcomed.

Campus environment and resources. Participants were asked to describe the campus environment and how it supports their education. Ennis described Rural University's Nature Park as a space where he could "de-stress and get in his zone." Acquired in 2003 as an abandoned rock quarry, Rural University remodeled its 520 acres into a lush park with 10 miles of hiking trails, ponds, and wetlands. The park opened to its students and the public the following year in 2004 (see Appendix D). James cited the Nature Park as his place to get away and relax:

> The Nature Park was definitely a large and very big resource for me . . . just the beauty of it simply is like, it's so quiet out there. You're in your home zone. Like, you can sit out there, meditate, and relax.

This substance free park is also used for ecological field research by environmental science classes, local elementary school field trips, and camping for Rural University community members only.

RU's ARC was also cited as an important program for supporting academic work. Divided into three cognitive learning areas, students may receive focused assistance in qualitative reasoning (Q-center), speaking and listening (S-center), and writing (W-center). It also serves as the central clearinghouse for faculty teaching development. One focus group participant, DeShawn, explained how the ARC helped her when struggling in a computer science course. "I was one of those people who no matter how much the professor worked with me, I just couldn't get computer science." However, she didn't take advantage of this help early on. "It took me a while to actually break down and say, 'I'm going to the academic resource

center'." But once she went, she recognized the value of this resource and the importance for seeking help in general. Now, she offers the following advice to her classmates. "Just go, break away from whatever else [you're doing] and just go, sit and work with these tutors and have them get through it with you."

Policies, practices, and programs. Programs that bridge curricular and co-curricular learning are hallmarks of small liberal arts colleges (Kuh, 2003a). Rural University offers a variety of robust mentoring programs that help their students, particularly underrepresented students, navigate the social and academic challenges. The most frequently mentioned was the Posse program.

Two participants were Posse scholars. Both credited the program with helping them prepare for and thrive at Rural University. As sophomores from New York City, they cited the Posse Program as the main reason for attending Rural University. Ennis and DeShawn said although the scholarships paved the way for access, the preparation and training offered by the Posse program were keys to their success.

> I think the Posse program is very structured and very organized in that it sets you up before you get to campus with a nine-month training program. You're set up with a trainer and you have your Posse of about nine, 10 or 11 people.

Once Posse scholars arrive on campus, they participate in an extended orientation program to help them acclimate, as a cohort, to their new home. Posse trainers and mentors are instrumental to this transition, explained Ennis. "My Posse trainer's actually a graduate of RU. And he's been a large influence on me staying here . . . and doing better for myself."

DeShawn found additional support through the First-Year Experience (FYE) mentor program. Required for all first-years, groups of 15 students enroll in a one-hour credit course

their first term. A "carefully selected and trained" upper class mentor is matched with the group to assist with all curricular and co-curricular transitions. Sharon had this to say about the FYE mentor program:

> You come here and you get a mentor with 15 other people who are going to be in your seminar group for the semester. And I felt like that was a big help for me staying. And I've helped people. Like, I've only been in it this year, but I've helped people like stay, already. And it's a genuine experience especially for [someone] like me. I tell my mentees straight: "I was leaving. I didn't want to be at RU." But definitely, you know, you have that mentor who's here, who you can go to. And then like for us, being mentors, we have peer mentors and we have our supervisor to go to. So it's always someone ahead of you who knows about the experience, whether you think so or not, who's here to like support you.

For African American men, Rural University offers the BMI. Launched in 2005, African American male students are invited to meet with other Black male faculty and staff members to discuss questions and issues relevant to their campus experiences. Ennis credited this program as one way Black men have found other non-Posse mentors to build a broader community together. RU offers other opportunities to "get out there meeting people. I meet a lot of other folks across campus through BMI. You know, they were strong Black men who helped bring us together."

Institutional agents. From a relatively new president to engaging faculty, RU employees received high marks from participants. Ennis, as mentioned earlier, noticed how the president has made building community a top priority. "Since I've been here, we've gotten a new president. And I feel like a big thing he's been promoting is a closer, tight knit community.

Not only academically, but socially as well." Unanimous among participants was the high satisfaction with faculty relationships. Terms used to describe RU faculty included excellent, caring, helpful, and willing to go above and beyond. James, an African American sophomore, expressed his appreciation for faculty members who often stay on campus late to assist students who need help.

> I had a professor who met with us probably two or three times before we had to turn in a final draft. And he was meeting with us like at 6:00 at night at the library. He would just sit and have a conversation with you, go over the paper. Then afterwards, he might invite me to his house to meet his wife and kids. I mean, they're just really hands on, excellent, excellent professors here.

DeShawn had similar experiences.

> I have professors who live in [a nearby city] and commute from various other places. But they'll stay on campus late. They'll work with you. And they have families to go home to. So I feel like that just shows you how important you are.

She also shared how a faculty member served as her female role model.

> I had this one amazing professor I took my second semester freshman year, and she's Haitian. She got her Ph.D. from Harvard and she's just all this greatness. And I was like, I wanna be like that, not from Harvard though. But I wanna be like that. Because, you know, I wanna help make a difference in somebody else like the way she made a difference in mine. So she definitely has kept me grounded. She kept me here, I was leaving. I was, really. I had my papers and everything.

Another faculty member helped her realize how women can overcome any challenge in higher education.

> For me, it was my French professor last year. What I learned in my first week of class here was more than we learned the entire year [in high school]. She was my strong force. She was so giving. She was my French professor, but she also noticed that I was a woman and she was a woman. She was an Arab woman, but you would've never known it unless she told you. And for me, it was like, really big to have other women like come through school. Because . . . it's the struggle that they go through. And no one really hears it. She helped me understand that.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to address two questions: Which private, liberal arts colleges achieved African American graduation rate increases from 2004-2007, and what do members of those institutions selected for study say explained such increases? Institutions were selected from a set of limiting criteria of IPEDS graduation data mined from the College Results Online website (www.collegeresultsonline.org). Eleven colleges emerged meeting all limiting criteria for the 2004-2007 reporting years. Three institutions that posted significant increases in African American graduation rates without relative drops in African American student enrollment were selected for two-day site visits. Middletown College and Rural University agreed to participate. A series of interviews, focus groups, and other data collection methods helped construct a unique 360-degree perspective for each campus. Results from these site visits were reported around five central themes including mission; campus culture; programs, policies, and practices; campus environment and resources; and institutional agents.

Middletown College's mission was revised in 2006 to include a supplemental diversity statement. Inclusive priorities were evidenced by enrollment and hiring gains in both underrepresented students and employees over the last decade. Participants reported

improvements in the campus culture since that time including a sense of comfort from seeing more underrepresented students and staff. Yet none expressed satisfaction with the status quo.

The ARC emerged as a critical source of support for many underrepresented students. In 2002-2003, the center ramped up minority student tutor recruitment efforts and added cultural bias trainings. These improvements helped diversify the core academic support program for the college. Students also seemed to benefit greatly from increased networks of institutional agents. From the vice president for student affairs to African American tutors and mentors, a new chorus of diverse voices and programs helped the college reach a tipping point of student support.

Rural University was also chosen for its improved African American graduation rates. Well supported through a healthy endowment, RU offers strong financial packages to students with high need. This is consistent with their historic mission focus on diversity. RU remains a national leader in recruiting a diverse community of students and faculty. Students live and learn in a highly residential community steeped in the liberal arts tradition. Participants echoed the importance of critical thinking, excellent teaching, and experiential learning solidly grounded in RUs *Pillars of Community* contract statement.

But community takes on a different meaning for some at RU. Greek life historically defined student culture; though recent first-year programs and increased housing options have changed that somewhat over the last decade. Fewer students “go Greek” while finding new communities among and between a growing multicultural student body. Initiatives like the Posse program are creating powerful sub-cultures that bring new confidence and voice to those often reticent to even speak in class.

Campus resources at RU have expanded to meet the growing demands of an ever increasing multicultural environment. Student affairs consolidated multicultural services within

the student union, symbolically raising the profile of students of color on campus. Multicultural clubs gained increased legitimacy as cultural and women's centers opened in 2006 and 2007. Students now have a centralized administrative support structure with additional dedicated houses to meet, host events, or just hang out. Academically, RU students are well supported. Professors model inclusivity by intentionally reaching out to those in need and showing genuine care for student success. Tutoring structures offer targeted help in each of the liberal arts areas through quantitative, speaking, and writing centers.

African American students at both institutions seemed to thrive on the rich and broad mentoring networks. From early-alert faculty intervention and highly trained tutors at Middletown to powerful Posse and first-year seminar mentors through the first year at RU, African American success was inextricably tied to the quantity and quality of human connections. Meaning making from these findings as informed by previous research is the primary focus of Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored best practices at graduating African American students attending small, private, predominantly White, liberal arts colleges. Questions guiding this study focused on which of these institutions showed significant increases in African American student graduation rates over the four-year period 2004-2007 and what members of particularly high performing communities said explained their improved graduation rates.

Two Carnegie Bachelor's-Arts and Sciences institutions with minority enrollments of 17% or less were selected for site visits in the fall of 2010. A multiple case study approach sought deeper understanding of the conditions by which such increases occurred. Data were collected through a series of interviews and focus groups. Transcript data were analyzed for themes and augmented with institutional documents.

