VOICES FROM FIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE GRADUATES

A Thesis

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in

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by

Carlena West-Nawrocki

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2013
VOICES FROM FIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE GRADUATES

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by

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Date

Graduate and Professional Studies in Education
Abstract

of

VOICES FROM FIVE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE GRADUATES

by

Carlena West-Nawrocki

Statement of Problem

Currently, a disproportionately small number of African American males are graduating from colleges and universities throughout the United States. The academic pipeline begins in Kindergarten and continues in higher education, where more Black males go to prison than to colleges or universities. This study investigates the factors that can promote academic success among African American males.

Sources of Data

This research study utilizes phenomenology, a type of qualitative research that collects data from personal, narrative interviews to understand a particular phenomenon. This investigator collected data from narrative interviews with five successful African American male graduates of California State University, Sacramento to develop a rich understanding of their choices, challenges, and triumphs.

Conclusions Reached

This data revealed changes required to support the success of African American males. To support African American males’ success in higher education, there needs to be cultural sensitivity toward African American males’ attitudes regarding spirituality,
each department should secure mentors for this population, and financial support should be established in the form of scholarships allowing disadvantaged students a true opportunity to obtain an education.

_________________________, Committee Chair
Crystal Olson, Ed.D.

_________________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my late parents, Eura Lee and Clyde E. West, who died just as I began writing this thesis. I want to thank you for the unconditional love and encouragement you have given me over the years. Especially how you let me know that my life had endless possibilities and all I had to do was reach for the stars. Thank you.

I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my son. You were the wind beneath my wings. I am blessed to have an awesome son; I thank God for you, one of my most precious gifts. I love you very much and I want you to know that I support all that you do with understanding, unconditional love, and encouragement. I want you to do great things with your life. You are a bright and shiny star. You need to use all the gifts I know you have and share them with the rest of the world.

To the African American, American Indian, Chicano, White, East Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander males in my present and past classes with whom I have shared teaching and learning: you have all been encouraging and awesome. You have participated in my classes as sons, teachers, and learners. For me, you are all budding seeds planted, sprouting, and growing into responsible, educated human beings with unlimited opportunities awaiting you. Know that I am in your corner and will always be there for you. I believe the dream for you so you must believe the dream for yourself. Remember what I have always told you: you can do anything.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank the loving presence, God, who directs and guides my life.

The support and continual encouragement of my brother, Dr. Christopher West, helped me understand I needed to complete this study because I am a mother of an African American male. Thank you, Dr. West, for your undying support and inspiration.

There is nothing more wonderful than having your sister at your side offering more than generous support each day. Each morning my sister cheers me on to begin again and tells me in unspoken words, “You can do this.” Just Do It.

Dr. Crystal Olson, my advisor, I do not know how to begin to thank you for so, so much. When I became anxious, you calmed me down. When I knew I could not, you ignored that and sent me back to the library to finish writing. I am so thankful you consented to be my graduate advisor. You have been my guide, the light at the end of the tunnel who has given inspiring understanding and encouraging words of wisdom. We met not knowing we shared the same religion, which made me realize that nothing short of the loving presence drew us together. ‘Bless you, and God let his light shine upon you.’ Thank you so very much.

The Science Educational Equity Program in biological science offered me the support of nearly all my interviewed graduate students. Thank you for your support, Dr. Barrena and Pam King. I would also like to thank the five men I interviewed, without
your participation this thesis would not have been written. Thank you for honest and forthright interviews. I am in each of your debts.

I would like to give thanks to all the library staff for their generous support and to those who knew me by first name, thank you all so very much.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

We black folk, our history and our present being are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish. If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the living past living in the present, for our memories go back through our black folk today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land.

The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us.

The common road of hope which we all traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claim. (Wright as cited in Inward/outward, 2001, para. 1)

Across all levels of education, the American educational system is failing African American males in disproportionate numbers (Harper & Harris, 2012). One of the biggest problems plaguing every level of education from Kindergarten to 12th grade and beyond to postsecondary education is the high number of African American males failing in the educational continuum. This problem is significant in two ways. In addition to the immediate economic disparity resulting from unequal access to higher education
(Toldson & Lemmons, 2011), there is an intergenerational economic effect; the earning power of African Americans is demographically reduced. A large body of research exists documenting the abysmal graduation rate for African American males and this research is discussed in the review of literature. Researchers have looked at a range of potential causes for the disparity in graduation rates as well as potential interventions on college campuses that might help, including several long-standing interventions directly aimed at African American male college students (Palmer, 2010); this research is also reviewed.

The inequality, in turn, leads directly to a range of moral and ethical issues. As Chima and Wharton (1999) stated, “a reality of economic, political, and social constraints persist in perpetuating a system of injustice and societal stratification characterized by imbalances of power and resources” (pp.18-19). For the United States to compete globally, it is imperative every American possess the skill set necessary for the new millennium. African American males’ social and economic benefits increase with a postsecondary degree and, conversely, decrease without educational acquisition. As indicated by President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative (Public Domain, 2009), not only is college graduation necessary for American economics, but it is also associated with better physical health (Adam, 2002). Despite the persistence of this prevailing issue, a marginal number of African American males have graduated from college. This investigation is concerned with phenomenological research, so it includes personal interviews of lived experiences of successful African American male graduate students who have beaten the odds.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to study the perceptions and experiences of successful African American males, i.e., of African American males who have finished their undergraduate program with a baccalaureate degree. The motivation for this researcher’s study was to determine what extrinsic and/or intrinsic factors in the participants’ lives contributed to their persistence and success in a college system arguably stacked against them. To complement quantitative data documenting the disparities in graduation rates among California public universities, phenomenological interviews were employed to collect first-hand accounts of the experiences of successful African American males (Wertz, 2005). This process allowed for constructive, emancipatory discovery. The intended focus was the effect on self-concept, a perspective gained by employing the methodology of phenomenology. This investigation’s data showed the stakeholders what type of accountability would likely improve students’ schooling experience, increase the academic opportunities, and enhance life outcomes for African American males in higher education and our society.

Statement of the Problem

In their comprehensive study of the graduation rates of undergraduates of American colleges, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) reported an analysis of evidence revealing clear and persistent disparities for some students depending on their race and ethnicity. Although the graduation rate for all minority students is dramatically
lower than the rate of white students, “particularly striking are the low graduation rates for African American males” (Bowen et al., 2009, p. 49). One clear fact appeared amidst all the statistical analysis: across the board, whether one considers six-year or four-year graduation, American higher education is not serving African American males equitably.

**Research Question**

Historically, one of the common problems challenging education is how to increase the number of African American males successfully graduating from college. It is imperative that this achievement gap is addressed to better serve the needs of African American students in colleges and universities throughout the United States, now and in the future. Proactive measures to increase the graduation rate in colleges and universities are crucial for assuring students develop the necessary skills for greater opportunity in the work force. In addressing this issue, it is important to discover the inside story and also to find solutions to this pervasive problem. This research was the first step to discovering where to commence on this path to equitability.

**Limitations of the Study**

The objective of this research study was to present the characteristic themes significant to African American males who have successfully finished an undergraduate degree and for those who have moved beyond that to obtain graduate degrees. This research study was accomplished through utilizing personal, narrative interviews from participants in the study. The findings in this study were limited by the small sample size of five participants and representation of only one university campus in the United States,
California State University, Sacramento. The population sample sought was five African American males who had successfully graduated with an undergraduate degree. The findings clearly demonstrated these five Black males, against all odds, did graduate from college.

**Definition of Terms Used**

**Affirmative Action**

The preferential treatment – based on race, gender, ethnicity, and national origin—in state hiring, contracting, or education (Fineman & Murr, 1995)

**African American**

Residents of the United States who came from, or whose ancestors came from, Africa. This term is sometimes used interchangeably with “Black.”

**Black Narratives**

Stories giving a true understanding of what occurs in the actual lives of Black people, i.e., expressing the hopes, dreams, and lives of the people. Literature was passed from one generation to another through parables, stories, poetry, fiction, and history. These are the perspectives of every life the writers have written about.

**Critical Race Theory**

CRT denotes that racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” (Delgado, 2001, p. xiv), and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture.
**Culture**

A person’s learned beliefs, values, traditions, customs, lifestyle, and identity

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)**

Institutions of higher education established in the mid-1860s with the primary mission to provide undergraduate and graduate educational opportunities to African Americans

**Jim Crow Laws**

State and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. They mandated de jure racial segregation (Jim Crow laws, 2012).

**Learned Helplessness**

Three interlocked ideas; first, an environment in which some important outcome is beyond control; second, the response of giving up; and third, an accompanying cognition: the expectation that no voluntary action can control the outcome (Seligman, 1992, p. xvii).

**Mentee**

The student receiving mentoring

**Narrative Research**

A strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Creswell, 2009, p. 13)
**Persistence**

Associated with such variables as financial aid, the quality of the learning environment, academic problems, the magnitude of racism in the classroom and on the campus, the way in which institutions handle racial incidents, home factors, psychological factors, relationships with teachers, and interactions with other students (Blackwell, 1990, p. 41)

**Phenomenology Research**

A strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 13)

**Peer-mentor**

An arranged relationship between two or more students who pass on experience, knowledge, and support while being positive role models and maintaining a healthy relationship

**Qualitative Research**

A means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants’ setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher interpreting the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure (Creswell, 2009, p. 12).
Racism

According to Kitano and Daniels (1995), racism is the belief that some races are demonstrably superior to others and that there is no such thing as racial equality. Racists fear interracial marriage or “mongrelization” because of the mixing of “inferior” blood, which is thought to lead to the decline of civilization. There is a presumed physical, mental, and cultural superiority of one race over another. These tenets are central to any racist perspective. “White racism would be the perspective that the White or European culture is superior to all others; people of color would also be considered racist if they held similar beliefs about the superiority of their own groups” (Kitano & Daniels, 1995, p. 8).

Resilience

“Conceptualized not as a fixed attribute of the individual but as the vulnerabilities or protective mechanisms modifying the individual’s response to the risk situation and operating at critical turning points during one’s life” (Winfield, 1991, p. 7)

Retention Program

A program within the institution to assist with retaining a particular cohort or group of students through graduation

Sociocultural

According to Merriam-Webster (2013a), “relating to, or involving a combination of social and cultural factors” (para. 1)
**Sociohistorical**

According to Merriam-Webster (2013b), “of, relating to, or involving social history or a combination of social and historical factors” (para. 1).

**Sociopolitical**

According to Merriam-Webster (2013c), “of, relating to, or involving a combination of social and political factors” (para. 1).

**Sociopsychological**

According to Merriam-Webster (2013d), “of, relating to, or involving combination of social and psychological factors” (para. 1).

