WHAT KEEPS BLACK STUDENTS THRIVING? THE ROLES OF FACULTY SUPPORT AND PEER INTERACTION IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS ATTENDING A DIVERSE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITH LOW BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Stephanie L. Jones
B.S., California State University, Sacramento, 2008

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in

Child Development (Theory and Research)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SPRING, 2010
WHAT KEEPS BLACK STUDENTS THRIVING? THE ROLES OF FACULTY SUPPORT AND PEER INTERACTION IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS ATTENDING A DIVERSE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITH LOW BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT.

A Thesis

by

Stephanie L. Jones

Approved by:

_____________________________________, Committee Chair
Kimberly Gordon-Biddle, Ph.D.

_____________________________________, Second Reader
Christi Cervantes, Ph.D.

Date_________________________________
Name of Student: Stephanie L. Jones

I certify that this student has met the requirements for the format contained in the University format manual, and that this Thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the Thesis.

_______________________________________  _____________________
Sheri E. Hembree, Ph.D., Graduate Coordinator   Date
Department of Child Development
Abstract

WHAT KEEPS BLACK STUDENTS THRIVING? THE ROLES OF FACULTY SUPPORT AND PEER INTERACTION IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS ATTENDING A DIVERSE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITH LOW BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT

by

Stephanie L. Jones

African American students are one of the lowest academically performing ethnicities in the United States. This disparity is caused by many factors, including lack of social support. Previous research has found the support of family members, teachers, and peers to play a vital role in the support of African American grade school students. However, few studies have examined the support of faculty and the influence that peers have on the achievements of Black college students. What is more, the majority of studies that have investigated this relationship have been conducted at Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) or Predominantly White Universities (PWU), which are not inclusive of the diverse institutions in America making up the majority of colleges/universities. The purpose of the current study was to examine associations
between faculty support and peer interactions and academic achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment. Data were collected in two phases, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. First, 43 self-identified African American students completed a questionnaire that explored the relationship between faculty, classmate, close friend support, and GPA as the criterion for academic achievement. The only correlation found to be statistically significant was the relationship between students’ perceptions of classmate support and the frequency of support being offered. However, limitations were found that distorted the data, such as the small sample size and the restricted range of the variables. Second, four students participated in a focus group session which extended the questionnaire, examined personal experiences, and gave specific insight into the social support factors effecting academic achievement. The data were analyzed using content analysis. Three themes of support emerged in the focus group discussion on faculty support (accessibility of professors, role modeling, and teaching styles) and two themes emerged from focus group discussion on peer support (positive influence on achievement and negative influence on achievement).

________________________________________, Committee Chair
Kimberly Gordon-Biddle, Ph.D.

________________________________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis advisor Dr. Kimberly Gordon-Biddle for all her assistance and support in writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Juliana Raskauskas for her assistance with the statistical analysis and Dr. Christi Cervantes for her support as the second reader. All of your time, guidance, and advice are greatly appreciated.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother Rhonda Jones. Thank you for all of your support and guidance through my undergraduate and graduate careers. You have always been there for me when I needed your support, guidance, and love. You are truly a wonderful, intelligent and kind person. Thank you for everything.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Thesis</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support and Student Achievement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/Staff Support and Student Achievement</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support and Student Achievement</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 35
   Design of Study ............................................................... 35
   Demographics ................................................................. 36
   Participants ................................................................. 39
   Procedure ....................................................................... 40
   Measures ....................................................................... 43

4. RESULTS ........................................................................ 46

5. DISCUSSION ................................................................. 58
   Limitations of the Study ................................................... 64
   Conclusion ....................................................................... 66
   Future Research ........................................................... 67

Appendix A. Background Questionnaire .................................. 69
Appendix B. Focus Group Questions ........................................ 71
Appendix C. CASSS Survey .................................................. 75
References .......................................................................... 79
LIST OF TABLES