In this chapter the context for why improved graduation rates of African American students in particular are an important goal for higher education is first presented. From there, the findings in Chapter Four are discussed, framed by two germinal theoretical works in the field, and followed by an exploration of the findings around two major themes, each with four sub-themes that help to make sense of the findings. Finally, the chapter presents implications for policy and practice and concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and opportunities for future research.

Why African American Graduation Rates Matter

African American graduation rates remain a significant bellwether for higher education in its struggle to keep pace with national demographic trends. The most recent data show that African Americans continue to lag well behind White students in earning four-year bachelor's degrees. In 2010-2011, African American students graduated at rates 22% lower than Whites at all institutions ("Six-Year Graduation Rates," 2011). Among private baccalaureate colleges, the gap widens to 25%. This is a big problem for small private PWIs. Competition for limited student talent, especially from underrepresented groups, is fierce. Other confluent trends create a gloomy forecast for the most tuition-dependent colleges. Tuition increases continue to outstrip cost of living increases while federal and state aid remains stagnant. The flagging U.S. economy means that institutional endowments are returning negative dividends or are, in some cases, drawing from underwater funds (Association of Governing Boards, 2009). Shrinking endowments often mean financial aid belt-tightening, requiring student prospects with the highest need to look for cheaper alternatives, such as two-year community colleges. Attending a four-year private college is becoming prohibitively expensive. So the question people are asking is, "Is it worth it?"

Graduation rates have become, for better or worse, the great dashboard indicator of student return on investment. National ranking publications such as *U.S. News and World Report* give it considerable, if not the greatest, weight in their ranking formulae. Government funding is tied inextricably to it. Regional accrediting bodies expect self-studies that show improvement and/or evidence explaining what has proven challenging about achieving it. Given that private colleges' tuition is often more than double their public competitors, it is incumbent

upon these institutions to prove their worth. Increasing demands for improved graduation rates mean colleges must do better.

Increasing graduation rates among African Americans may be low hanging fruit in this effort. African Americans are attending private colleges at record rates. From 1999-2009, their enrollment at four-year private colleges grew by more than 150%, outpacing growth for all other ethnicities attending *any* not-for-profit college, public or private ("Six-Year Graduation Rates," 2011).

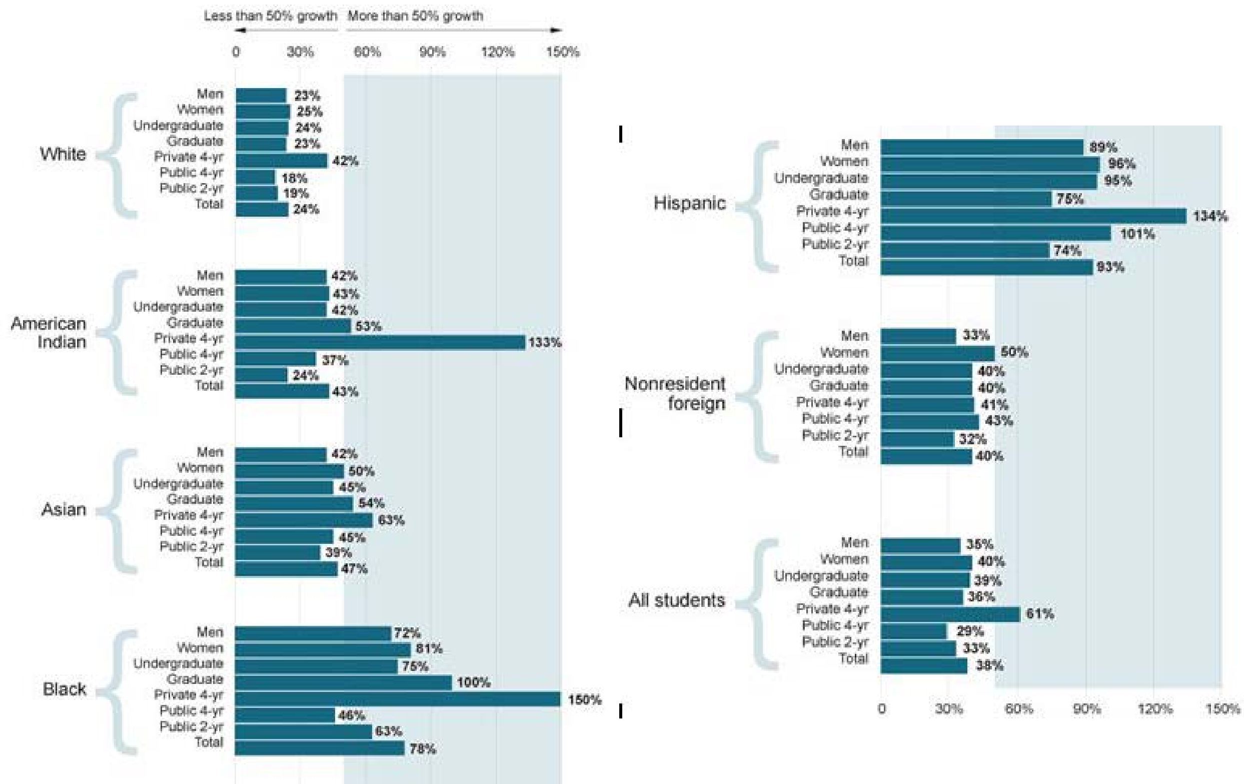

Figure 20. U.S. enrollment growth, 1999-2009. Source: Copyright 2011, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Reprinted with permission.

However, record enrollments offer little promise to private colleges unless they can graduate their new students in four years. Consider the financial benefits when institutions

realize even slight graduation rate gains. The average sticker price at private colleges in 2010 was around $40,000. After tuition discounts and other aid, most students paid about 60% of that, or $24,000 per year ("Six-Year Graduation Rates," 2011). Over four years, then, the average PWI collects roughly $100,000 in revenue per additional graduate. With only modest increases in enrollment, private colleges stand to dramatically improve their balance sheets. Take, for example, the colleges selected for this study.

Middletown College and Rural University respectively graduated 19 and 22 additional African American students in 2007 compared to 2004. At these rates, Middletown realized $1.9 million in additional revenue, Rural University, $2.2 million. Added revenue brings precious resources for a host of new initiatives. Among them might be targeted scholarships for underrepresented students, additional diverse faculty and courses, and dedicated multicultural centers. New diverse infrastructure in turn attracts more diverse students, faculty, and staff. Cultivating racial and ethnic minority alumni support becomes easier when they see their alma mater developing interculturally. Thus, institutions stand to improve their bottom lines with only modest graduation rate increases.

Increasing African American graduation rates helps the entire student body. All students benefit from a diverse learning environment (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2003a). Engagement with others from diverse backgrounds expands student perspectives, helps them question assumptions, and breaks down homogeneous cultural barriers to social change. Nowhere is this type of learning more evident than at small, private, liberal arts colleges (Kuh, 2003a). Small gains in African American graduation rates can have a compounding benefit effect. These benefits are not theoretical; they are real, as evidenced in this study.

So although the current environment for private PWIs may appear challenging, it is also ripe with opportunity. The colleges profiled in this study have shown that a strong vision, campus-wide action, and a little investment holds the promise for long term prosperity, both for African American students and the institution itself.

Theoretical Lenses on the Findings

Making sense of the data requires some grounded theoretical perspectives to shed light on the conditions driving improved graduation rates. All students face, at one time or another, decisions to remain enrolled and graduate, transfer to another college, or drop out entirely. Understanding these decision points is important to better understand why students remain enrolled and why others choose to leave. Tinto's theory of departure (1987) as introduced in Chapter 2 provides a robust tool for this task. Astin's theory of involvement (1999), also introduced in Chapter 2, augments Tinto via a perspective on those aspects of the collegiate environment that help achieve integration through involvement, a centrally important element to student persistence toward graduation.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure and Astin's Theory of Involvement

According to Tinto (1987), persistent students move through their college experience marked by critical decision points. First, students must make their initial commitments to their colleges of choice. College choice and potential for success at that college are often driven by what Tinto calls *inputs*. These include student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, high school GPA and rank, standardized test scores, geographic home, etc. (Tinto, 1987). Next, students will remain enrolled, or retained, if they are able to successfully *integrate* into both their academic and social systems (e.g., perform well in class, make meaningful friendships, have positive faculty interactions). Once integrated into these systems, students then make final

commitments to their academic goals and chosen institutions (e.g., the student declares a major, knows the path to graduation, etc.) and confirm that their current institutions can adequately fulfill these goals toward graduation. The data suggest that increases in African American students at Middletown and Rural University sprang from these decision points and ultimately the institutions helped them remain committed and continue with their studies.

Although Tinto's (1987) model helps explain *when* these conditions occur, another perspective provides insight into *how* these decision points help or hinder improved conditions for graduation. Astin's (1999) involvement theory examines the quality and quantity of students' time spent on college pursuits, matched with their ability to forge relationships with faculty and student peers. His theory claims that time spent on studies and building meaningful, significant relationships within the institution impacts students' involvement and conditions for success. The higher their involvement, he argues, the more likely they are to persist and graduate. Astin offers some basic postulates that, when exercised, increases overall student involvement. Namely, when students invest physical and psychological energies toward their academic pursuits, learning and intellectual development increase. Students will invest in their experiences in varying amounts at different times. Thus, learning fluctuates to the degree to which investments are of high quality *and* quantity. Regarding the institution's role in involvement, he had this to say: "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 519). Consequently, institutions that design and implement policies and practices to increase student involvement in their academic and social lives will likely increase the chances for student success and graduation, including for African American students.