**Spirituality**

Defined as the desire to understand a deeper authentic self, role, and purpose in life, conceptualized through relationships with others who have a common connection to a higher power or being

**Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 is the Introduction, which considers the Purpose of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Research Question, Limitations, Definition of Terms, and Organization of the Study. Chapter 2 is a Review of the Relevant Literature, divided into three sections. Section one of Chapter 2 explores the phenomenon of the African American male with an undergraduate degree; this section points out the history of African Americans from slavery to the present. Section one elucidates the impact of the educational pipeline (which can shift African American males toward either higher
education or prison) by considering how the sociocultural and psychological nuances of the educational system (from Kindergarten to higher education or prison) have led to the academic success and/or failure of Black males. Clarity regarding success or failure can be reached through the lenses of “learned helplessness,” self-efficacy, resilience, and Rational Emotional Behavior Therapy in their relationship to African American males. Next, this section clarifies African American educators’ perspectives on educating Black children. Another segment in Section one reveals theories of how to overcome the psychological damage incurred during formative education. The final part of Section One addresses peer involvement in shaping African American male beliefs about academics.

Section Two of Chapter 2 begins by discussing the efforts of campus leaders and policymakers to improve the status of African American male students at colleges and universities. Moreover, this section elucidates the history of federal legislation that has made it possible for minorities and disadvantaged groups to attend colleges or universities and includes examples of noteworthy retention initiatives in place around the United States. Additionally, this section argues the theories of retention and Critical Race theories. Finally, this section mentions a small sample of retention programs existing in the United States.

Section Three of Chapter 2 defines the phenomenology used in this study and its significance to personal narratives. This section of the thesis gives examples of research studies utilizing personal narratives. The phenomenological research method is most
appropriate to capture the lived experiences of successful graduates from their own perspectives and to develop themes from their responses. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the procedure for creating the questionnaire, interviewing participants, and collecting the data. Chapter 4 analyzes the predominant themes that emerged. Chapter 5 presents a summary, implications, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion of the study.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Section One: The Phenomenon of the African American Male with an Undergraduate Degree

We must accept equality or die. What we must also do is to lay down a line of thought and action which will accomplish two things: the utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it were to medieval and ancient civilization. To do this is not easy. It calls for intelligence, cooperation, and careful planning. It would meet head on the baffling difficulties that face us today. (Du Bois, 1897)

Two-thirds of African American males who begin a college or university education do not graduate within six years; this is considered the lowest college completion rate of all racial and gender groups in U.S. higher education (Harper & Harris, 2012). One of the biggest problems plaguing every level of education, from Kindergarten to 12th grade and beyond to postsecondary education (the educational pipeline) is the disproportionate number of African American males failing in our educational system. Educators, administrators, and policymakers at all levels have employed numerous strategies to ensure Black male success along the educational pipeline. Unfortunately, this problem may well be the result of the indelible scars of
slavery and the way Black people are regarded in this society – the racism and stereotypes fostering discrimination.

Sociohistorical, sociopolitical, sociopsychological, and sociocultural factors of the American educational system are all important aspects impacting the educational achievement of African American males. The main goal of this paper, a qualitative study known as phenomenological research that uses narratives from participants, was to examine the common themes allowing some African American males to become academically and professionally successful. Most educators agree education is arguably more important now than any other time in American history. Education is the primary gateway to economic opportunity in America. To achieve economic parity, African American males must obtain academic skills for the new millennium, thereby increasing their chances of obtaining a professional status. Nearly limitless benefits and gains come with a college degree. A college education allows both social and economic access typically not afforded to individuals who are non-college graduates. The college degree offers social and economic access not available without successful completion of a degree (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). African American males who obtain a college degree earn higher incomes than African American males who only finish high school and some college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). Figure 1 depicts the mean earnings of African American men by highest degree earned.
Figure 1. Mean earnings of African American men by highest degree earned.

Over the last 10 years, there has been marginal growth in undergraduate matriculation at American colleges and universities. Some Black males appear to lack the skills to cope with failure, skills critical to the development of creativity. There are persistent odds against academic success including questionable engagement, reluctant achievement patterns, and high attrition rates. There are, nevertheless, Black males overcoming the perceived incompetence, maladaptive self-beliefs, low expectations, apathy, or disappointment to endure and master success in higher education. Such success occurs on all levels of education, from the undergraduate level in science,
engineering, and mathematics to the next level of attainment in education, the professional degrees such as Master’s, Ph.D.s, J.D.s, and M.D.s (Emdin, 2011; Harper, 2008; Hrabowski, 1991; Jett, 2011).

High achieving African American males maintain a belief in self-control, have high expectations, and enjoy positive self-regard (Graham, 1994). Understanding the improvements in literacy and academic achievement of African American males requires acknowledging and examining the phenomenon of African American male achievement. There are many factors to be considered, such as the following: historical significance, social-psychological aspects of education, African American male education (culturally relevant pedagogy), and Critical Race Theory as well as theories addressing retention of African Americans in college (Anderson & Khareem, 2009). The central characteristics exhibited by successful African American males include a meaningful interest and aptitude in science, engineering, and technology; strong familial support and influence; faculty mentors; and opportunities in programs fostering their abilities (Jackson & Moore, 2006).

**Historical Significance**

Historically, African Americans have always been concerned about educating their people. Notable Black historical figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Malcolm X reflected on the importance of education in their writings and teachings (Anderson & Khareem, 2009; Fairclough, 2001; Haley & X, 1999; Harper, 2008; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Woodson,
2000). Booker T. Washington (1901), in his well-known text *Up from Slavery*, explained:

> how the neighbors in [a] community where every member of the community would try to go to school, whether it be day or night school, or 50- or 75-year-olds, all sought to attend school with [the] goal of being able to read the Bible before they died.  (p. 24)

According to Fairclough (2010), throughout history, teachers such as Lucy Laney, Richard R. Wright, John Hope, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, John Mercer Langston, Mary McLeod Bethune, and a small army of now-forgotten pioneers shared a missionary fervor about the value of education that profoundly influenced millions of Black Americans. On the other hand, in the south it was illegal for Black Americans to read and write because it was thought the more educated the Negro was, the more likely he would be to leave the plantation. The threat of harsh punishment and lynching were given to any caught teaching or learning to read. However, to ensure African American’s equal rights after the Civil War, Federal troops were present in the south from 1860 until 1877 (George, 2000). However, the highest courts in the land passed laws that crippled the success of African Americans in American society.

For many generations, African Americans experienced educational inequity, discrimination, and racism. White missionary sympathizers assisted in establishing African American colleges and universities when racist legislation and discrimination precluded Black attendance in public colleges and universities (Irvine, 2001). The Black
college movement began in the mid-1860s as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896. The decision led to legislation legally endorsing the practice of segregation in public places, schools, colleges, and universities. The legislation alleged that a Black man was not entitled to the rights accorded in the Emancipation Proclamation since Blacks were not equal to Whites.

In an excerpt from *My Story* (1992), Rosa Parks discussed Jim Crowism and how as a little girl she did not quite understand why there was a difference between the two water fountains:

> The public water fountain in Montgomery had signs that said ‘Whites and Colored.’ Like millions of black children, before me and after me, I wondered if ‘White’ water tasted different from ‘Colored’ water…It took me a while to understand that there was no difference in the water. (p. 46)

African American people in the Jim Crow South knew Whites viewed them as intellectually inferior and less than human (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). Along with the Plessy legislation, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed each state to determine how to handle the concept of “separate but not equal,” which later became known as “Jim Crow laws” (George, 2000). Jim Crow’s “Whites Only” was outlawed in 1944, according to Marable (1983). The change in the law led to Blacks wanting more of a say in politics; therefore, between 1944 and 1952 the number of Black voters increased from 250,000 to approximately 1.25 million. In 1946, the decision in *Morgan v. Virginia* Supreme Court determined it unconstitutional for any state law to require Jim Crow sections on interstate
bus transportation. The decision ushered in the formation of a civil rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equity (CORE). CORE challenged local segregation laws on interstate public transportation (Shah, 2012).

Before the Civil Rights Movement of 1954-1968, there was an increase in the number of Blacks educated as doctors and lawyer. Blacks now had the education but were still not given an opportunity for employment in anything more than menial positions. The Civil Rights Movement promised to end Jim Crowism and fight for equal treatment under the U.S. Constitution for Black people (George, 2000). In 1954, a little less than 100 years later, the U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision Brown v. the Topeka Kansas Board of Education enacted a state-mandated end to racial discrimination and segregation, which accelerated integration in public facilities and accommodations (Bell, 2009). Brown overturned the decision of Plessy v. Ferguson, “separate but not equal,” which violated the principle of equal protection under the law guaranteed by the Fourteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Judge Robert Carter explained that Brown changed African Americans from people begging for decent treatment to citizens commanding equal treatment as their constitutional rights (Bell, 1980). Prior to the Brown decision, Black parents complained that public schools were inferior, with tattered, overused books and insufficient copies for each student (Bell, 2009; George, 2000). Over 100 years later, Black parents are still dissatisfied about the same issues concerning the inferiority of public schools in the inner city where a majority of Black students live and attend school (Woodward & Elliot, 1990). The Brown legislation led
the way for African Americans to integrate into predominantly White schools and universities. According to hooks (2001), prejudiced and stereotypical beliefs of White teachers negatively impacted the learning and development of Black students, particularly Black males. McCall (1994) recounted his experiences:

It wasn’t much better dealing with white teachers. They avoided eye contact with me as much as possible…it was too much for an eleven year old to challenge and I didn’t try. Instead, I tried to become invisible. I kept to myself, remained quiet during class discussions, and never asked questions in or after class…I staggered numb and withdrawn through each school day. (p. 19)

Incident

(For Eric Walrond)

Once riding in old Baltimore,

Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,

I saw a Baltimorean

Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,

And he was no whit bigger,

And so I smiled, but he poked out

His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore

From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember. (Cullen, 2001, p. 158)

The Civil Rights Movement led to Affirmative Action for African Americans and people of color in jobs, housing, and education. The definition of Affirmative Action is the preferential treatment – based on race, gender, ethnicity, and national origin – in state hiring, contracting, or education (Fineman & Murr, 1995). Affirmative action was not a panacea; it required that Whites step aside for African Americans, who Whites considered less qualified, inferior, and unworthy (Bell, 2009). The purpose of Affirmative Action, according to Critical Race Theory, was to allow African Americans equal footing with their White counterparts to redress past inequities. It was an attempt to ensure against systematic occlusion of opportunity in employment, college admission, and housing for Blacks and other marginalized groups of American people. A number of lawsuits ensued and Affirmative Action was overturned. Affirmative Action precipitated a 75% decline in the population and advancement of Black students in colleges and universities the following year (Chace, 2011).

The Educational System with Psychological Overtones

The sociopsychological literature is saturated with the African American male experiences in education. A growing number of scholars report the incongruence existing in the disproportionate numbers of Caucasian teachers teaching students of color (Boykin, Tyler, Watkin-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2006; Tyler, Boykin, Boelter, & Dillihunt, 2005; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). Each of the following theories can be used to
understand the characteristics important for academic success or failure by examining sociopsychological theories known as “learned helplessness,” self-efficacy, resilience, and Rational Emotional Behavior Therapy (REBT). These theories characterize important insights about African American males traveling through the educational pipeline where African American males developed irrational beliefs about their ability to learn. Psychological research has shown that, as early as Kindergarten, Black boys are not developing the academic skills to be successful in reading but instead are developing “learned helplessness.” Seligman explained (1975):

> learned helplessness” refers to three interlocked ideas that reinforce “learned helplessness:” First, an environment in which some important outcome is beyond control; second, the response of giving up; and third, the accompanying cognition: the expectation that no voluntary action can control the outcome. (p. xvii)

An example of “learned helplessness” demonstrating the overused, negative teacher expectations and attitudes plaguing African American males is such terminology as “endangered mentally, retarded or dysfunctional” (Cross & Slater, 2000; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Major & Billson, 1992). For Example:

Victor is a nine-year-old of unusual intelligence—at least his mother and his friends think so. His teacher in the third grade of all-black Philadelphia public school wholeheartedly disagrees. At home Victor is lively, quick to respond, highly verbal, and outgoing. With his playmates out on the streets, he is the acknowledged leader; even though he is a bit smaller than his peers, his charm
and imagination more than make-up for his size. But inside a classroom, he is a problem.