Table                                      Page

1.  CSUS Student Ethnicity Demographics 2008 ............................................ 37
2.  CSUS Faculty Ethnicity Demographics 2008 ............................................ 38
3.  Demographic Characteristics of the Participants ....................................... 41
4.  Means and Standard Deviations of Frequency of Social Support Categories
    (professor, classmate, and close friend) .................................................. 47
5.  Correlation among Social Support Source Scores and GPA .......................... 49
6.  Correlation Matrix ..................................................................................... 49
7.  Means and Standard Deviations of Importance of Social Support Categories
    (professor, classmate, and close friend) ..................................................... 50
8.  Correlation among CASSS Importance Rating and Frequency Rating ............ 52
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, academic achievement among African American students is much lower than that of Caucasian students in all grade levels. African American students enroll in and graduate from college at lower rates than Caucasian college students in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics reported that merely 12.7% of African Americans were enrolled in a degree-granting institution in 2008, compared to 65.7% of Caucasian Americans. This disparity continues to rise as stiffer college requirements and a decrease in affirmative action policies has emerged. Thus, African American college students are highly underrepresented in the institutional setting (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This lack of achievement and retention is preventing African American students from attaining degrees in higher education and achieving high paying and fulfilling job opportunities.

Many factors contribute to achievement and retention among African American students (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). First, family support is a social factor that has been thoroughly examined, and research indicates that parental support plays a significant role in achievement and persistence in African American students (Davis,

A second potential factor is university faculty support. Although research on the role of faculty support in Black students’ academic performance and persistence has been sparse, the data suggest faculty support to be a key factor in promoting success and persistence (Allen & Smith, 2008; Charles, Dinwiddle, & Massey, 2004; Frank, 2003; Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008; Jay & D’Augelli, 1991; Newman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Smokowski et al., 1999; Wilson & Stith, 1993).

Research also indicates that positive peer relationships is an important factor in promoting achievement and persistence among African American grade school students (Gibson, 2005; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Hubbard, 2005; Neman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Stilth & Wilson, 1993; Smokowski et al., 1999; Somer et al., 2008). Current research has placed great emphasis on the social factors that promote success among elementary and secondary students; however, few studies have investigated the power of social support on college students. Moreover, the limited research that has been conducted in higher education has sampled specific types of institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) and Predominantly White Institutions/Universities (PDI/U). Future research must focus on diverse institutions of higher education with low Black student enrollment.

The current study examined the relationship between academic achievement and
faculty and peer support among African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black students enrollment. The study of African American college students in these institutions contributes to more general understanding of students of color. Studying factors that promote the achievement of students of color is essential, as this combined population makes up half of students today in the U.S. The U.S. Department of Education reported that by 2003, students of color would comprise 40% of the total student population with as many as 70% of these students residing in larger cities within California, New York, Texas, and others (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). Because nearly half of the population in major cities is comprised of students of color, researchers need to further examine the relationship between academic achievement and persistence among Black students to create more programs, policies, and intervention strategies that can be implemented to assist African American students in succeeding academically.

**Purpose of Study**

In order for educational researchers and policy-makers to implement policies in our school systems, it is important to examine the social predictors of persistence and achievement among African American students. The current study focused on African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black students enrollment. The study addressed three areas. First, the relations of faculty support and peer support to academic achievement and persistence among African American college students
attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment were examined. Second, this study addressed the perceived importance of faculty and peer support in relation to the frequency of support being offered to Black students. Lastly, a focus group methodology was employed in order to gain a better understanding of the correlational data and student’s perceptions on the importance and frequency of faculty support and the negative and positive aspects of peer interaction.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

African American students attending California State University, Sacramento participated in the study. Data were collected in two phases. During the first phase, 101 undergraduate students in three Pan African Studies courses completed the *Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale* (CASSS) by Malecki, Demaray, Elliot, and Nolten, (2002). In the second phase, four African American CSUS freshman and sophomore students participated in a focus group on the importance of faculty and peer support.