Whereas Tinto (1987) provides an over-arching schema for understanding student departure points, Astin (1984) shed light on the impact of student involvement inside and outside the classroom. Viewed together, these theoretical perspectives offer a road map for navigating the labyrinth of forces driving student persistence. However, these perspectives are not without their weaknesses. Many have criticized both approaches for their lack of relevance for underrepresented college students such as African Americans (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1992).

Criticisms of Tinto and Astin. Tinto's (1975, 1987) model of student departure draws heavily from Durkheim's suicidal (1997) and Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage theories. Durkheim asserted that the potential for suicide was predicated on an individual's ability to successfully integrate with society. The higher the integration, the theory proposes, the less prone an individual is to commit suicide. Van Gennep identified and coined the phrase *rites of passage* to describe the symbolic and ceremonial events (circumcision, bar mitzvahs, initiation ceremonies, etc.) that help individuals integrate with their societies. Tinto broadly applied these theories to all college students as they try to integrate to their academic and social environments.

Critics maintain that Tinto's (1975) model applies only to traditional students (18-22 years old, residential, predominantly White) and is not as relevant for underrepresented students such as adults, distance learners, or racial and ethnic minority students. These smaller student populations often must acclimate to their academic and social environments under starkly different circumstances (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guiffrida, 2006; Rovai, 2002; Tierney, 1992). Tierney (1992) sharply criticized Tinto's application of Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage to the college environment as "potentially harmful . . . for racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 603).

Furthermore, Tierney claimed that an integration perspective presumes that underrepresented students must somehow conform to, or assimilate with, majority cultural norms in order to successfully persist and graduate. On the contrary, Tierney suggested, minority students must first overcome significant racial and cultural barriers that simply do not allow for integration. Instead, persistence research should examine "universities as multicultural entities where difference is highlighted and celebrated" (Tierney, 1992, p. 604).

Tinto (1987) acknowledged these and other criticisms while reasserting the model's overall validity stating that "the model was developed to explain certain, but not all, modes or facets of dropout behavior" (p. 688). Subsequent literature builds from Tinto's theory to better explain departure behavior among students attending specific institution types (Berger, 2002) and by focusing on classroom integration as a better predictor of overall academic and social integration (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). Others have expanded Tinto's model to look specifically at African American student adjustment to social and academic environments (Guiffrida, 2003; Seidman, 2004-2005; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Thus, Tinto's theory maintains a "nearly paradigmatic status" (Braxton, 2000, p. 107) in higher education persistence research today.

Similar criticisms were also made against Astin's (1984) involvement theory claiming limited application to students of color. Subsequent literature has, however, expanded Astin's theory to better understand how involvement activities impact student development in African Americans, for example. Flowers (2004) examined data from nearly 8,000 students who took the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), a survey of student involvement. He found that some, but not all, involvement activities (library experiences, course learning experiences, personal experiences) did positively impact African American student

development. Other activities had only nominal impact, such as experiences in athletics, recreation facilities, the student union, or clubs and organizations (Flowers, 2004).

Neither Tinto's student departure nor Astin's involvement models fully explain African American college persistence phenomena. But viewed together, along with critical race theory, racial identity development, Black feminist thought, and other theories addressing the African American college experience, they are helpful for making sense of study findings (Cross et al., 1995; P. Collins, 2000; Cuyjet et al., 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Themes from the Findings

Findings from this study suggest these high-performing institutions succeeded in doing two things very well: cultivating caring cultures and redistributing institutional power through mission-driven diversity initiatives. Members of these communities engaged their underrepresented students early and often by building networks of meaningful relationships. These relationships ranged from casual, daily, and one-on-one interactions to formal, highly structured community building. In the end, students from all backgrounds were often supported by layers of advisors, teachers, coaches, and peer mentors. The most financially limited students were also supported by generous financial aid, supporting long-term enrollment and short term needs.

Key to African American student success was an institutional mission focused on action. These institutions boldly stated their diversity priorities and, most importantly, distributed ample resources, power, and influence to campus professionals leading change. Throughout the period studied, both Middletown and Rural achieved critical masses of African American students, faculty, and staff, creating a cultural tipping point. With clear priorities for

diversity and the necessary resources for change, these institutions reengineered their academic and social environments, making them much more welcoming and conducive for learning.

Themes from the Findings

Culture of Caring

College life can be uniquely difficult for African American students attending small, private colleges. The body of research on this is clear. "One troubling finding is that students of color, especially African American students, do not find the liberal arts college environment as supportive as other students do" (Kuh, 2003a, p. 6). African Americans regularly endure feelings of isolation (Cuyjet et al., 2011; Fleming, 1988). They live in hostile environments where they are routinely exposed to micro-aggressive behaviors on good days and overt racism on the worst (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999b; Hrabowski, 2004; Solorzano et al., 2000; Watson et al., 2002). In class, African American students often "lament their role as spokesperson" (Watson et al., 2002, p. 67) for their entire race while trying to find their individual paths to achievement. Added expectations to assimilate to majority culture social norms (e.g., wearing the latest trends in clothing, joining majority Greek chapters, etc.) can subjugate their desires for individual expression.

Steady pressures to carry the African American banner while trying to succeed in hostile environments can build to intolerable levels. But finding help is not always easy or even sought out. Compounding these problems is the fact that African American students, especially men, are more reluctant than other students to seek the advice and support they need (Watson et al., 2002). Given these barriers to success, PWIs must cultivate cultures of caring in order to improve African American graduation rates (Noddings, 2005). That is exactly what Middletown College and Rural University seem to have accomplished.

Over the last decade, Middletown and Rural took deliberate steps to cultivate a culture of caring and lower barriers to success for African American students on their campuses. Institutional influences in this regard were extensive. Starting as early as the application to college process and continuing through to commencement, faculty, staff, student peers, and even local community members played critical and intentional roles in supporting student success. Study participants described in detail how African American students were supported in helping them to negotiate and succeed in both the academic and social environments. Clear patterns emerged from the data of institutional priorities and practices that helped students actively engage in meaningful relationships, dialogue with trusted staff and peers, and find necessary resources to keep them enrolled and engaged.

Middletown study participants across the board characterized their campus as a caring community. Their descriptions painted the picture of an organic campus culture of support. Beth Benson, for example, shared that people really seemed to care about each other. Institutional CIRP data supported her observations. Dean Anderson suggested Middletown had a level of community not experienced at other colleges she had worked at in the past. Moreover, when she tried to describe Middletown's culture of care, a definition seemed to elude her, but it was clearly felt. She shared how tenderly people cared for students and how faculty selflessly gave of their time and talents, beyond what was expected by most African American students. So valuable to her was the Middletown culture of caring that she wished they could "bottle it up and sell it."

Chaplain Easton said the campus culture was known as "Middletown nice." Although valuable and important to a supportive culture, he did feel that this orientation can be a "thicket" for the institution as it moves toward a more inclusive environment. Being too nice

and polite, the chaplain explained, can inadvertently suffocate necessary social progress for those with less of a campus voice, namely African Americans and other ethnic minorities.

Nevertheless, it was clear that student–faculty interactions were frequent and meaningful. Faculty and staff were, for several student participants, role models. Students sat on all major campus committees with voice and vote. Shout Out dialogues about recent racial incidents helped students from all backgrounds wrestle with tensions arising out of the college experience.

Middletown exercised a standard of care that helped students remain focused on their academic goals. Study participants generally reported positive, supportive interactions with faculty and staff, starting from the admissions process through the senior experience, although participants admitted that conditions were not yet at an optimum.

At Rural University, focus group participants described RU as an environment in which students were well supported inside and outside of the classroom. James commented on how the president was leading a stronger, caring community through changes in the academic and social environments. But the culture of care did not stop with the president. It extended to the faculty as well. It was not unusual, according to James and DeShawn, for faculty to stay late into the evening, sacrificing time with their families, to help them with their homework. DeShawn regarded her Haitian and Arab faculty members as female role models helping her push through struggles. Ennis found a warm home for all ethnicities at the AAAS house. He recalled a recent Thanksgiving dinner where students and staff from various races and religions ate, listened to different music, and watched an NFL football game on TV.

A "family-type environment" was how Jose Hernandez characterized RU's caring community. Students readily find uncle and mother figures as advisors and mentors throughout

their four-year experience. Other administrators spoke to the university's history of early desegregation and welcoming campus for LGBTQ students that made RU an institution where any student could thrive. RU's desire to welcome all students extended into the curriculum by providing required courses in January for students to explore diverse cultures on campus and abroad.

Each campus practiced an ethos of care via different programs and practices. Furthermore, each engaged students early in their college experience, and actively, through multiple means. The culture of caring theme that was present at both institutions appeared to be a critical component of African American student success and that can be further described via four sub-themes with links to the literature and that are described next.

Early and Active Involvement

Private, liberal arts colleges have a built-in advantage over other college types: they are small. Student-to-faculty ratios are generally low, on average around 11:1 for institutions fewer than 5,000 students (Hu & Kuh, 2003a). Middletown and Rural reported ratios of 12:1 and 10:1 respectively. Low ratios mean that faculty have increased contact with students and can be more involved in one-on-one advising and teaching activities. Staff often know students individually and can better advise them through difficult times (Fleming, 1988; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999a).