Victor was a slow starter when reading instruction began in kindergarten and first grade. He was eager, but just wasn’t ready to make the connection between words on paper and speech. He tried hard at first, but made no progress; his answers, readily volunteered, were consistently wrong. The more he failed, the more reluctant to try he became; he said less and less in class. By second grade, although he participated eagerly in music and art, when reading came around he became sullen. His teacher gave him special drilling for a while, but they both soon gave up. By the time he might have been ready to read, simply seeing a word card or a spelling book would set off a tantrum of sullenness or of defiant aggression. This attitude began to spread to the rest of his school day. He vacillated between being despondent and being a hellion.

An astonishing thing happened last summer. Two psychologists from a nearby university came to the school to teach reading to some “un-teachable” children; Victor, of course, was included. As usual, he made no progress. Just seeing a sentence written on the blackboard would send him into one of his moods. These researchers tried something different: they wrote a Chinese character on the blackboard and said it stood for “knife.” Victor learned it immediately. Then another one stood for “sharp.” He learned this one, too. Within a few hours, Victor was reading English sentences and paragraphs
disguised as Chinese characters. The summer is now over and the researchers have gone back to the university. Victor has a 150-character vocabulary but can’t read or write any English. He is presenting more of a disciplinary problem, and his new teacher thinks he is mentally retarded. (Rozin, Poritsky, & Sotsky, 1971, pp. 1265-1266).

According to Seligman (1975), schoolchildren can reverse “learned helplessness” by developing ways to cope with failure. Experiencing failure without learning strategies to cope with failure can lead to “learned helplessness” in grade school and in postsecondary levels of education. The ability to cope with pain, trouble, failure, boredom, or frustration is critical to creativity; overcoming such obstacles strengthens a student’s ability to endure and master their own actions. Seligman added, “learned helplessness” can lower IQ and school performance. If a student believes he will not do well on a test, he will not try; believing he is unable to make the cognitive responses. It is this belief, which develops “helplessness.”

Victor’s learned helplessness easily demonstrates and explains, in part, the “Fourth Grade Slump.” The “Fourth Grade Slump” is a phenomenon occurring at the end of third grade. Reading at the fourth-grade level is foundational for basic literacy as well as a strong indicator of later academic success. By fourth grade, most students’ reading scores stay on pace with school demands. This research suggests that most academic difficulty, such as difficulty in reading, begins as early as preschool, which is a critical time for students developing into readers. Such was true with Victor, but this
phenomenon is much more alarming in the fourth and fifth grades as well as at the high
school level, where establishing strong reading abilities is critical to success (Chall &
Jacob, 2003; Sanacor & Palumbo, 2009).

**Black Educators’ Perspective**

Culturally relevant pedagogy contends that Black male students need culturally
responsive instruction, i.e., not using explicit, direct instruction (Delpit, 1988). A few of
the overarching, critical pedagogies essential for reading programs/classrooms for
African American males are the following:

1. facilitate academically challenged students to become the leaders in the class
   and remove the negative notions about Black boys which provide them with
   negative emotional support;
2. teach African American males in a learning
   community from where they can participate, from what they know rather than
   teaching in an isolated disconnected way;
3. teach using a student’s real-life
   experiences to make literature come alive;
4. students participate by asking their
   own questions. Without using this critical pedagogy, African American males
   remain detached. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 117-118)

In Victor’s case, the use of Chinese characters proved to be a successful
intervention demonstrating he was capable of learning, but upon returning to his teacher,
the pattern of “helplessness” and inability to read returned (Seligman, 1975).
Additionally, if reading skills suffer, then so do writing skills; these skills develop one
after the other, i.e., reading skills then writing skills. Research has demonstrated reading
ability informs writing ability. Developing writers need the practice of reading to become good writers (Boscolo, Ariasi, Faver, & Ballarin, 2011). African American males’ academic problems with reading begin very early. When reading requirements change from learning to read to reading to learn, it creates a domino effect along the educational continuum; a compounding of one problem after another until high school leads to dropout rates and, finally, to catastrophic reduction in the number of African American males going to college.

In the K-12 continuum, a teacher’s beliefs and expectations are important and influential; characterizing African American males with especially negative connotations such as lazy, disconnected, violent, unprepared, retarded, and needing special education can negatively impact a student’s success, as was apparent in Victor’s case. Self-fulfilling prophecy demonstrates that what we believe about people affects the way we treat them, and because our treatment is premised on our belief about them, they respond in ways confirming our original prejudicial beliefs (Merton, 1948).

Another example illustrating all too well what happens to African American male students who do well in school is explained in the following:

I think [white teachers] look at Black males as like just waiting for them to mess up. I went to Warner Elementary School, the Spanish immersion program. I was in the Spanish Immersion program for about two months; then I didn’t want to do it anymore because I didn’t see how Spanish would benefit me so I was forced to take special classes because the Spanish Immersion program is actually smarter
than the traditional program, so I had to take special classes and special math
classes...they told my mom that they didn’t think I could do it and that it was a
mistake that I actually ended up in the Spanish program, and so after I took the
special classes, I made straight A’s in Elementary school. I made “A” honor roll
my whole life until middle school, and I had never gotten in trouble or anything.
They just told me they didn’t think I could do it because I was Black. (Graham &
Erwin, 2011, pp. 407)

According to Martha Collins (1982), a teacher can be sensitive to a student’s needs by
teaching at the student’s level using explicit, direct instruction to teach the child the
subject matter and skills necessary for his academic success and by teaching strategies
aiding the student to learn (Collins, 1982; Delpit, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers
do not reach students in the primary grades, these students are at risk of not learning the
educational objectives necessary for the following grades or, even worse, being relegated
to remedial classes or retention facilities (Hale, 2001). As seen in Victor’s case, most
students enter kindergarten eager to learn but after a couple of years, a downward shift
occurs, and the excitement about school disappears, according to Hale (2001). Kunjufu
(2003) suggested this demonstrates the lack of excitement has more to do with the school
than with the child.

Educating Other People’s Children,” the author stated teachers should explicitly
“decode” dominant culture for disadvantaged students by teaching them to comprehend
this foreign culture; for example, teaching math with cultural significance to low-income children, such as the probability that police will stop a Black male running down the street compared to a White male running down the street. On the other hand, in the previous narrative about Victor, it was clear there was divergent behavior between home and school; the perceptions of family and friends were very different from the teacher’s interpretation (Seligman, 1975). Victor struggled to learn in Kindergarten and first grade and experienced one failure after another in reading and writing, respectively. The response was to give up and act out to demonstrate his dissatisfaction. More culturally relevant pedagogy occurred when the researcher taught him the symbol for “knife” and “sharp” in Chinese, which proved to be much more culturally relevant to him. Table 1 shows the percentile ranking of Black males at third grade and the percentile ranking at seventh grade.
Table 1

*Reading Progress from Third through Seventh Grade*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentiles</th>
<th>Beginning 3rd Grade</th>
<th>Ending 7th Grade Percentile</th>
<th>Reading Progress (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginning 3rd Grade Percentiles</th>
<th>Ending 7th Grade Percentile</th>
<th>Reading Progress (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that scores decreased with each successive grade. Historically, African American males have had low retention and graduation rates in high school and college. Table 1 demonstrates why academic success is delayed along the educational continuum (Kunjuku, 2003, p. 28).

Other Psychological Theories

In Albert Ellis’ (2001) book, *Overcoming Destructive Beliefs, Feeling, and Behaviors*, the author explained the ABC Theory of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy:

The purpose of the ABC theory is used when people want to function productively and happily. A stands for Adversities which interfere with achieving a desired goal; B stands for Beliefs about their Adversities; and finally, C stands for behavioral Consequences which can be healthy or unhealthy which may lead to self-helping or self-defeating, respectively. (p. 19)
Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is a comprehensive educational intervention used for students from the ages of 8-21 to change the intensity of negative goal attainment for irrational beliefs (Banks & Zionts, 2008). As with Victor’s narrative, children can exhibit behavior that allows for certain ways of thinking that lead to or interfere with goal attainment. Meichenbaum and Cameron (1974) suggested that since teachers are with students part or most of the day, they can influence children by using REBT. Ellis explained that REBT has a positive effect when teachers utilize this therapy in a classroom. It is a behavioral intervention reducing self-defeating emotions and behaviors.

According to Bandura’s (1977, 1997) theory of self-efficacy, participants involved in his research learned to overcome negative beliefs and gained the ability to marshal motivation, establish cognitive reserves, and command authority in their environment. Put simply, there is power in the belief that you can produce the desired effects in the face of obstacles and challenges.

A consequence of low self-esteem is dropping out of school, heading to prison or, even worse, death as a result of Black violence, gangs, or drugs. There are large numbers of African American males who matriculate into prison instead of college. Of the 2.2 million people in the U.S. prisons, the incarcerated population of African American males makes up 900,000 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007; Green, 2008; Ford, 2009; Justice Policy Institute, 2007; Mauer & King, 2007). Table 2 suggests that if current incarceration rates are maintained, then 6.6% of U.S. citizens born in 2001 will go to
prison, according to Thomas Bonczar (2003), Statistician for the Bureau of Justice Statistic.

Table 2

*Percentage of People Ever Going to Prison During Their Lifetime According to Year Born*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 clearly shows that Black males, compared to the other two groups, have a larger disadvantage. The Black male percentage is three times higher than White males and twice as high as the Hispanic population of males going to prison. According to Bobb (2006), the average scores for African American men on Scholastic exams in secondary school are normally low. He reported that the average SAT score for African American males is 721, while for Asian and White students of in 2003-2004 the scores were 1,155 and 1,123, respectively. The statistics suggest that at the high school level, African American males are not gaining the academic skills to succeed and they have a large disconnect from standard expectations and practices for the SAT.
**Peer Involvement**

Many factors influence Black male achievement including legislation, teachers’ low expectations, sociopsychological factors, and the risk of prison. Another important risk factor contributing to the declining number of African American males in higher education is their peers. Students at an impressionable age can be influenced by peers who feel that learning is for White people. According to Kunjufu, Black male high school students are greatly influenced by their peers; these students have to contend with their peers’ belief that academic success equates to acting White and not honoring cultural values (Kunjufu, 1988; Ogbu, & Simons, 1998; Palmer et al., 2009). The chance of losing the respect of their peers reduces the chances of developing a student-teacher relationship. African American males also identify academic achievement as un-aligned with masculinity (Davis, Jenkins, & Hunt, 2003). In the book, *The Pact*, a narrative account of how three African American males make a pact to become doctors, one of the characters writes:

> The lives of most impressionable young people are defined by their friends, whether they are black, white, Hispanic, or Asian; whether they are rich, poor, or middle-class; whether they live in the city, the suburbs, or the country. Among boys, particularly, there seems to be some macho code that says to gain respect, you have to prove that you’re bad. We know firsthand that the wrong friends can lead you to trouble. But even more, they can tear down hopes, dreams, and
possibilities. We know, too, that the right friends inspire you, pull you through,
rise with you. (pp. 2-3)

To cope with their feelings regarding teachers’ low expectations, African
American males have countered with the “cool pose.” This “cool pose” behavior renders
the Black male behavior as distant, detached, and unavailable emotionally, nonchalant
behavior that could affect the types of close relationships they develop later in life (Major
story of four young African American students attending a junior high school for the
gifted. In the school newspaper, one of the young African American students wrote:

We are all glad that we are taking a journey on the high seas of life with Adrian
and his crew. But why do we have to mess up every day by struggling to get an A
or a B when C will do?...The Cruiser thinks that life should be laid-back and
enjoyed. (p. 9)

A majority of African American males live in neighborhoods influenced by
poverty, black-on-black violence, gangs, and drugs in which survival to adulthood is
slight. As a result, it is important for Black males to downplay their intellectual ability
(Major & Billison, 1992; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Palmer et al., 2009).

Section Two

Nationally, for institutions to meet the needs of a diverse population of students,
retention programs need to address the numerous overwhelming issues, i.e.,
nontraditional students, older students, single parents, working students, and minority
students. Retention is a very personal issue for students, requiring a flexible, comprehensive, and supportive approach reinforcing students’ need for success (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001). President Obama announced *The American Graduation Initiative*, which prepares Americans to compete globally in the 21st century:

> The American Graduation Initiative is a program outlined by President Obama to help increase the number of Americans enrolling and graduating from college. It is currently only a proposed program and it is unclear if the goals will be met through existing proposed legislation, or through a separate American Graduation Initiative bill. Preparation for the 21st century is the framework that supports students’ successful achievement toward graduation. (Public Domain, 2009)

The purpose of retention programs is to support a student’s successful achievement in his or her role as a student from matriculation to the completion of the degree. As Black students enter college, a number of factors and conditions concern their retention and graduation. Researchers have developed theories and models offering explanations for the likelihood of students either dropping out of college or graduating from college. The purpose of this portion of the literature review is to examine foundational retention theories followed by some examples of retention programs that may offer an explanation for why some minority students graduate successfully. This section of the literature review does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of retention programs; rather, its aim is to highlight a few important characteristics.
History of Federal Legislative Programs

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s ushered in the deaths of two great leaders: John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. College students were instrumental in the changes within educational systems; students played an active role in making changes that addressed the economic and social barriers that led to poverty and discrimination. Barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and other socioeconomic factors were linked to higher education opportunities for minorities and disadvantaged students.

In 1967, at the California State University of Los Angeles campus, Black and Mexican American students formed an alliance known as the United Mexican American Student Association (UMAS) and the Black student Association (BSA).

The two organizations found out about the 2% rule, which allowed first-time freshmen to be designated as Special Admits. Therefore, 2% of the freshmen could be admitted without meeting all the requirements, even with low test scores or non-satisfactory academic performance. The educational committee of BSA and UMAS founded the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) utilizing the 2% rule. The Associated Student Incorporated (ASI) at CSULA gave BSA and UMAS $40,000 to run the Minority Student Program. The state allocated funds for administrative support and supplies. EOP established financial stability when the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 1072 (the Harmer Bill). Thirty years since its inception, the EOP is still providing services to economically and socially disadvantaged minority students (The California State University, 2013).
Additionally, in response to the War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed legislation in 1964. The first program began with the Upward Bound program, which developed out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964; then, in 1965, Talent Search evolved from the Higher Education Act; and finally, in 1968, Student Support Services emerged, formally known as the Special Services for Disadvantaged Students. Together, the three programs were coined TRIO in the late 1960s. The federal TRIO programs have evolved over the years with the addition of a fourth program in 1972, the Educational Opportunity Centers. In 1976, the Higher Education Amendment authorized a training program for Federal TRIO for leadership and administrators. A sixth program, Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, was added to TRIO in 1986. Therefore, TRIO is a collection of federally funded programs making educational opportunities available to all Americans. TRIO programs are designed to support low-income and first-generation Americans to enter college, graduate, and fully participate economically and socially in American life. TRIO is funded with Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Financial aid, on the other hand, supports students who have financial barriers to higher education. Funding for retention programs is provided by both federal and state sources (TRIO, 2013).

**Student Retention Theory**

Retention Theory literature is concerned with the connection, engagement, and commitment of students to succeed in college or university settings. Students’ abilities to persist to graduation is dependent upon the degree of integration in a college setting.
Beal and Pascarella (1982) explained, “The ultimate purpose of retention studies and programs is to implement intervention strategies that can or will make a positive difference in retention rates” (p. 74). In 1975, Vincent Tinto suggested the Dynamic Model of Institutional Departure. Tinto’s model of student retention is dependent upon the three following characteristics: a) precollege, b) aims and commitments, and c) experiences gained at an institution. The precollege characteristics include students’ experiences prior to coming to college, i.e., family background (education of parents, social status), personal attributes (gender, race), skills (academic, personal), financial resources, and disposition (motivation, social preferences).

The goals and commitment include both the colleges’ and students’ goals and commitment. Institutional experience involves academic performance, faculty, staff, and peer interaction. A student’s overall feeling about a college (Lau, 2003) influences whether the student stays in school. If a student has positive experiences and feels she is part of campus life (e.g., making friends; joining organizations; and developing good relationships with counselors, staff, and faculty), the student staying in school will be promoted. Retention Theory literature (Tinto, 1988) stated that a positive college experience is necessary for students’ persistence to graduation. For example, California State University, Sacramento has a program known by the acronym SEE (Science Educational Equity) and is an organization that offers students faculty mentorship, student-to-student mentoring, and advising with staff to ensure student success in science
coursework, which may specifically lead to biological degrees such as medicine or research.

Tinto’s theory included two constructs: commitment and integration. Tinto explained how students’ “intention” and “commitment” are key characteristics influenced by associated attributes of family background, personal attributes, and experiences. Commitment involves intention and institutional goals for students. Institutional commitment leads to persistence when the individual’s goal is to complete college (Tinto, 1993).

The following excerpt is from “The Pact,” a narrative told by three Black males who persisted to become doctors:

We knew we’d never survive if we went at it alone. And so we made a pact:

We’d help each other through, no matter what. We studied together. We worked summer jobs together. We partied together. And we learned to solve our problems together. We are doctors today because of the positive influence our friendship had on us. (Davis et al., 2002, p. 2)

As students become more integrated into an educational institution, their commitment increases and attrition decreases (Swail et al., 2003). The success of a student, according to Tinto’s model, is dependent on whether a student can leave his past life behind and become part of the college life, academically and socially; in “The Pact,” they collectively committed to achieving their goals. When students do not integrate into college life, it may be due to what Tinto called incongruence and isolation. Incongruence
is a lack of institutional fit or the divergence of the individual’s needs, interests, and preferences from those of the institution. Tinto’s theory suggested institutions “put students’ welfare ahead of other institutional goals” (1993, p. 146), allowing the student to believe he belongs. Another aspect of his theory is the focus on social and intellectual community. The opportunity to be integrated as a member of the academic community, both as a social and intellectual member, is extremely important to their retention, success, and perception of mattering (Jacoby, 1989; Perry et al., 2003).

Astin’s (1985) theory of involvement known as the input-environment-outcome is also significant to student retention. Retention of students is dependent on their involvement in academics, faculty and student peer groups, and activities on campus. Additionally, this positive connection between faculty and student peer groups is very powerful for Black students and other minorities who need support, academically and personally. Consistent, ongoing academic advising support is also a significant positive connection, as can be gleaned from the following excerpt from “The Pact,” a narrative about three African American males who make a commitment to go to medical school. Carla Dickson, their advisor demonstrated the importance of a connection with staff:

Carla planned every detail of student life in the pre-medical/Pre-Dental Plus program…Several times over the years at Seton Hall, I received a grade less than I thought I deserved in a class and complained to Carla…She persuaded me to make an appointment to talk to the professor to try to understand why I had received the lower mark and to make my case for myself. More times than not,
her advice worked. You are doctors; she told us in her opening remarks. You guys have to visualize yourselves as doctors. (Davis et al., 2002, p. 115)

Academic, financial, and personal support were important for these three African American males with regard to becoming doctors of medicine. “One important factor associated with success for African American students is the degree of academic integration in campus life through the faculty and curriculum” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 15).

**Campus Climate**

Campus climate, especially racial climate, is another element of campus life and environment important to African American students; the environment inside and outside the classroom has an impact on every student within the campus. According to Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999):

One key to enacting diverse learning environments lies in understanding and developing programs and policies to improve the campus climate for racial/ethnic diversity, which involves understanding the environment from the perspective of members from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, creating opportunities for improved race relations that permeate the classroom and extracurricular lives of students, and realizing the educational benefits of diverse learning environments for students to be prepared to meet the demands of a complex, diverse society. (p. iii)

African American students are sensitive to racism in their environment, as noted by Bean (2005):
I make few demographic distinctions in the themes. Being African American or Hispanic may be correlated with higher levels of student attrition at certain institutions, but it is not the cause for leaving. Chilly or hostile racist atmosphere on campus would result in a clear sense of minority students not fitting in or feeling alienated, and this lack of fit or alienation leads to leaving. (p. 216)

**Retention Program Evaluation**

ACT, American College Testing, has conducted the fourth national survey research study pertinent to student success at several colleges and universities. In 2010, ACT Incorporated conducted this study by sending out surveys to Chief Academic Affairs Officers at 3,360 colleges and universities. An explanation of the ACT study follows:

A total of 95 four-year colleges or universities enrolled greater than or equal to twenty percent Black students participated. Colleges’ and universities’ educators can utilize the result from this survey, [and] research efforts to make modifications or additions to their program to ensure student success. The study surveyed the school’s retention goals for first-year to second-year; one-quarter did not have any goals while fifty-five percent did. A mean of forty-two percent and median of thirty-nine percent were used for the successful completion in six-years for a four-year degree. Several retention practices used by different colleges and universities are as follows: tutoring, faculty use of technology in teaching, college-sponsored social activities, individual career counseling, writing center/lab, mandated placement in courses based on test
scores, remedial/development coursework, required summer orientation, and assessment of student performance (American College Testing, 2010). The purpose of the ACT study was to allow each program to introspectively recognize its weaknesses and strengthens (American College Testing, 2010).