Both institutions seemed to take full advantage of their size by connecting with new students very early in their college commitment. In fact, these institutions did not wait until students matriculated. Rural University sponsored not one, but two annual Posse classes. Twenty students, 10 each from New York and Chicago, were selected early in their senior years, well before admissions deadlines, and invited to participate in the Posse program. These

high school seniors attended weekly workshops facilitated by program staff, Rural University alumni, and upper class student mentors. By the time they graduated from high school, participants had invested significant time practicing skills such as taking notes and test taking. They also forged meaningful connections with other students. Such experiences helped solidify their commitment to Rural and accelerate their integration with social and academic environments upon arrival (Tinto, 1993).

Middletown offered Jumpstart, a pre-orientation experience for students who might benefit from early exposure to the campus and support services. At-risk students from both majority and underrepresented groups attended a one-week program. According to Dean Davis, assessment data showed that Jumpstart helped their students link to peer mentors and academic support services more quickly than would likely happen independently during the course of their first weeks and months of classes.

After matriculation to college, African American students still faced unique challenges in the classroom not likely experienced by White students (Cuyjet et al., 2011). Feelings of isolation, cultural dissonance, and limited access to mentors pose seemingly insurmountable barriers (Cuyjet et al., 2011). Many students feel the crushing weight of responsibility for speaking for an entire race. Focus group students openly shared their challenges. Sharon from Rural University was acutely aware of her race and the pressures to perform. So conscious of her race was Sharon that she chose not to speak in class for an entire semester citing fears of "sticking out like a sore thumb." DeShawn, also from Rural, struggled to engage in the classroom, saying that her grades suffered initially. It took an entire year for her classmate Ennis to begin to speak. But Ennis explained, once he enrolled in a class he was passionate about, his "juices started flowing" and he felt more welcomed by his peers and the faculty.

Sharon was not a Posse student at Rural, and therefore did not benefit from pre-college bridge or preparatory programs. However, she did take advantage of the January term, or J-term, during her first year. Being in class with other African Americans helped boost Sharon's confidence. In her first year, Sharon enrolled in a J-term, East African culture class. For the first time, she was in a class where most of the students were also Black. This gave Sharon the encouragement she needed to finally speak. "So I spoke up a lot in there and I was like, wow, my opinions do matter."

Offering the J-term academic option at Rural University in 2006-07 exposed an increasing number of students to more frequent multicultural dialogue and study. Students were required to attend three J-terms over their four years. J-term courses were designed specifically to explore diverse perspectives. In Sharon's case, she took an East African cultures class her first winter at RU. It was exactly the environment she needed to find her voice. Being surrounded by other African American peers encouraged her to speak more. This helped her build up confidence and ultimately strengthened her self-esteem. Afterwards, Sharon realized that her opinions in class did matter and that her voice was valued.

According to Astin (1999), African Americans generally develop higher levels of self-esteem than White students when actively involved in college. RU provided an academic venue through which Sharon, and other African Americans, could emerge and see themselves as engaged, valued learners. Higher self-esteem undergirds commitment to one's academic environments, a necessary stage in Tinto's (1993) integration model.

Middletown cultivated a network of early intervention. It was common for faculty to contact other colleagues regarding students struggling in class well before serious problems arose. Chaplain Easton routinely called his colleagues even if he was just "getting a vibe" from

a student. Keeping students actively involved meant regular, even casual, dialogue with faculty and staff. The practice of knowing and supporting struggling students was almost an unspoken standard of care. Dean Davis said the practice did not have a name per se, but that it was "part of [their] culture." However, she met individually with those students experiencing more significant academic struggles. In 1999, she and her staff began identifying students who were at or below the minimum grade point average, requiring them to come in for meetings. Through this process, she would recommend customized strategies to better support learning (e.g., appointments with the ARC, emergency financial aid, other personal or financial support). Dean Davis spoke about offering a make-up final exam to one African American student struggling to graduate. Because of a close relationship with a fellow faculty member, they agreed to pass the student even though the deadline for grades had passed. Such "red tape" exceptions were commonly used when necessary at Middletown.

Outside the classroom, students experienced the Middletown caring culture from the staff as well. Greg recalled how Middletown was not his first choice until an administrator "went to bat" for him and made the process easier. He felt that college administrators were genuinely helpful and not only interested in taking his money. These genuine, supportive experiences go a long way in building trust, a critical ingredient for African Americans trying to acclimate to a PWI (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999b; Tinto, 1992).

Meaningful Connections

According to Gardner (1986), students who make at least one meaningful personal connection within the first six weeks of school are more than twice as likely to return for a second year as students who do not. Strong connections help build the framework within which student involvement can thrive. Meaningful connections between students and their peers,

faculty, administrators, and even coaches and non-campus community members help form a web of support and resources necessary for rich student involvement (Astin, 1999). Institutions participating in this study seemed to excel at cultivating such connections early in the student experience.

Posse students at Rural were carefully matched with faculty advisors and upper class student mentors who assisted with transition issues common among underrepresented students. Rural's BMI program promoted weekly dialogue among and between African American men. Such dialogue is another critical ingredient for African American students to develop their racial identities (Cross et al., 1995). Students not participating in Posse or BMI described meaningful relationships with other Rural students and faculty through the FYE program. Sharon explained that she, as an FYE mentor, genuinely connected with her mentees saying, "I tell my mentees straight: 'I was leaving. I didn't want to be at RU'." But she said she stayed because she had mentors that helped her each step of the way.

Faculty relationships play a vital role in the minority student experience. In fact, it may be the most important factor in student success (Cole, 2010; Watson et al., 2002). Focus group students praised faculty for being involved in their lives in and out of the classroom. James's and DeShawn's professors, as noted earlier, stayed at Rural after hours to help with coursework and papers. James described his experience this way:

> I had a professor who met with us probably two or three times before we had to turn in a final draft. And he was meeting with us like at 6:00 at night at the library. He would just sit and have a conversation with you, go over the paper. Then afterwards, he might invite me to his house to meet his wife and kids. I mean, they're just really hands on, excellent, excellent professors here.

Middletown students also felt supported by faculty willing to go above and beyond. Eve and Darlene both shared that their faculty were interested and highly invested in their lives. Felicia felt supported because of her close relationships with Dean Anderson and other faculty of color saying how they often checked in on her and made sure she and her friends were okay.

Middletown also placed a premium on student membership on institutional committees. In many cases, students had both voice and vote. Dean Benson explained that Middletown students scored higher than their comparison groups on the NSSE survey for working with faculty and administrators on committees and other projects.

Both institutions took early and direct steps at addressing the daunting challenges posed in the academic and social environments. Having meaningful connections, rather than ones that are fleeting or superficial, appeared to be an important part of African American student engagement and ultimately retention and success, conditions that the research suggests are important (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Tinto, 1992).

Multiple Layers of Support

HBCUs excel at providing supportive learning environments where students have multiple mentors to guide them (Fleming, 1988). Networks of trusted faculty, academic advisors, peer mentors, and coaches create a buffer between the challenges of college life. PWIs rarely have enough faculty and staff of color to provide similar networks. So White and other faculty and staff must step up to the plate (Horton, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Middletown and Rural have managed to create these layers of support.

Adam said he was ready to leave Middletown after his first semester. But once he connected with staff and peer mentors, he got involved. He joined a club, declared a major, and began to actively assert himself at the college. He was elected co-president for AAAS. Out of

this experience was born the Shout Out student forum, giving voice to those grappling with social justice challenges. As a senior, Adam said he grew to love Middletown College.

DeShawn and Ennis at Rural University also benefited from the guidance of multiple mentors. DeShawn found an immediate connection with her FYE mentor who helped sustain her through the first few months. She also claimed that her appreciation for a Rural liberal arts education grew out of the reinforced messages she got from various mentors and teachers. One reason she recommitted to Rural and stayed enrolled was because her Posse mentors and professors helped her learn how to think critically and apply her learning to a wide variety of topics. DeShawn appreciated how an RU education helped her probe more deeply into an issue rather than taking information or facts at face value. Ennis credited his Posse mentor for keeping him enrolled at Rural and a large reason why he was doing so well. Nevertheless, Ennis sought the advice and support of others beyond his Posse network. So Ennis also connected with a group of "strong Black men" through Rural's RMI program.

The importance of broad networks was universally understood by participants as well. Faculty and staff from both institutions described how *all* students benefited from regular and meaningful relationships with mentors and tutors. Yet students from diverse backgrounds received added attention in many cases. The ARC director, Farrah Feinstein, realized few students of color were applying to be learning assistants. So she and her staff sent letters congratulating high performing students of color on their academic achievements and specifically invited them to apply. Within a year, the center saw increases in African American and other learning assistants from diverse backgrounds.

Middletown's popular ARC was a critical ingredient in helping the institution improve its overall graduation rates. African American students, often averse to seeking help, and in

some case even reluctant to speak in class, benefited the most from the center's programs and stigma-free reputation. Students across the achievement spectrum utilized the ARC's many workshops and peer tutoring sessions, or visited to simply polish their chemistry reports, for example. Middletown's network of informal and formal academic supports reinforces Upcraft and Gardner's (1989) assertion that regular and positive advising helps students form the basic academic habits that will help or hinder their intellectual growth.

Posse participants at Rural had weekly contact with faculty, staff, and upper class student mentors. If they needed to vent, debrief, or get homework assistance, the Posse network provided a broad net of support. Both the ARC and Posse program set high expectations for students which in turn reinforced a culture of achievement at the institution.