For example, to better understand persistence at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), faculty and staff worked together to improve student retention by centering their interest on resiliency and using resiliency training to understand how it may help retention. “Resiliency refers to the ability or process of remaining ‘in-tact’ in the midst of potentially and often destructive environmental factors” (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. iv). RIT engaged Peak Inc. (a consulting group that teaches and assesses resiliency) in their resiliency efforts; Peak Inc. used three scales to determine resiliency: Peak’s resiliency scale, a standard self-efficacy scale, and a newly developed resiliency scale. The three scales allowed for convergent validity breakdown of the measures. The training improved resilience and academic performance. The training showed a substantial difference in resiliency before and after the training; the correlation between the three measures was significant. Other studies (Lifton, Seay, & Bushke, 2000) compared two groups of college students with low and high resiliency. They found that students who had a high resiliency did persist to graduation. At the Iowa State University retention program, African American students were actively involved in the studying and learning process by increasing the time they spent in this process. The result showed significant improvement of grades, e.g., one student went from a 2.0 to a
3.9/4.0 GPA. Academic and social support systems are the two significant characteristics of this retention program (Blake & Moore, 2004).

HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities)

African American students who graduate from Historically Black Colleges and Universities graduate academically more prepared than those attending predominantly White universities in America. HBCU offer Black students a positive cultural affirmation, mentoring from Black faculty, and an understanding of the importance of an education. One of the affirmations used is “literacy for freedom, freedom for literacy” (Perry et al., 2003, p. 11). HBCUs graduate more successful African American males with 66% of all African American students graduating with their bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate’s (NCES, 2011).

Recent research related to retention and persistence increasingly focused on how Historically Black Colleges and Universities have graduated more African American male students at greater rates than predominantly White colleges and universities (Jackson & Moore, 2006). According to Schmidt (2009), the research is forcing predominantly White Colleges to look at the practices used at Historically Black Colleges and Universities so they can increase the number of Black males succeeding in college. Schmidt explained that foundations such as the Lumina Foundation for Education are willing to financially support Dr. Shaun Harper, a professor at a Historically Black College and University, to oversee a four-year effort at six unnamed colleges to improve African American male success in college (Schmidt, 2009).
Retention Programs

This section of literature review references different retention programs at various two-year colleges and four-year universities fostering successful graduation of African American males. There are many retention programs throughout America that foster the success of all students toward graduation. These retention programs are likely to have mission statements, requirements, goals, core values, purposes, or even a list of their success rates. The following is a small sample of the programs fostering Black males and other minorities’ academic success at predominantly Black and White colleges and universities.

Morgan Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence

Morgan Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE) is a program designed to reduce the number of African American male dropouts from college (Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011) (Morgan State University, 2013). The Morgan Male Initiative on Leadership & Excellence (MILE) is an Office of Residence Life and Housing program that seeks to enhance the quality of student life and engagement for male students at Morgan State University. The "MILE" provides students with a wealth of academic support services and social engagement opportunities to create a healthy and holistic campus experience.

The core value of the Morgan MILE is to encourage high academic achievement, leadership, and character development. We envision leadership as a level of
maturity where a student assumes responsibility for his academic success and personal conduct and motivates their peers through their actions.

1. We value student voices and we encourage critical thinking and dialogue.
2. We foster an atmosphere of brotherhood and camaraderie.
3. We value diverse ideas, thoughts, and experiences that broaden the perception of ourselves and our world.
4. We believe that our personal academic success is connected to the success of our communities and world. (Morgan State University, 2013, para. 3)

**The McNair Scholars Program**

The McNair Scholars Program is located on most major campuses. It is a federally subsidized program encouraging underrepresented groups with an opportunity to apply. The description, characteristics, and requirements for the program are as follows:

McNair Scholars Program is an innovative program that prepares talented students in the pursuit of doctoral study and careers in higher education. Twenty-five scholars are selected to receive stipends to conduct research with university faculty mentors, write research papers, and present their work to professors and peers at regional and national conferences (McNair Scholars Program, n.d.).

The program has completed 15 summer research programs and 23 alumni have completed doctoral programs. Five of our alumni are currently in faculty positions and 10 are conducting post-doctoral research. Four of our alumni have completed M.D.s, two
have completed J.D.s, one has completed a Pharmacy degree, one has completed a D.P.T. (doctorate in Physical Therapy), and one has completed an Ed.D. Forty scholars are currently enrolled in doctoral program (McNair Scholars Program, n.d.).

A participant must meet the following requirements before becoming a McNair Scholar:

- Low income as defined by the US Department of Education

  and

- First generation to college (where neither parent completed a four year degree)

  and/or

- From an underrepresented group in graduate education

  (African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American and Alaskan, other Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian)

  and

- Should have a 3.0 or higher GPA

- Completion of at least 60 units

- SDSU Undergraduate

- US Citizen or permanent US resident

- In pursuit of a Ph.D. (McNair Scholars Program, n.d.).

**The Meyerhoff Scholars Program**

Another promising program questions why African Americans are only 3% of the American scientists (Hrabowski & Freeman, 1991). Hrabowski began a program known
as Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. The aim of the program is to produce M.D.s and Ph.Ds in science and technology. His program helped Black students succeed. The failure rate in the science classes decreased from 60-40% among freshmen as a result of more homework, increased feedback from teachers, and more tutorials (Meyerhoff Scholars Program, n.d.).

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program offers a different emphasis focusing on highly able students who aspire to become leading research scientists and engineers. The program is open to people of all backgrounds committed to increasing the representation of minorities in science and engineering (Meyerhoff Scholars Program, n.d.).

In a proven formula for success, the program adheres to 13 key components. Whereas top scholars at other institutions are motivated by competition, Meyerhoffs’ students rely on mutual support; the students continually challenge each other to do more, creating an environment of positive peer pressure. Students are encouraged to form study groups for particular classes—within their majors, with Meyerhoff students, or with non-Meyerhoff students (Meyerhoff Scholars Program, n.d.).

To help acculturate students in the program’s philosophy and provide them with the tools they need to succeed in their first college semester, all incoming Meyerhoff Scholars attend an accelerated six-week residential program called Summer Bridge. Through for-credit courses in calculus and African American studies—as well as non-credit courses in chemistry, physics, study skills, and time management—scholars experience the rigors of college-level instruction and learn how to meet higher standards
of performance. The oversight of Meyerhoff Scholars is highly structured. In their freshman and sophomore years, students meet regularly with program staff for academic advising. In their junior and senior years, sessions focus more on preparation for graduation and professional school applications (Meyerhoff Scholars Program, n.d.).

Meyerhoff Scholars participate in research, conferences, paid internships, and study-abroad experiences, which ground their knowledge and open their minds to other cultures and perspectives. They have studied in Paris at the Centre International de l’Enfance; completed internships in Brazil, China, Honduras, and Guyana; and participated in the International Research Training Program, funded by the National Institutes of Health, at the University of Lancaster in England.

Meyerhoff results. Since 1993, the program has graduated over 700 students. As of February 2011, the program has achieved the following results:

- Alumni from the program have earned 81 Ph.D.s, 25 M.D./Ph.D.s, and 92 M.D.s. Thirty-eight of the Ph.D.s were awarded between 2005 and the first half of 2008. Meyerhoff graduates received these degrees from such institutions as Harvard, Stanford, Duke, the University of Pennsylvania, M.I.T., Berkeley, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Carnegie Mellon, Rice, NYU, and the University of Maryland, College Park.
- Over 85 additional alumni have earned graduate degrees in engineering, and nearly 300 alumni are currently enrolled in graduate and professional degree programs.
- An additional 230 students enrolled in the program for the 2010–2011 academic year, 51% of whom are African American, 26% are Caucasian, 18% are Asian, 5% are Hispanic, and 1% are Native American.

- The program is having a dramatically positive impact on the number of minority students succeeding in STEM fields; students are 5.3 times more likely to have graduated from or be currently attending a STEM Ph.D. or M.D./Ph.D. program than those students who were invited to join the program but declined and attended another university (Meyerhoff Scholars Program, n.d.).

**Community College Retention Programs**

At the community colleges where so many African American males begin their education, there are programs in place throughout the nation to ensure their realization by providing resources and support for minority and disadvantaged students. These programs were designed to allow Black males as well as other minority students to develop skills to be successful on a college campus. Some of the programs are designed to promote success in the classroom and to assist students matriculating into the university. There are presently several programs that exist at community colleges whose purpose is to help students advance successfully to higher education, such as UMOJA, RISE, MESA, and PUENTA. Following is a list of these programs’ requirements, explanations, and what they offer.
UMOJA

Umoja (which means unity) equips young people to succeed in college and confidently claim their future; this is accomplished by building a web of dynamic relationships where schools, families, and communities partner to bridge the gap between the talents and ambitions of low-income young people and the resources they need to thrive.

RISE

RISE is an acronym meaning Respect, Integrity, Self-determination, and Education. Its program is located on the Sacramento City College Campus with the purpose of offering resources and services to underrepresented students. RISE offers tutoring, community involvement, college tours, and the "hook up" on campus to competitive four-year universities (Respect, Integrity, Self-determination, Education, n.d.).

MESA

MESA is acronym meaning Math, Engineering, Science, and Achievement. MESA works with thousands of educationally disadvantaged students so they can excel in math and science and graduate with math-based degrees. MESA is nationally recognized for its innovative academic development program (Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement [MESA], 2012).
The Puente Project

Puente: the Puente Project is an academic preparation program that for more than 25 years has improved the college-going rate of tens of thousands of California's educationally disadvantaged students. Its mission is to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students who:

Enroll in four-year colleges and universities

Earn college degrees

Return to the community as mentors and leaders of future generations. (Cosumnes River College, 2013, para.1)

EOP

The Educational Opportunity Program is designed to improve access and retention of historically low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. EOP students have the potential and demonstrated motivation to perform satisfactorily at a CSU, but they have been unable to realize their potential because of their economic or educational background. The program provides admission and academic assistance to EOP-eligible undergraduate students. In many cases, the program offers financial assistance to eligible students. Campuses tailor their programs to accommodate the needs of their student population (The California State University, 2013).

All the information gathered about these retention programs was taken from each individual website. There are numerous retention programs not mentioned in this literature review, but what does bear mentioning are the numerous summer bridge
programs offering minority students a chance to observe what university life is all about. Summer Bridge is a unique opportunity making it possible for graduating high school students to understand the nuances of the university.

Section Three: What is Known about the Lived Experiences of Successful Black Males and Phenomenology as a Way to Study the Topic

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research approach using personal, narrative experiences of individuals to understand a specific phenomenon. This investigation used phenomenological research to determine African American males’ perceptions of this particular phenomenon. According to Martens (1997), the intent of phenomenological research is “to understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participant” (p. 169). There are a number of current researchers who have conducted phenomenological studies to obtain first-hand accounts of (Groenewald, 2004) successful African American male undergraduates. These investigations discussed the experiences, failures, difficulties, and contributing factors for success. The specific phenomenon in this focused research concerns the disproportionate number of African American males attending, dropping out and not graduating from colleges or universities throughout America; this crisis must be addressed. Phenomenological research utilizes small group interviews, focus groups, or individual interviews to find significant common patterns, themes, and relationships as they emerge (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Jett, 2011). The phenomenological paradigm provides a suitable structure for this type of examination because it is concerned with the following:
Bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore challenging structural or normative assumptions.

Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support, or challenge policy and action. (Lester, 1999, p. 1)

Each of the following studies used qualitative methods, specifically phenomenology, to determine the personal experiences of the participants. In this qualitative research, the phenomenological approach was used to make interpretations, to draw conclusions, and to compare commonly shared beliefs about the essence of being an African American male who successfully graduated from college. This research provides a new contextual lens for understanding the African American male, by understanding the information gathered from a phenomenological approach. This method allowed the data to speak for itself by putting aside preconceived beliefs. Instead of testing a hypothesis in phenomenology, the goal is to comprehend a phenomenon from the perspective of the individual (Wertz, 2005).

In another phenomenological study, 304 participants each wrote a 650-word essay about their viewpoints on problems in American education; the purpose of this writing prompt was to better understand how students’ philosophies on education were shaped and why they wanted an education from a system that critiqued them. A cohort of 10 scholars was selected from the group of 304 for one-on-one interviews. The 10 scholars had a mean undergraduate grade point average of 3.26. Their family structures were as
follows: four from single-parent households, five from two-parent households, and one from other. Their socioeconomic backgrounds were as follows: four from low-income, four from working class, and two from the middle class. The findings showed that Black male students are interested in education and attend schools that prepare them for degrees beyond the undergraduate level of education (Harper & Davis, 2012).

In this review of the literature, several qualitative studies were identified to give credence to African American males who have graduated from college. These studies suggested that the most pertinent commonality for retention and persistence was financial support. The research findings of these studies were conveyed to clarify the significant themes obtained (Beal et al., 1982; Bean, 2005; Harper & Harris, 2012).

This research has indicated a number of factors necessary for the academic accomplishment of an African American male completing a bachelor’s degree program. A significant number of researchers support the conclusion that family support is essential for academic success (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Hrabowski, 1991; Museus et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Warde, 2008). Palmer et al. (2009) conducted a study at a public, doctoral research Historic Black College and University using interviews with an additional short answer open-ended questionnaire to discover the academic and social experiences of African American males. Palmer et al.’s research findings established three major themes challenging retention and persistence theories. a) Financial support inhibits persistence especially when fiscal deadlines are missed resulting in students being dropped from the university, b) Pride vs. need – Black male
participants did not seek out assistance for academic and social issues and instead tried to rely on their inner strengths to resolve problems, and c) the disconnection between conditions in the home and communities, i.e., peers and academic success.

Another qualitative study using phenomenology included focus group interviews with African American male graduate students. The study, conducted by Warde (2008), explained there are four contributing factors significant to the achievement of college graduation. The causative factors are as follows: a) understanding the significance of a college degree, b) the need for resources for persistence, c) the need for a mentor, and d) being resilient.

Fries-Brit and Turner (2001) conducted a qualitative study, using phenomenology, interviewing 15 academically successful Black students at predominantly White institutions and observing such characteristics as their academic, social, and racial experience. The study focused on how stereotypes were eroding Black students’ emotional and academic well-being. Academic well-being is the correlation between self-esteem, racial self-esteem, and academic efficacy. Fries-Brit and Turner (2001) concluded that for Black students to succeed they must pay a high price for an education.

In the United Kingdom Educational system, the problems of inequity for disadvantaged groups are distinguished not only by race but also gender issues, disability, and linguistic competence. The concern with gender has been longstanding and deeply ingrained. The effects of gender concerns can be seen in exclusion of some from certain
occupations and professions. In education, it is more pronounced with the selection of coursework following a more traditional stance where girls choose English and art and boys choose mathematics and sciences. Minority, ethnic students such as the Black Caribbean students are not as successful as other groups (Fries-Brit & Turner, 2001).

Other studies using phenomenology involved 24 African American males in a four-year college or university who participated in a study to determine the themes related to spiritual identity. Some participants saw their faith as a source of support on which to depend. Their spiritual belief was used as coping mechanism. Some of the participants’ identities were tied to their spiritual and religious beliefs. This study implied that faith and creed are diversity concerns at the colleges and universities.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

African American male enrollment, retention, and graduation rates are an ongoing challenge in higher education when compared to other ethnic groups. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the common characteristics leading to the successful graduation of African American males. This investigation used phenomenological research to seek African American males’ perceptions of what it means to be a successful college graduate. According to Mertens (2005), the intent of phenomenological research is “to understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participants” (p. 240). Studying these successful male alumni informs college and university stakeholders, educators, and government officials of how best to allocate resources to provide a quality education for all students. Essentially, this study examined several significant research questions as they relate to African American male alumni. Some of the questions aimed at increasing the understanding of the essence of the college experience are as follows:

1. What meaningful factors played an important role for retention programs in successful graduation?

2. What characteristics contributed to persistence and led to successful graduation?
3. What aspect of retention do successful graduates recommend as the most valuable?

This chapter describes the population, research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

**Population**

This study was conducted using alumni from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). CSUS is part of a system of universities with approximately 23 campuses throughout California. CSUS campus is located in an eastern suburb of Sacramento. The targeted participants were five African American men alumni. To find participants for the study, numerous organizations from the east coast to the west coast were contacted using an explanatory letter clarifying the ideas concerning the study (see Appendix A). Two organizations responded: the Science Educational Equity (SEE) university librarian and one church. SEE is an academic support program serving students of lower socioeconomics who are underrepresented in health professions, science research, and science teaching; SEE contributed three participants to the study. Several Black churches were solicited for participants, one church, Harvest, responded, and an individual was selected. As most of the research was completed at the library at CSUS, the librarian recommended one of the assistant librarians, who consented to be interviewed.

The population of this study was specific to African American males who have graduated from college. This study consisted of self-selected science majors, except for
two self-identified alumni who had master’s degrees in clinical sociology and Spanish. The African American males in this study are professionals in each of their fields as follows: medical sales, a medical doctor, a dentist, a clinical sociologist, and a Spanish teacher. Self-identified participants emailed their interest to participate in the study. The ages of the alumni ranged from two extremes: the youngest in their late 20s and the oldest alumnus in his 50s.

Individuals signed consent forms online and answered 32 interview questions by phone interview. All the alumni were interviewed by phone using a questionnaire, as at least one lived on the east coast of the United States. Once the interviews were completed, the interview questions were grouped according to their commonalities and analyzed.

**Design of the Study**

The research methodology for this study utilized qualitative design applying phenomenological narratives to determine common themes and feelings among participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). According to Creswell, phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants. The stages of the research process included the following: the objective, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation stage. This research used a qualitative model throughout the study. In the research objective stage, the researcher fashioned interview questions typical of qualitative, phenomenological research. According to Wertz (2005), phenomenological
research allows the researcher “to grasp ‘what’ something is the intuition of essence” (p. 168). Wertz suggested phenomenological research is “a revelatory relationship with subject matter under investigation” (p. 171). The objectives of the researcher were to explore and describe the educational experiences of African American males.

The phenomenological aspect of this research involved collecting, analyzing, and interpreting open-ended questions from African American males’ interviews. The questions were designed to elicit first-person accounts of their educational experience and the answers reflected personal experiences vividly portraying African American males’ feelings and opinions concerning their educational success. The questions were used to analyze common themes, feelings, and patterns among the respondents. The objective was to find the common meaning and essence of their educational experience from Kindergarten through college. Once the common meaning and essence of their educational experience were discovered, then university stakeholders, educators, and government officials would begin to understand how to support men of color to succeed in education and begin to allocate resources necessary for their success.

**Data Collection**

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary with no incentives offered. A number of participants were contacted by the coordinator of the Science Education Equity program, who agreed to help find participants for this study. Three volunteer participants responded, agreed to be part of the study, filled out a consent form to participate, and were interviewed for the study. Another volunteer participant was
suggested by one of the librarians at CSUS, who asked one of the assistant librarians if he would participate in the study. He consented to be interviewed. Finally, after a number of retention programs had been exhausted, a volunteer from Harvest Church called and asked to be part of the study.

Each participant was emailed a consent form with a statement that his confidential information would not be used before or after the study (see Appendix B). All interviews were conducted by phone and each participant was asked 32 questions (see Appendix C). The researcher used the questions to determine common themes among the participants. The data were collected; transcribed; and analyzed for common themes, feelings, and opinions about their educational experience from Kindergarten through college. Commonalities emerged during analysis of the data.

The data in this study were collected using personal interviews from four African American male alumni from CSUS. Of the participants studied herein, three studied biology and chemistry, and two alumni studied sociology and Spanish. At the time they were interviewed, most were working in their chosen profession, i.e., Clinical Sociologist, Pharmaceutical Representative, Dentist, and one participant was in his last year of medical school. To analyze the data collected from the five interviews, it was important to look at the commonalities and themes emerging, which told the story of how each of these males successfully graduated from undergraduate and graduate school and completed their degrees despite being Black men.
To analyze the interview data collected in the study, the researcher used a simplified version of explication approach, as described by Hycner (1985). Hycner advised that data analysis in phenomenological research can mean a loss of the whole phenomenon, but explication “keep[s] the context of the whole” (p. 161). Hycner suggested interpreting the data using the following steps:

(a) transcribe the interviews

(b) bracketing or phenomenological reduction – this requires suspending meaning and interpretation while viewing the uniqueness

(c) delineating units of meaning

(d) clustering units of relevant meaning

(e) determining themes from clusters of meaning

(f) writing a summary from each of the interviews

In the first phase, the researcher transcribed each of the interviews. The researcher then put all the data transcribed into a table. Next, commonalities or themes were determined from 10 significant themes from the questions.

The data in this study were collected using personal interviews from five African American male alumni from CSUS. To analyze the data collected from the five interviews, it was important to look at the commonalities and themes that emerged, which told the story of how each of these males successfully completed their undergraduate degrees and graduated despite being Black men.
This study was carried out in accordance with the method of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). According to Creswell, phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants. Wertz described phenomenological research as “another important but much misunderstood scientific procedure, one that is fundamental to qualitative research because it enables the researcher to grasp ‘what’ something is: the intuition of essence or the eidetic reduction” (p. 186). Wertz additionally elaborated, “one of the researcher’s first choices involves the identification and selection of human beings whose lives involve a revelatory relationship with subject matter under investigation” (Wertz, 2005, p. 171).
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perception and lived experiences of five African American males who graduated from college. This research study explored the intrinsic and extrinsic factors in their lives that contributed to persistence and success. These findings represent the analysis of data collected through telephone interviews. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) explained:

If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them? Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction. Human beings talk with each other; they interact, pose questions, and answer questions. Through conversations we get to know other people, learn about their experiences, feeling, attitudes, and the world they live in. (p. xvii)

This study offers valuable insight about the perspectives of these five African American men who all graduated from California State University, Sacramento. The interviews allowed for an in-depth understanding of the concerns African American males face at a predominantly White university. This part of the thesis examines the voices and lived experiences of these participants.

Presentation of the Data

In reviewing the data, three key themes emerged: a) Perspectives about Spirituality, b) Perspectives about Success, and c) Perspectives about Resilience and Persistence. These themes were chosen based on their frequency and significance,
primarily as they pertain to this phenomenological research. Questions were grouped together principally in relationship to the personal qualities that may have been efficacious to the phenomenon investigated. The voices of the participants follow.

**Perspectives about Success**

Bonner (2001) asserted in his research that academic achievement occurred when students established a relationship with faculty. Each of the respondents had a good relationship with a faculty member; one respondent said, “I was an A student. Dr. Cuney encouraged me to do my best.” He also said his role model was instrumental for his degree attainment, stating:

> My role model was Professor Cuney and he guided me as a mentor and in my research study. We had lunch together. He would encourage me: ‘Lynn, keep going. Lynn, you do not have enough research for in-depth studies.’ He would constantly inspire me to do an excellent job.

In interview number two, subject two stated:

> Dr. Berrena in the Science Educational Equity Program was a professor who believed minorities could excel in the sciences and go on to professional schools, Ph.D. or master’s [programs] or practice medicine or practice dentistry. So she really pushed and provided the resources for minorities to excel in college with tutoring, or study groups, or providing access to professors.
He agreed that this same role model and his parents were significant in his graduation from college, “Definitely my parents, then Dr. Barrena and Pam King: these were the key individuals who had an influence on me graduating from college.”

In interview three, subject three explained the following:

Recently, in the credential program, one of the professors [was] Dr. José Cintron, a Puerto Rican guy from Indiana; he was the blackest guy I knew on campus. He was really cool and he pretty much told me what to expect when I got into the professional world. He warned me of things to be careful about. Do anything I can to close the ‘achievement gap.’ Whenever I had any questions about the educational system or just anything in general he was the kind of guy you could just talk to.

This participant asserted, “My mother was my role model. She did not have a college degree but wanted my brothers and me to get our degrees. So I guess she was instrumental in me getting my degree.” In interview number four, subject four replied:

I would say Dr. Barrena and Pam King; these two did everything in their powers to empower me, to encourage me, and uplift me even when things looked ugly. They never let me feel as though I was not going to be where I wanted to be. What they did for me encouraged me, which was indescribable in words, they let me know that I will make it and I would be great. They were such a blessing in my life.
He additionally said about his role model:

My grandmother, who moved out from Oklahoma, was a hard worker, and I looked up to her. With my mother there was a time when we did not have a home. We had to sleep in a car. We were on welfare; she could not feed me. There were times when she wanted to end her life but did not, and seeing her strength to be able to continue at the lowest point inspired me when I came to my lowest point.

In the final Interview (number five), subject five explained, “I was supported by Dr. Barrena, Dr. Metcalf, Pam King, and the Science Educational Equity office.” His comment about his role model was:

Some of my mentors were Dr. Chete, Dr. Alonzo, [and] Dr. Middleton; I could easily call them any time of day and we could shoot the breeze about whatever and talk about dentistry. I watched each of the individuals in their dental practices that ranged from oral dentistry to oral surgery throughout school and I always wanted to make them proud.

From all of the participant responses, it is evident some respondents admitted to having good relationships with their parents, who supported them emotionally and financially. Parental support is essential to survival on a predominantly White campus with no one to whom to turn. Collectively, all of the respondents had someone as a role model or mentor to encourage and help them along the path to completing their degrees. One participant mentioned he did feel discrimination from White professors, and when
asked if he felt he was treated as a minor contributor, he responded, “Throughout college, I felt that the professors did not consider Black student participation important in different groups, unless it was a Black or minority professor who encouraged your participation. White professors did negate what Black students had to offer.”

**Perspectives about Spirituality**

The spirituality of students on college campuses continues to increase, so the need to understand how spirituality develops in students must also increase (Love, 2001; Love, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Manning, 2001; Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). In the report, the national Black male college achievement study of 2012, Harper and Davis (2012) looked at Black male success in postsecondary education and recognized that a belief in God helped them to successfully navigate their college career. Interviewees were asked how their belief in God contributed to their attainment of their degrees. Collectively, most had a close affinity to God that contributed to the completion of their degrees.

Each respondent identified with a God. One participant explained, “This is who I am when things get rough: I prayed, I prayed. And Professor Cuney, an African American, prayed with me that I am everything through God.” According to Riggins et al. (2008), Black students are dependent on spirituality to deal with the pressures and stresses of college life. Moreover, African American students draw upon their spiritual support rather than consulting with mental health professionals.
Another respondent had the same intentions with regard to spirituality; he responded by explaining the following:

I was brought up in a Christian home and having that push and that background and knowing that my parents supported me and I had the backing of God. I would have to say that helped me to be positive and remain optimistic and I’d pray for tests and activities to make sure I had spiritual backing to make it through college. It helped me when I did struggle and had a hard time to pass a certain test. I passed them all. There were times when it was somewhat more difficult than it was easy.

Astin et al. (2011) commented that religious ideas are reinforced daily at home but at school the non-presence of spirituality reduces their religiosity. Additionally, another participant who felt very strongly discussed his belief in the following manner:

If it was not for my belief in God, I would not be in medical school today, or I would have given up a long time ago. God is so awesome, so gracious, so loving, and so amazing. He always finds a way to continue to uplift me and blesses me so very much, and I am so thankful. On every exam, for the past seven years, I put Philippians 4:13 I.C.A.I.W. All Things (I can do all things through Christ, which strengthened me). I put this on the top of all my exams.

Schneiders (2003) explained spirituality among Black people has its intentions in all aspects of their lives and has its effects on their individual life goals. Schneiders also stated that self-transcendence is creating a sense of liberation by going beyond one’s
limits. Jagers and Smith (1996) asserted that spirituality assists individuals in comprehending the very nature of knowing. Finally, the last participant said, “I always pray daily, and when I could not talk to my wife or mother, I could always talk to God.” One participant did not have as strong a belief in God and spirituality as the other respondents; when responding to this question he stated, “There is a higher being and I believe that if it was meant for me then it will happen and anything is possible.” Herndon’s (2003) theoretical framework explained that spirituality supports African American males in college in creating a sense of purpose. For students of color, spirituality is an important factor for development of their identity.

**Perspectives about Resilience and Persistence**

All participants showed resilience and persistence, evident by the completion of their degrees and, for some, continuing further in education: two received master’s degrees, one became a dentist, and one became a doctor of medicine. This theme examines only one participant’s interview. He, of all the respondents, exemplified the characteristics typical of an African American male who had been, or could have been, a modified version of Victor, portrayed in the Literature Review. He comes from an inner-city poor background and had to live in a car. This respondent had the most difficulty in Kindergarten through college where most of his teachers gave up on him. Interview question number nine asked: Does success mean failure? He responded:

I don’t know if success means failure. I think you have to fail before you succeed because anyone who has had success has had failure. I think that going
through failure allows you to take a step back and figure out what you need to do differently and make some adjustments. Sometimes it means looking inward to try and figure out what you need to do differently to accomplish what you want. Then once you figure it out, this allows you to be more successful. I have used my failures as strengths.

Interview question: Did anyone tell you about success and succeeding? Did you know it intuitively or was it a struggle to figure out? He responded:

In high school, the coaches look at success as winning championships and bringing the school a lot of money and getting at least a 700 on the SAT so you can go to college and play sports and obtain an education. Intuitively, I knew what success is athletically. I had a God given gift and ability. It was a struggle to figure out academic success and to figure it out in my life. It took me a while to figure out academic success.

Interview question: Describe a situation in which you overcame a failure or an obstacle in school. He responded:

The first one that comes to my mind was at Sac State. I was academically disqualified twice and had to get counseling to figure some things out; a fraternity brother helped me figure out what to do. I was able to get back in both times, but those were pretty big obstacles.

Interview question: Describe a situation in which someone encouraged you to succeed.
My mom always told me to keep pushing, especially when times became rough and trials came. My mom taught me to understand this. Just because a trial comes does not mean that you are done and can’t go forward. You just have to keep pushing (trying). She has always told me that there are no quitters in our family.

Interview question: If you failed at something important, who could you go to for help to get back on track? He responded:

When there is an obstacle you cannot help but say, ‘This is very difficult and maybe I cannot do this.’ When I first got into medical school, I would say, ‘Can I really do this?’ My belief in God encouraged me onward.

This participant’s experience did resemble Victor’s plight through the lens of a negative educational system and he did more than survive, despite all the inequities and discrimination, to become a doctor of medicine. He had the hardest journey of all the participants. He came to CSUS with a 1.0 grade point average and flunked out twice. He exhibited Seligman’s (1975) “learned helplessness,” attributable to his school experience, but what he learned at home about persistence compensated for the negative attitudes of his teachers.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world…One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1897, pp. 6-7)

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary, implications, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion of this study. The summary restates the purpose, methodology, and results. The overall objective of the study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of successful African American males who graduated from college. The implication for this study was to develop programmatic involvements and institutional approaches encouraging and promoting African American male academic success at the California State University campuses.

The goal was to understand what these Black males considered to be important contributing factors to their academic success. These students shared their life experiences, viewpoints, and opinions about what factors they believed were critical to their academic success. The described factors had the greatest impact on academic success and can be agents of change for developing program interventions at CSUS.
Critical Race Theory supports the use of qualitative phenomenological research to
determine institutional racism effects on the lived experiences of African American males
in education.

**Summary**

The investigator conducted interviews of five participants whose voices and lived
experiences gave salient insight into which characteristics allow African American males
to graduate from college. All of the participants’ lives had common threads or themes
running through them. In capturing the perspectives of five successful African American
males and understanding their lives, three important themes emerged in the analysis of
the responses: a) Perspectives about Spirituality, b) Perspectives about Success, and c)
Perspectives about Resilience and Persistence. For themes a) and b), each participant’s
response was analyzed; but for c), Perspectives on Resilience and Persistence, only the
answers from one participant were analyzed. He was chosen because his voice and
experiences mirrored the experiences of most African American male students: single-
family household, self-helplessness, and an athlete.

One concern of qualitative research is preventing the breach of confidentiality.
Complete confidentiality may be impossible or difficult, especially with narratives,
phenomenological research, or in-depth interviews. The identities of the five participants
should remain anonymous. The only way to ensure confidentiality was to not reproduce
any completed copies of the interviews in their entirety. Reproduction of data, even with
the use of pseudonyms, could result in loss of anonymity. Unfortunately, CSUS has a
small African American population on campus and the risk of losing anonymity is too
great a price for the participants.

**Findings on the Perspectives about Spirituality**

One common thread among participants was their belief in, and connection to, God. Each of the respondents passionately and intensely relied upon their spiritual beliefs to overcome barriers, challenges, and obstacles. All respondents had a strong to intense belief in God, upon which they relied during times of challenge to give them hope that they would accomplish their goals. Their belief in God seemed to add to their inner strength, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Riggins (2008) explained that Black students see their spirituality as an effective coping strategy to help deal with the stresses of college life. Mattis (1997) asserted the most commonly held belief explains that the majority of African Americans are significantly religious.

The participants used religion to center and focus their thoughts and to think beyond themselves to cope with their environment, either coping with needing to do well on an exam or coping with the obstacles, pressures, and stresses of college life. Harper and Davis (2012) contended that spirituality, namely a belief in God, helps Black students make it through college. According to the interviews, spirituality was used by African American males in the following way:

1. To pray – The power of prayer was utilized to effect positive changes in participants’ lives.
2. To write the scripture on the top of exams—A positive affirmation helping focus and center knowledge

3. To pray with professors—African American ministers preach that God says “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew). The idea is prayers become much more powerful if more than one person is praying; this allows an individual the chance to build strength during difficult times. Some respondents mentioned that spirituality assisted them in maintaining focus, remaining positive, and staying grounded in everything they endeavored. Religion created a positive effect on their well-being and supported them in becoming efficacious.