Financial Assistance

For most students, attending a private, not-for-profit college is made possible only because of generous financial aid packages. Eighty-seven percent of private college students receive some form of aid ("Six-Year Graduation Rates," 2011). Combinations of scholarships, grants, loans, and/or work-study funding help those who cannot afford full tuition and fees. African Americans attending Rural and Middletown cited financial aid as a primary factor in their decision to apply and stay enrolled.

At Rural University, Posse scholars received full scholarships all four years as long as they maintained a 2.5 cumulative GPA. The Student Affairs office also awarded emergency scholarships to student who showed academic promise and high financial need. Other high achieving African Americans cited a combination of scholarships, work-study, and grants as reasons for their persistence. Ben credited his financial aid package from Middletown as the main reason he and most of his friends applied to the college and remained enrolled. Others

claimed that Middletown's highly ranked academic programs such as theatre and dance lured them initially while their generous financial aid packages kept them there. Although focus group participants committed to Middletown for different reasons, the supportive atmosphere and expanding focus on diversity seemed to keep them committed.

Distinguishing Aspects of Rural and Middletown

Results from these case studies suggest that Rural and Middletown have removed the 'hostile environment' label from their campuses. Barriers to success are being actively and systematically eliminated. Caring community members reach out to underrepresented students early and often to ease their transition to college life. A critical mass of minority students, mentors, and tutors create multiple layers of support that are critical for students to find their voices and press through the daily challenges unique to being a minority student on the campuses. Generous financial aid packages offer the necessary resources to remain on track toward graduation.

Up to this point, the study results tell a story that might be true, or at least believed, at many PWIs across the nation. What seemed to distinguish Rural and Middletown from other PWIs, and appears to further explain why their African American graduation rate improvements are among the highest in the nation, have to do with the redistribution of power and influence, a mission focus linked to enactment, diversity as a priority, building a critical mass of African American students, diversifying the curriculum, and providing counterspaces, topics that are discussed in the sections that follow.

Redistribution of Power and Influence Through Diversity

For much of higher education's history, access was limited to White men of wealth and family prominence. This fact held largely true all the way until the mid-1800s. Minority

students and women had to wait nearly three centuries after the country's first colleges' founding to gain access and really only in large numbers since the 1950s. By the time our nation opened all school doors to African Americans in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision, Harvard had celebrated its 318th birthday.

African Americans entered higher education faced with 300 years of discrimination. In that same time, White graduates prospered, bought land, assumed public office, founded businesses, made scientific discoveries, and enjoyed centuries of national power and influence. Providing equal access to higher education had come. But the ability to earn a degree was out of reach for most African Americans. So it would be decades before the collegiate playing field began to level. Rural University and Middletown College are two examples of institutions that appear to have gone further than most in embedding not only structural but also cultural components that appear to be uniquely valuable to African American student retention and success.

Mission Focus Linked to Enactment

The college mission statement frames an institution's core values and purpose for existing. It is designed to clearly articulate what the college is and what it is not; what it does, and what it does not do (Rowley, Lujan & Dolence, 1997). For example, does the institution aspire to be an intensive, comprehensive research institution like many land grant universities, or does it emphasize teaching with small student–faculty ratios like many small private institutions? The mission statement often spells this out. Increasingly national accreditation boards have used mission statements and strategic plans that flow from them as benchmarks for educational and operational effectiveness. Is the institution living up to its stated mission and

goals? Are students getting the intimate learning experience espoused by the college's mission?

The colleges participating in this study made diversity a clear mission focus. Middletown refined its mission with a supplemental statement in 2006. The college expanded their mission statement adding "diversity" as a "fundamental Middletown value." This symbolic step helped pave the way for real and focused action via new diverse faculty hires and the hiring of their first African American Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Amiee Anderson. In her interview, Dean Anderson confirmed that Middletown's diversity efforts were "front and center," fueling the momentum behind a string of additional diverse faculty hires.

In Rural's case, they had a longstanding tradition of inclusiveness. They were one of the earliest American colleges to admit African American students (1835) and women (1837). For the last several decades, Rural made the internationalization of their campus a top priority. But it has been only in the past 10 years that the institution made strides at diversifying their institution. Offices supporting international and intercultural student affairs relocated to one, central location. New centers for minority and women were built. Their concentrated focus on diversity fueled the curriculum changes needed to create the J-term. It took a revision of their mission to begin this transformation.

Diversity is Prioritized

At the highest levels, Middletown codified an institution pledge toward greater inclusivity. In 2006, as noted in the previous section, Middletown augmented their mission statement with a diversity statement. The new language helped advance the institution's

commitment to diversity. The statement makes the bold claim that the institution cannot reach its educational goals without practicing this value. It states,

> We believe that our academic program *is not able* to achieve the goals set in our mission statement unless each member of the community recognizes and understands the benefits, conflicts, tensions, and intersections that are inherent in diversity. Diversity is, therefore, a fundamental Middletown value. (emphasis added)

Discussed later in this section is the path the statement made for significant organizational shifts in resource allocation, power redistribution, and focused policy development.

Rural University's Community Covenant monument was erected in 2004. It served as a powerful statement symbolizing a rock solid commitment, literally, to the institution's core values of educational inclusiveness and mutual respect. By asking all new students, faculty, and staff to sign the covenant, Rural helped institutionalize their values of intellectual engagement, providing unique learning opportunities, developing supportive relationships, and being diligently engaged in their community. So serious were the covenant leaders that they engraved the language in a metal plate, mounted it on a granite block, and asked all new members of the community henceforth to sign a hard copy. Articulated in the four pillars is this commitment: "I celebrate diversity and respect and honor the differences among our members." For African Americans, these words served to offer a community where they could be comfortable and successful.

Building a Critical Mass

African Americans, as well as all students, benefit from diverse campuses (Chang, 1999; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003; Watson et al., 2002). Chang (1999) found that as a college became more heterogeneous,

students' social interactions and college experiences improved. "The more students socialize with someone from a different race, the greater their level of college satisfaction and improved social self-concept" (Chang, 1999, p. 389). Evidence of improved diversity in student enrollment, faculty ranks, and physical spaces were found at both institutions.

Knowing that others from similar backgrounds are around to share in their struggles, empathize with problems, and socialize outside of class is critical to student integration with the college environment (Tinto, 1993). However, there is a tipping point of sorts that remains somewhat of a mystery to higher education. What percentage of diverse students are enough to reach that critical mass? What types and frequency of interaction best stimulate learning and development?

Evidence gathered in this study suggests that Middletown and Rural have attained their critical masses. Dean Iverson expressed it this way: "I honestly think one of the big things about the Posse program was getting a critical mass. . . . The fact that they had their Posse, you know, their peers, the fact that they [had] other people from NY [and] Chicago, . . . it made a huge difference" (p. 123). Dr. Gustafson agreed that the Posse program had likely aided retention and graduation rates by adding a critical number of diverse members to the student body. She also reported increases in racial minority students dining together in the campus's main dining hall, the Hubb.

Kelli Kaufman credited the recent growth of African American Greek organizations, now up to four chapters, to a growing critical mass of minority student enrollment. Without this increase, these chapters would have been much smaller or non-existent, pressuring African American students to join a predominantly White chapter or opt out of Greek life altogether. Neither of these options seemed appealing to participants. There was a clear dilemma for

African Americans going Greek. It was all but required for a social life at Rural. However, joining a traditionally White fraternity often brought the ire of other African American friends. DeShawn explained that Black students who join traditionally White fraternities or sororities "get the stare" from their Black peers. It is seen as a form of defection from the RU Black community thereby weakening, or diluting, the strength of the growing, yet fragile population.

Although Middletown's minority enrollment was not as large as Rural's, combined increases in African American students and employees helped create a broader multicultural community at Middletown. During the period studied, African American student enrollment increased only marginally. However, Middletown added four African Americans to the faculty and staff, including a vice president for student affairs, director of the new multicultural center, and two other faculty members. Participants across the board recognized the improved multicultural landscape and subsequent benefits to students. Dean Anderson admitted they were not ready to proclaim "mission accomplished," but were making great progress toward achieving a critical mass. She reported that alumni recently had told her that they were envious of the diversifying campus and wistfully wished they could re-enroll. For Ben, seeing more persons who looked like him was comforting. Darlene said being surrounded by Black people made her feel good.

Diversifying the Curriculum

Academic scholarship and teaching form the core of higher education's mission and purpose (Boyer, 1990). It is one of the primary purposes colleges and universities exist. Although learning certainly happens beyond the classroom, faculty and the curriculum represent the engine driving student learning and development (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005).

Clearly, if an institution hopes to significantly impact multicultural learning, it must engage the faculty and diversify the curriculum (Tierney, 1992).

Furthermore, the degree to which institutions support the academic needs of their students directly impacts student drop-out and thus graduation rates (Tinto, 1993). Institutions with highly diverse environments foster greater learning for students of color as compared to more homogeneous campuses (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). Enhanced learning necessarily assumes increased quantity and quality of time devoted to educationally rich experiences (Astin, 1999). The data showed that Middletown's academic programs experienced considerable change during the period studied in supporting underrepresented students' success, in part via changes in the curriculum. Ultimately, these changes provided both symbolic and structural institutional commitments toward a more diverse and supportive environment (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

In 2003, Middletown introduced the "D-Requirement" into the academic general education curriculum. Formally titled the "Diversity and Difference" general education requirement, students are required to complete at least one course exploring cultures and perspectives outside the United States and Europe. Or they may choose a course examining the experiences of cultural minorities in those regions. This was a major step to help all Middletown students engage in critical dialogue about racial identity, oppression, and connections with others from diverse backgrounds (Cross et al., 1995; Freire, 2004; Hu & Kuh, 2003). The D-Requirement gained institutionalized status over the next few years, allowing the college to create a new African American Studies minor in 2007. The new minor brought with it a new African American faculty director.

Rural's J-term offered a broad menu of academic choices for students seeking diverse perspectives. The four-week curriculum allowed students to concentrate study in cultures from all over the world and throughout history. Beginning in 2006, first years were allowed to study abroad. This change was made after RU discovered the strong retentive effects of international study among upper class students. Although not the strongest reason participants cited for improved graduation rates, first-year study abroad helped. But not all first-year students can afford to travel. Sharon stayed on campus her first J-term. For her, it made all the difference in her academic transition. An East African course helped her find new confidence to break her silence in class.

Providing Counterspaces

Space is power. More appropriately, how space is used often reflects who is in power. Pictures hanging on the walls, choices of furniture and interior design, who is invited to meet where, what language is used, and who talks the most are each indicative of the power brokers moving in and through that space (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Patton, 2010). To the casual observer walking through a college campus, discerning which culture is in power quickly becomes evident. Portraits and busts of dead White presidents, Latin seals embossed in flooring, Victorian furniture, and an overwhelming number of middle-aged White people staffing most offices mean that White culture dominates institutional decision making. In classes, textbooks offer knowledge discovered largely by White authors taught mostly by White faculty. Outside of class, residence halls (especially first-year areas) often cater to the dorm-style living-learning environment from a bygone, monocultural era (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Rooms segregate students into pairs, often forcing those from minority cultures to room with those from the majority. If minority students want to socialize with friends, they go to spaces

more conducive to comfortable, cultural interaction. This is usually the dining hall, a place where White students often wonder why the Black students always sit together (Tatum, 1997).

This is the perspective many minority students have of their PWI colleges. If they do not feel excluded outright from the majority culture, their experience is almost always described as marginalized (Cuyjet et al., 2011; Patton, 2010; Torres et al., 2003). Torres et al. (2003) recommended that institutions "purposefully create spaces and programs that reflect diverse cultures" (p. 85), not just in a building room but in multiple spaces throughout campus.

African American students seek safe, social spaces just like any other student. They need rooms and buildings in which to share stories, plan activities, and deconstruct the issues and problems they uniquely face. Such "spaces" can include African American student organizations, fraternities, sororities, and study groups (Solorzano et al., 2000). But on predominantly White campuses, these dedicated spaces are often difficult to find. Institutions recognizing this need are building new or renovating older spaces designed for power-neutral or minority culture-specific purposes. Multicultural centers, living-learning pods, or residential floors adorned with culturally pluralistic art and décor and that have robust programming are examples of brick-and-mortar solutions to this need.

From 2004-2010, Rural University dedicated two houses and three centrally located spaces specifically for this purpose. African Americans received their own house in 1988 and upgraded to a larger house in 2010. These facilities certainly helped intercultural groups connect. But a more fundamental shift in power was initiated to help level the metaphorical social environment playing field.

Rural University's 1999 decision to defer Greek recruitment, or rush, from early fall to spring was significant. It was the catalyst behind a dramatic shift in the student social power

structure away from the predominantly White Greek community to the non-Greek and multicultural community. For over 100 years, the campus culture had been dominated by predominantly White Greek fraternities and sororities. Early fall recruitment meant that first-years had to quickly decide if they would participate in Greek life, and if so, which group to join. Once a member, the student's housing, meals, and most campus social events were hosted in this community. Until recently, African American and other underrepresented students had few non-Greek housing options outside traditional residence halls. Deferred recruitment required students to wait until the spring semester to rush. This gave underrepresented students more time to make non-Greek friends, assemble in neutral spaces, and cultivate meaningful relationships.

Students less interested in going Greek doubled in three years at Rural. Requests for independent living options thereby dramatically increased. Rural responded by buying or building 100 apartments and houses over the next decade. Non-Greeks, including most African Americans, began forming their own social groups and hosting their own, smaller, more intimate parties. So instead of attending Greek parties trying to fit in with 300-400 virtual strangers, non-Greeks could socialize throughout the week with 10-20 close friends. It completely changed the Rural social scene, making it much easier for African Americans to integrate with the social environment (Tinto, 1993).

In 2006, Middletown College added a new multicultural center. The center was guided by a newly created director position and provided a common, dedicated space for students of color to gather. Multicultural students and clubs now had a space to hold study groups, host meetings, and engage in intercultural dialogue. Discussion forums called a Shout Out were a direct outgrowth of this new supportive environment, according to Director Caffey. The

program, led by the BSA, offered students a safe space to plan and discuss important contemporary issues such as racial profiling. Students regularly use these forums to bring the community together to vent frustrations and dialogue about important steps toward social change.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Rural's and Middletown's comprehensive steps toward diversifying their academic and social systems involved both symbolic and structural elements. A clearer mission and new academic programs attracted more African American faculty who in turn facilitated deeper campus-wide dialogue from diverse perspectives. Additional African American staff offered a broader mentoring network and programming specific to the needs of underrepresented students. New dedicated spaces encouraged connections among and between multicultural groups. As a result, students, faculty, and staff were connecting with deeper engagement. The net effect of these symbolic and structural changes provided a more supportive environment for African American success in both academic and social systems.

Higher education leaders seeking to improve African American graduation rates at their institutions can learn from these institutions. Bolman and Deal (2003) provided a useful framework by which others might adopt and adapt these findings. Thus, implications for potential policies and practices emerging from this study are presented using symbolic, political, structural, and human resource frames. Such an organizing structure provides a useful means of considering the range of considerations that can impact the success of any initiative, in this case as manifest through improving African American student success.

Symbols of Change

Bolman and Deal (2003) argued that symbolism is extremely important to members of an organization and any action taken by leaders ought to consider its impact. They suggested that actions can have different meanings for different persons but that a leader can be particularly effective if he or she is able to see how it is distilled and can articulate a change in a way that is more broadly shared. Helping a community make sense of an action or experience helps to clarify uncertainty and ambiguity, resolve confusion, and increase predictability among organization members. Powerful symbols also "form a cultural tapestry . . . that helps people find purpose and passion" in their work and lives. Finally, the symbolic frame assumes that "culture is the glue that holds an organization together and unites people around shared values and beliefs" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, pp. 242-243).

PWI leaders hoping to influence change can utilize symbols similar to those used at Rural and Middletown. Rural's Community Covenant and Middletown's diversity mission statement signaled heightened institutional values around diverse perspectives and inclusiveness. Such symbols should be displayed permanently and distributed widely and frequently. New members to the campus should be invited to read, sign, or pledge their commitments to these values. Exercising these at the start of an academic year helps newcomers align their values and expectations with the larger institution and remind the institution what is expected, thereby reducing gaps in the students' perceptions and the campus reality. If new students have a clear and early concept of the institution's core values and expectations, their ability to adopt and integrate with their new environment becomes more likely (Tinto, 1993).

Covenants and statements are important. But their words are empty unless coupled with real change. Action speaks louder than words, especially among minority populations skeptical of grandiose promises made by White-dominated leadership (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Rural and Middletown advanced their values with real change. Both showed evidence of political empowerment for African Americans through structural and human resource change.

Political Empowerment

President Woodrow Wilson is well known for saying he learned politics from professionals at Princeton and then practiced it on amateurs in Washington, DC. His sentiment captured the political landscape familiar to veterans of higher education events today. College campuses, like most institutions, get things done though carefully choreographed dances by loosely and sometimes tightly formed "coalitions of individuals and interest groups" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 186). These coalitions rise and fall, ebb and flow with changing values, interests, available resources, information, and perceptions of reality. Colleges, therefore, are political organisms experiencing regular conflict by power brokers vying for limited resources. Those with power make important "decisions by bargaining, negotiating, and jockeying for position among competing stakeholders" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 186).

At PWIs, these decision makers largely are, and have been for hundreds of years, White men, although that is slowly changing. But as long as decision-making authority and resources remain in the hands of White leaders, power and influence will remain concentrated with the majority population. Who-gets-what decisions will continue to reflect majority perspectives. Non-majority populations will likely remain marginalized (Watson et al., 2002).

Campus leaders aiming to develop a diverse campus should then distribute power and resources accordingly. Appointing a cabinet-level African American, similar to Middletown's

Vice President Amiee Anderson, sends a powerful, clear message that the institution's efforts are genuine. Additionally, the political clout necessary to form coalitions, negotiate change, and empower stakeholders is best positioned at the cabinet level. Vice presidents generally have the greatest purview over hiring decisions, budget allocation, and major division initiatives. Although top down change is not the only political strategy that can work, mission statements and top leadership representation make institutional priorities clear.

Leaders should also incorporate the student perspective. African American students should have voice and vote on major institutional committees and that extends beyond just student government. Students who are genuinely empowered to help guide institutional affairs enjoy a level of community integration and involvement that research shows is impactful to their retention and success (Astin, 1999; Fleming, 1988; Tinto, 1987). Curriculum committees, strategic planning task forces, and judicial boards all serve to carry out the core values and policies of the institution. Without sufficient representation, diverse perspectives get pushed to the margins. Middletown provided ample opportunity for student input and influence through committee seats. As a result, focus group students described a sense of ownership in their community. NSSE results confirmed Middletown led their comparison schools in student representation on campus-wide committees.