**Recommendations on the Perspectives about Spirituality**

University campuses need to find ways to allow for spirituality or communal prayer between students and faculty or staff. Religious organizations are not necessarily required, but there should be some place to go on campus where people can pray, perhaps a mediation room. The university needs to provide professional development for professors to learn and understand cultural sensitivity toward spirituality.

**Findings on the Perspectives about Success**

All of the participants understood success and were willing to work hard to achieve it in their lives. Three out of the five respondents were told about success at home and learned how to be successful. Some of the participants mentioned people
instrumental in their success, such as peers, professors, and campus staff. One respondent turned to his peers (his fraternity brothers) for advice and counseling while others turned to professors or staff for obtaining tutoring or any other services, such as financial support. Two areas of concern were highlighted in the interviews: racism leading to discrimination and establishing mentors as guides through the educational process.

Insensitivity about racism leads to discriminatory behavior; most African Americans males have dealt with previous racism and can sense that ingenuous behavior in a professor. Educational discrimination erodes the very essence of academics in a multicultural community and inhibits our society’s progress into the next millennium. African American males deserve to be on a campus where they feel safe from those kinds of indignities.

Most of the participants felt that tutoring was important for their success. In the sciences, misunderstandings can occur, which can cause comprehension loss. Each participant in the SEE program experienced misunderstandings and received conferencing with peers and faculty to support their academic success. As juniors and seniors, they all supported one another and other students. In turn, they were given academic leadership positions in which they had ownership of their knowledge and strengths.

Some participants in the interview revealed they had great difficulty with finances as a loss in housing occurred. Other African American males, who did well, received
higher grades and had financial support from family. One participant explained he began college with an athletic scholarship and believes he may not have been able to get an education without it.

**Recommendations on the Perspectives about Success**

The university needs to provide professional development in sensitivity training for staff so they can support a student’s ability to succeed. The university needs to develop academic support through one-on-one minority mentors for each academic discipline. The university cannot achieve success without offering appropriate financial support to disadvantaged students whose parents cannot offer any financial support. Moreover, African American males deserve to be on a campus where they feel safe from the indignities of racism. Based on these interviews, success happens in an environment where students have one-on-one tutoring and mentoring with faculty and also peer tutoring to support them academically. Each department should have emergency funds to help students in dire financial need.

**Findings on Perspectives about Resilience and Persistence**

In this section of the findings, it is important to consider resilience and persistence. One dedicated African American male in this study had the goal of obtaining his undergraduate degree; as this paper was being written, he was completing the last semester of his medical degree. As previously mentioned, this participant started at California State University, Sacramento with a 1.0 grade point average, flunked out twice, and is now in the final phase of medical school. Throughout Kindergarten to
higher education, he was not succeeding. He became a student in the Science Educational Equity Program on campus that offered him almost familial support; through that support, he became efficacious about his education. It is evident there was a discrepancy between his earlier teachers, who did not encourage him in school for numerous years, and his obvious success now. He epitomizes resilience and persistence. He defied the odds and reached his personal goals in life. During the interview, he was asked questions about resilience and persistence; here are two of the questions and his answers, demonstrating his ability to stick with something and persevere.

When asked: How well are you able to bounce back when you have a setback? He answered, “Most of the time I am able to bounce back. As I have gotten older, it has allowed me to say, ‘Ok what do I do now?’ Or make the adjustments I need and keep going.” Another question asked about failure: If you failed at something important, who could you go to for help to get back on track? He answered:

When there is an obstacle you cannot help but say, “This is very difficult and maybe I cannot do this.” When I first got into medical school, I would say, “Can I really do this?” My belief in God encouraged me onward.

Another question about failure asked: Does success mean failure? He responded:

I think you have to fail before you succeed because anyone who has had success has had failure. I think that going through failure allows you to take a step back and figure out what you need to do differently and make some adjustments. Sometimes it means looking inward to try and figure out what you need to do
differently to accomplish what you want. Then once you figure it out, this allows you to be more successful. I have used my failures as strengths.

Another question asked: What would you tell other African American males to do differently than what you did? He answered:

Do not allow anyone to limit you or put you in box, especially African American males who are athletic or play sports. Don’t allow people to get you to believe that the only way to make it into college or make it in life is through athletics. This was what I struggled with and this was what I thought: the only way I could do anything was through sports. I learned that God gave me more than athletic ability, he gave me a brain. I have to work at it and I have to use education like I did sports.

His religious beliefs gave him an anchor upon which he relied to give him strength to persist. One question asked: How has your spiritual belief contributed to your obtaining your degree? He answered:

If it was not for my belief in God, I would not be in medical school today, or I would have given up a long time ago. God is so awesome, so gracious, so loving, and so amazing. He always finds a way to continue to uplift me and blesses me so, so very much and I am so thankful. On every exam, for the past seven years, I put Philippians 4:13 I.C.A.I.W. All Things (I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth.me). I put this on the top of all my exams.
Also important to mention here is he grew up wanting to become an athlete. He stated that he practiced every day to be good. Practice and more practice at something are important for becoming good. One question asked about his goals: What goals did you set for yourself? He stated, “Early on, I wanted a baseball or football scholarship to go to college. My three biggest goals were to become a doctor, husband, and father.” His intentions changed and he is now becoming the doctor he thought he could not become.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

When discussing future recommendations, it is important to consider the following questions:

- What factors contribute to African American males making strong connections with becoming eager learners, developing as problem solvers, pursuing academic habits of mind, and establishing self-efficacy?
- Do teachers undermine their academic success, precluding or arresting their academic development?
- What doors need to open to close the ever-widening achievement gap?
- How does the problem manifest and what can teachers or professors do about this mounting intergenerational legacy that has become foundational in education?
- If African American males fail, what recourses are available in life besides low paying, unfulfilling jobs, or prisons?
• Considering the retention crisis and the disproportionately low number of graduating African American males, what are the next steps in securing their future in the next millennium?

The information gleaned from this study contributes to the already growing body of knowledge examined in the literature about the lived experiences of African American males who successfully graduated from college. Furthermore, this information will assist stakeholders, policymakers, educators, and professors in understanding the educational plight of African American males in attaining their educational goals.

All the research literature claims persistence and success are enhanced by university support and faculty who demonstrate the path to success. In this regard, all faculty members should receive cultural sensitivity training to facilitate one-on-one mentoring of students from diverse backgrounds. Finally, faculty need to understand that most African American males were raised in the church, a legacy passed down from slavery; during that time, the church helped slaves cope with the pressures and stresses of slavery. We live in a racist society that does not realize everything is predicated on racism.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Interest Letter

Carlena West-Nawrocki
7721 College Town Drive #29
Sacramento, California 95822

To whom it may concern:
My name is Carlena Nawrocki. I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento completing a study for my thesis in Language and Literacy. The working title of this study is “Identifying Characteristics that Make African American Males successful college graduates.” I seek to interview of successful African American college graduates to determine those factors. Your program over the years has succeeded in producing successful Black male college graduates. Your role in helping to find participants for the study would contribute to identifying the lessons learned, and can assist in bringing others along.

I am requesting your assistance in helping me to find participants for this study. I can be reached at [number] (leave a message) or [email]. When you call, please leave a phone number or if you email please leave contact information. I will additionally contact your organization by phone as a back up.

Thank you for your assistance.

Carlena West-Nawrocki
APPENDIX B

Consent Form

CSUS-Master thesis Interview for Determining
What makes a Successful African American Male College Graduate
Informed Consent Form

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with California State University, Sacramento used in a master thesis. You are being asked to participate because you are African American male who has successfully graduated from college/university. Your participation would help more African American males to graduate if the legislators, administrators and faculty better understood how to support successful graduation of more black males. A list of sample questions will be provided. The interviewer reserves the right to add additional questions in the course of the interview and/or conduct a follow-up interview as needed.

2. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. Once the information is transcribed then commonalities between interviewees will used to make conclusions. The conclusion will be made available for public and scholarly use at California State University, Sacramento. Any member of the general public will have access to the study’s findings. Your words per se will not be quoted but merely used to draw conclusion as to what assisted you along your education process that made you successful.

3. Most interviews will take approximately one hour. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding.

In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any recording(s) made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

4. Completion of the interview, the recording(s) and content of your interview and the biographical information will be kept anonymous(Anonymity is generally only used for handling personally identifiable information that might be a threat to one's employability, financial standing, reputation, criminal or civil at will more than make a difference for other African American males.

5. Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be handled by editing those portions out of the final copy of the transcript. The original
recording will not be edited.

If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact Carlena Nawrocki, Principal Investigator, [redacted] or

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research, you can contact Dr.

I agree to participate in this interview.

______________________________  ___________________________
Signature of Participant        Consent Date

_________________________      ___________________________
Street Address               City                  State               Zip

_________________________
Phone Number
I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting the participant to sign it.

______________________________  ___________________________
Signature of Investigator      Date
APPENDIX C

Interview

Interview Questions

1. What are your thoughts about failure/success?
2. Who in your family came closest to meeting success? How? Why?
3. Describe a time you failed at something?
4. Describe a time when you succeed at something? What did that feel like?
5. How did you know you were doing well in class? When and under what circumstances –was it the first day? with other students? your interaction with the professor?
6. Have you been a group when they treated you as the expert?
7. Have you ever been in a group when you were treated as a minor contributor?
8. What do you wish your parents had told you about success or succeeding?
9. Did anyone tell you about success and succeeding? Did you know it intuitively or was it a struggle to figure out?
11. How do you find ways to think about mistakes or failure?
12. How do you respond to failure?
13. How do you describe success?
14. How do you create success from failure?
15. How have people encouraged you to succeed?
16. If you met someone who was having difficulty? What would you tell them?
17. How do you know if you succeeded?
18. What are your thoughts on how failure leads to success?
19. As you think back to elementary school what teacher gave you the impression that you were going to succeed?
20. If you failed at something important who could you go to change your perspective?
21. What thoughts get in the way that you can or are succeeding?
22. How well are you able to bounce back when you have a set back?
23. What milestones
24. What would you tell other African American males to do differently than what you did?
25. What goals did your parents set for you?
26. What goals did you set for yourself?
27. Did you accomplish goals that your parents expected?
28. What did you promise yourself along the way to accomplishing different goals?
29. What is the difference between being a white American male and black American male getting an education?
30. The “Achievement Gap” between whites and blacks how did that affect your success?
31. Was there ever a time when you felt frozen even though you knew what you were doing?
32. Describe a situation in which a college professor supported you and helped you succeed.
33. Describe a situation in which you were inspired to work and study hard when you were a child.
34. Describe a situation in which you came very close to dropping out of college.

Erik Erikson

“…the world gets bigger and more complex as we go along, is fairly obvious, but we might take exception to the last, i.e., failure is cumulative.”
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