Structural Enhancements

Political forces tend to rise and fall depending on the interests of stakeholders, coalitions they build, and the resources available (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Thus, politically advantageous appointments in high places may have only a fleeting impact. Over the long term, institutions also need diverse organizational structures to maintain a steady course toward diversification.

Bolman and Deal (2003) framed structural enhancements using the following assumptions:

> [All] organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives. Organizations increase efficiency and enhance performance through specialization and a clear division of labor. Appropriate forms of coordination and control ensure that diverse efforts of individuals and units mesh. Organizations work best when rationality prevails over personal preferences and extraneous pressures. Structures must be designed to fit an organization's circumstances (including its goals, technology, workforce and environment). Problems and performance gaps arise from structural deficiencies and can be remedied through analysis and restructuring. (p. 45)

Following these assumptions, colleges can make significant changes in their organization structures to best support graduation rate increases. A consistent practice of hiring qualified African Americans and other racial minorities provides the staying power needed for lasting change. However, appointments should not be limited to stereotypical roles such as multicultural and women's centers (Cuyjet et al., 2011). They should be intentionally distributed to underrepresented departments and centralized locations.

At the core of the college organization is its curriculum. What is taught and by whom constitutes the heart and engine of higher education. It is also the most powerful vehicle for addressing the hostile environment experienced by many African American students. By adding African American and other ethnic studies courses, institutions can provide an attractive learning environment for those tired of carrying the race banner. Middletown recognized this power and created an African American Studies department and minor in 2007. Built into the curriculum structure was now an affirmation of African American history, culture, political

narrative, and a permanent place in the college's core operations, among the grandest of symbolic gestures and virtually insulated from the shifting political landscapes. Rural's J-term was another effective example of achieving curriculum structural reform while emphasizing globally diverse perspectives.

Perhaps one of the most powerful and permanent structural changes an institution can make is providing safe counterspaces for underrepresented groups (Patton, 2010). Building or repurposing space dedicated to African Americans and other groups provides a home or living room for those without a place to gather. Walls can be decorated with culturally specific (or diverse) cultural artifacts. Programs promoting cultural understanding should also be frequently scheduled and guided by staff competent in racial and ethnic minority advising and programming. These safe spaces provide solace from the micro-aggressions routinely faced in majority cultural spaces. They encourage open and fiercely honest conversations about one's experiences that in turn facilitate cultural and racial identity development (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Freire, 2004; Taylor & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Although students benefit socially through these dedicated spaces, academic study groups also thrive. Without the pressures of "sounding Black" or speaking for their entire race, African Americans can experience the self-affirming academic support often experienced only at HBCUs.

Diversifying residential areas is also fertile ground when supporting diverse student needs. Colleges dominated by predominantly White Greek organizations or majority populated residence halls have the unintended effect of assimilating non-majority students. Rather, residential areas should extend the inclusive practices in other campus areas with the goal of exploring and learning from diverse perspectives. This goal becomes more attainable where smaller groups of diverse students reside together. Living in apartments or small house co-ops

where daily living must be shared are wonderful micro-laboratories for multicultural learning. Rural University created these micro-communities when they deferred Greek recruitment, greatly expanded their small campus houses and apartment options, and instituted the first-year mentoring program.

One complaint participants discussed in this study was the fact that multicultural centers and other spaces were located on the fringes of campus. Houses and buildings dedicated to ethnic minorities are desired. But locating them off the beaten path sends the message that these groups remain marginalized. Instead, efforts to locate counterspaces in the center or hub of campus should be prioritized (Patton, 2010). In 2010, Rural consolidated their multicultural and international offices into the student union. It was one of the most important structural changes they made toward a multicultural environment, according to Dr. Gustafson. Now, when diverse students have needs, they can drop by during their lunch hours without feeling segregated from the main campus. By consolidating offices, Rural's multicultural and international student services staff were able to quickly share information about students' needs. Thus, where possible, institutions should try to centralize staff from diverse functional areas within an environment where each feels valued.

Human Resources

Restructuring campus resources can have a tremendous impact on how students are included in or marginalized from the institution. But how colleges nurture a caring learning environment is based almost entirely on their human resources.

Bolman and Deal (2003) described assumptions from the human resource frame in this way:

> Organizations exist to serve human needs, not the reverse. People and organizations need each other. Organizations need ideas, energy, and talent; people need careers, salaries and opportunities. When the fit between individuals and system is poor, one or both suffer. Individuals are exploited or exploit the organization—or both become victims. A good fit benefits both. Individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and organizations get the talent and energy they need to succeed. (p. 115)

Nowhere is the human resource frame more relevant than in higher education. Colleges and universities are staffed with the highest trained, most skilled human resources in the world. They do not, per their mission, strive to produce the best widgets, build houses, govern cities, or transport goods. Indeed, the mission of colleges and universities is to produce higher-educated people. Faculty comprise the core workforce, most of whom have terminal degrees and many years of experience. About one-quarter of the faculty enjoy life-long job security and academic freedom through tenure. They choose their professions because they find meaning and satisfying work there. That is to say, faculty need to create and transmit their knowledge. Colleges provide the resources and venue to make that happen.

Carey (2008) found that the single greatest factor distinguishing institutions that were truly making a difference among minority students was that they gave them their attention. This study found that African American graduation rates likely improved at these selected institutions because people indeed paid attention and genuinely cared. Highly trained tutors and dedicated mentors helped prepare students for the academic rigors and social challenges they would face. Faculty served as role models, often staying on campus late to assist students with homework. Administrators attended student programs, helped formed gospel choirs, and

personally invited underrepresented students to apply for top leadership roles. In a word, they cared.

Middletown's ARC stood out as a shining example of how carefully selected and trained students can make an enormously positive difference. Underrepresented students were hand selected to be tutors, then all students, particularly majority students, received cultural awareness training. The training helped ensure that they were enlightened to the impacts of the socio-cultural environment and prepared to be of optimal help to students of all races and backgrounds. Providing such training more broadly (e.g., faculty, academic advisors, administrators, and residence hall staff) would go a long way helping diverse students feel welcomed.

Implications for college leaders include providing diversity or cultural competency training to all faculty and staff personnel. Training should challenge participants' assumptions about diverse students, provide historic and contemporary cultural information, expose personal biases, and offer dialogue techniques that minimize micro-aggressive or outright racist comments. Trainings should be tailored to the needs of the employee. Faculty trainings might highlight class discussion ground rules such as not tolerating racist or sexist comments and respecting the perspectives of all students (Torres et al., 2003).

Study Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore best practices at liberal arts institutions that have evidenced among the largest improvements in African American graduation rates in recent years. Although the study was valuable in surfacing best practice ideas, like all research, it is not without its limitations. First, as a qualitative case study, the research only included two campuses. Studies exploring three or four campuses might offer more robust findings and

implications for policies and practices among other small, private, predominantly White liberal arts colleges. Furthermore, the data to inform institutional selection focused only on the four-year period 2004-2007. Institutional forces such as campus-wide strategic initiatives, enrollment management goals, and demographic shifts in the marketplace all have long-term influences on graduation rates that likely stretch beyond a four-year window. Implications for policy and practice can be considered for similar institutions only after carefully adapting these findings to fit the unique conditions of other campuses. Studies exploring high-performing public or private institutions larger than 10,000 students and/or at community colleges would also offer greater potential for an array of actionable interventions, including within resource limitation realities.

As a multiple case study, data were collected broadly from a wide variety of sources. Administrative and student testimony, college documents, and site visit observations made up the bulk of data sources. Although this multifaceted approach to data collection and triangulation was valuable, it did not consider all possible sources of impact and was also studied cross-sectionally, at a moment in time. Future research might include longer site visits, perhaps a week in residence, periodic visits over an academic year, or possibly most optimally, embedding into the campus for an entire year to follow the natural cycle of campus ebb and flow. Direct observation of African American student group programs such as Middletown's Shout Out discussion forum or tutor training sessions could likely have provided further insights into phenomena facilitating African American student success. Observing Rural University's AAAS meetings and African American engagement in classes could also have provided a deeper look into faculty–student and peer-to-peer relationships.

As a White man, my ethnicity may have, and likely did, have an impact on participant interaction. Soliciting information from participants relies on a level of trust between researcher and those being interviewed. Non-White participants may have been less trusting and thus less comfortable sharing sensitive information about their experiences. Any level of distrust would then limit data collection. Future research might utilize a multicultural team approach where one researcher is White and the other African American. This pairing might facilitate higher levels of participant trust and thus better data collection. Some participant responses lent themselves to further investigation but were not pursued given the focus of this study. For instance, the notion of dual identities or "passing" as another ethnic minority may shed light on emerging demographic changes influencing ethnic minority college student experiences.

Another limitation includes the theoretical lenses used to understand rather complex and integrated phenomena. Lenses such as Tinto's (1993) student integration model, Astin's (1999) student involvement theory, and Cross et al.'s (1995) Nigrescence theory focus on individual student experiences and development but do not address institutional development as a system. Future research might explore the institutional experience as it matures through its developmental phases. Given the dominant White culture prevalent at PWIs, future studies might adapt Helm's (1995) White racial identity development model to explore if and how institutions experience and move through these stages.

Finally, this study sought only to explore campuses with high-performing African American graduation rates. Other diverse groups were considered only in so far as they helped create a critical mass of diverse students or faculty. Nevertheless, other studies should explore the interplay among diverse groups and their collective influence on retention, persistence, and

graduation rates. Other studies might also explore campuses where graduations rates of African Americans took a noticeable fall over a relatively short period of time. That kind of research would provide a valuable comparison with this study and would likely be equally as valuable in affirming good practice.

Study Summary

A high school diploma is no longer the standard for education in America. Our strength as a country depends on *every* enterprising man and woman of all races to contribute their skills and talents to the knowledge driven economy. A college degree is the promise necessary for most to attain a high quality of life (Kuh et al., 2008), but for 13% of American citizens, that promise is eroding. African Americans continue to see their college graduation rates stagnate ("Black Student College Graduation Rates," 2006). By extension, their capacity to live the American dream is hindered. Given this reality, it is imperative that higher education as an industry design and build wider pipelines for African American college degree completion. As was found in this study, a lot can be learned from high performing small, private, liberal arts colleges.

African American graduation rates improved at Middletown College and Rural University because caring people made it a priority. Then these communities did what was most important: they acted. From top campus administrators to student peer mentors, these institutions cultivated a culture of care by intentionally supporting African Americans faculty, staff, and students. Indeed, all students benefited from their ethos of care. From the moment Posse students were admitted, for example, until professor recommendation letters opened doors to graduate schools, Rural was there.

One could argue that all institutions care for, support, and encourage their students on the way toward graduation. But at these institutions, fundamental changes permeated the campuses through multiple frames of leadership. Core values, missions, and campus-wide commitments were rewritten (and even literally written in stone in one case) to symbolize an institutional embrace of diversity. Top African American academic and administrative leaders were hired to help diversify the curriculum and administrative policies. Seats were designated for student input on college committees. The net result was that African Americans enjoyed enhanced political power on campus. RU and Middletown also diversified their physical spaces by centralizing multicultural staff and expanding living-learning facilities. Perhaps the most impactful change came from direct contact with caring human beings. Faculty routinely reached out to students and colleagues monitoring student progress. Highly trained and diverse tutoring staff helped remove the remedial stigma from Middletown's academic support center. Mentors engaged with students before they took their first college class. In short, barriers to completion for African Americans were systematically dismantled.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(Adapted from Kuh et al., 1991, Involving Colleges Audit Protocol)

Mission & Philosophy

1. What is/are your institutional mission/core values?
2. What benchmarks are used to measure African American (AA) student success against overall student success and the institutions mission?
3. In what ways are AA students valued and supported?

Campus Culture

4. How do the institutional culture and dominant student subcultures promote or diminish student learning?
5. What traditions help socialize AA students to the mission/core values of the institution? Which are antithetical to the values of the institution?
6. How is the value of AA student learning communicated and received?

Campus Environment

7. What unique campus resources make student learning consistent with your mission?
8. How do your major facilities encourage interaction among and between students, faculty and staff? How do these facilities address the unique cultural and social needs of AA students?
9. In what ways does the academic and co-curricular environments promote racial and ethnic understanding?

Policies and Practices

10. To what degree do policies and practices support AA student retention and degree completion?
11. What programs and services help AA students develop a healthy identity with their campus community?

Institutional Agents

12. How do messages between the President, CAO and CSAO resonate as they address an integrated student learning approach?
13. Describe the nature and frequency of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom? How does this compare to faculty-student interaction among and between AA students?
14. How do faculty support the holistic development of AA students?
15. What reasons are cited by AA students for attending this institution?
16. Why do AA students leave?
17. How does the AA student subculture support or impede the learning mission?
18. In what ways do other community members encourage AA student success?

Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

5-8 students or recent alumni (0-6 years out)

per focus group

Questions will be revised slightly (i.e. verb tense) as appropriate for the group participants: (i.e current students or alumni). Some or all of the questions may be offered to the groups.

Mission

1. What key conditions influenced your decision to attend (site)?

2. How would you describe your institution's mission and core values?
3. What is it about (site's) core values, mission or philosophy that keep you here?
4. Why do think AA students leave?
5. How does this institution know if AA students are benefiting from this mission and core values? In other words, how does the institution measure your success?
6. In what ways are AA students valued and supported?

Campus Culture

7. How would you describe the campus culture here? What traditions, norms, and unspoken "rules of the game" are unique to (site)?
8. How does this culture promote or diminish student learning?
9. What traditions help socialize AA students to the mission/core values of the institution? Which are antithetical to the values of the institution?
10. In what ways does (site) communicate that AA student learning is highly valued here?

Campus Environment

11. What unique campus resources make student learning consistent with the mission?
12. How do your major facilities encourage meaningful interaction among and between AA students, faculty and staff? How do these facilities address the unique cultural and social needs of AA students?
13. In what ways do the academic and co-curricular environments promote racial and ethnic understanding?

Policies and Practices

14. To what degree do policies and practices support AA student retention and degree completion?

15. What programs and services help AA students develop a healthy identity with their campus community?

Institutional Agents

16. What messages from the President, faculty and staff resonate with you as related to an integrated approach to student learning?
17. Describe the nature and frequency of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom? How does this compare to faculty-student interaction among and between AA students specifically?
18. How does the AA student subculture support or impede the learning mission?
19. How do faculty support the whole person development of AA students?
20. In what ways do other community members encourage AA student success?

APPENDIX B: STUDY INVITATION LETTER

June 21, 2010

Dear (Dr./Ms./Mr. potential participant):

I invite you to participate in a study I am conducting at (institution). My research seeks to explore conditions associated with the recent African American student graduation rate increases at small, private, liberal arts institutions. An investigation of national African American student graduation data trends suggests that your institution may have had particular success in this regard in recent years. Your experiences at (institution) and knowledge of policy, practice, and/or the student experience may offer unique insights that could inform the study.

I will visit your campus (date range) to conduct a series of individual and group interviews. If you are available, I welcome the opportunity to speak with you. Participation requires only about one (1) hour of your time during which I will ask some questions about campus programming, policies, culture and other topics surrounding the African American student experience at (institution). If you agree to participate, please complete the attached informed consent form and return to me via fax or email attachment. I will then call with additional information and schedule an interview time with you.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Robert W. Pool
PhD Candidate
Indiana State University
Department of Education Leadership, Administration and Foundations

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

RAISING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT GRADUATION RATES:

A BEST PRACTICES STUDY OF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Robert W. Pool, principle investigator under the supervision of Dr. Joshua Powers, faculty sponsor, from the Department of Educational Leadership, Administration and Foundations at Indiana State University. This project satisfies the dissertation requirement toward a doctorate of Philosophy (PhD). Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore campuses reporting significant increases in African American student graduation rates. Particular focus will be given to small, private, predominantly White, liberal arts colleges categorized as Carnegie Bachelor's-Arts and Sciences with a minority enrollment of less than 17%. A discussion and implications section will summarize best practices in improving graduation rates for African American students.

You have been asked to participate in this study because your institution reported increases in African American graduation rates over the 2004-2007 reporting period via the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Your professional or undergraduate

experiences may help inform the investigator as to what conditions contributed to these increases. You are one of approximately 20 participants who will be invited to interviews or focus groups. Your participation is entirely optional.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Sign this informed consent form.
- Participate in an individual or group interview lasting approximately 1 hour.
- Respond to questions regarding programs, initiatives, policies or other environmental phenomena associated with the student experience and African American graduation rates.
- Suggest other faculty, staff, students or others associated with the institution who might help the researcher explore conditions associated with African American graduation rates.
- Review the researcher's interview notes for accuracy as may be helpful to his understanding of the meaning of your comments/observations.

Participant responses will be audio recorded. Recordings will be transcribed for future analysis and stored for three years and then destroyed. Only the researcher and his faculty advisor will have access to original recordings and transcripts. Transcripts will reference participants by their fictitious name only.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Risks to participants are minimal. However, in the event sensitive information is shared during recorded interviews, the participant may request to a) alter the statement, b) strike the statement from the record or c) withdraw from the study completely. Should this happen, all records referencing the participant would be omitted from the study. Notwithstanding such a case, this study poses no greater risk to participants than that of normal daily life.

The researcher may terminate the study if, during the course of investigation, he determines that insufficient data exists or opportunities to collect data aren't available.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Because the researcher seeks to understand potential campus-wide conditions contributing to African American graduation increases, few, if any direct individual benefits are anticipate other than the value to you reflecting on this topic. However, potential benefits to your institution and similar institutions are anticipated. By exploring facilitators associated with African American graduation rate increases, readers may better understand successful programs, policies, and practices that encourage African American student success. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the body of literature examining the lagging graduation rates of African American students. I would also be happy to provide a copy of my study findings should you request it.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using fictitious institutional and participant names throughout the interviews and in the write-up of the study. Data and recordings will be stored for three years and available only to the researcher and his faculty advisor. After three years it will be destroyed.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Robert W. Pool, Principal Investigator

315-719-8369 (cell); r-pool@hotmail.com

32 Sharon Street

Geneva, NY 14456

Joshua Powers, PhD. Faculty Sponsor

812-237-2900 office; jopowers@indstate.edu

Department of Education Leadership Administration & Foundations

College of Education, Indiana State University

Terre Haute, IN 47809

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

__________________________________ _______________________

Name of Subject Date

APPENDIX D: RURAL UNIVERSITY NATURE PARK MAP