Measures and Data Analysis

Social factors examined in relation to students’ achievement included professors, classmates, and close friends. The *Child and Adolescent Social Support Survey* (CASSS) was utilized to determine the frequency and importance of faculty and peer support and correlation with students’ GPA.
The CASSS was coded and analyzed by obtaining the total score of each section and performing a correlation analysis using GPA as the index for achievement. The focus group questions were obtained from a previous student thesis (Harven, 2003) and included questions pertaining to faculty support and peer interaction among students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. Content analysis was the method used to analyze the focus group interview data. The session was audio taped and an outside researcher took notes on key themes arising throughout the session. The audiotapes were transcribed and coded for themes.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used repeatedly throughout the thesis: social support, Tardy’s Model on Social Support, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU), Predominantly White Institutions/Universities, and the terms Black and African American. The following definitions will put each term into context of the present study.

**Social support.** Sidney Cobb (1976) believed social support consisted of three different components. Cobb defined these components as “feeling loved, feeling valued or esteemed, and belonging to a social network.”

**Tardy’s Model of Social Support.** The CASSS was developed from Tardy’s model of social support, a framework that examines five different dimensions of support (Tardy, 1985), including: “(a) Direction, or whether social support is being given or
received, (b) *Disposition*, referring to the availability of social support, (c) *Description/Evaluation*, whether an evaluation or description of social support was drawn out from an individual (d) *Network*, referring to the sources of an individual’s support network, and (e) *Content*, referring to emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (Malecki et al., 2002, p. 1; Tardy, 1985).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** Ladson-Billings (1995) described culturally relevant pedagogy as “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Howard, 2001, p. 181). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy related to the current study as it’s focus is on the achievement of students of color and support the keys themes of social support for African American students.

**Historically Black Universities/Colleges.** A predominantly Black College/University (HBCU) is an institution of higher education with at least 40% of the student population being Black American. The purpose of HBCU’s is to “support the strengthening of predominantly Black institutions to carry out programs in the following areas: science, technology, engineering, math, health education, internationalization, globalization, teacher preparation, and improving educational outcomes of African American males” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

**Predominantly White Institution/Universities.** Predominantly White Institutions/Universities (PWI/U) are institutions of higher education with more than half (50%) of the student population being Caucasian (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The current study is situated at a diverse institution of higher education with low Black
student enrollment.

**Black Students/African American Students.** The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably in the study. African American and Black are commonly used terms and in current literature. In addition, these terms are commonly used and accepted in the African American community.

**Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter One has presented the statement of the problem, purpose of study, methodology, definition of terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework for the study, and examines previous research on the impact of social factors on African American students’ academic achievement. Chapter Three describes the overall design of the study, including the participants, and the qualitative and quantitative methods utilized and the procedure for collecting data. The measurements, including the focus group questions and the CASSS questionnaire will be discussed in detail as well as the analysis used to interpret the data.

Chapter Four reports on the results found from the focus group and the questionnaire. Tables and selected quotations are provided for clarification of results. Chapter Five discusses both the qualitative and quantitative findings and their relationship to previous research. In addition this chapter presents arguments concerning the application of Tardy’s model on social support and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to the relationship between academic achievement and social support.
Overview

According to Kerperman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008), African Americans are underrepresented in college and face many academic barriers. John Ogbu, a pioneer in minorities’ academic performance, suggested, “African American adolescents receive fewer academic rewards, fewer occupational opportunities, and greater social stigma related to academic success than do adolescents who belong to the majority culture” (Kerpelman et al., 2008, p.997). In order for African American students to succeed academically, supportive social factors for student success must be examined.

Previous research indicates that family support is vital for the achievement of Black students, as it offers encouragement, motivation, guidance, and positive interaction. In regards to faculty support, prior research specifies that motivation, encouragement, role modeling, and advising are all factors that faculty employ that predicts the success of African American students. Finally, peer interaction has been found to have a positive and negative effect of the achievement of Black students. Due to the fact that merely 12.7% of African American students enrolled in a degree granting institution in 2008, the present study’s focus is closing the achievement gap; by examining support systems for African American students attending a diverse institution
of higher education with low Black student enrollment. Specifically, this study will
examine how faculty support and peer interaction impact the academic achievement of
African American students.

This review of literature explores previous research and examines the role of
family and faculty support and peer interaction for Black students’ academic
achievement. This review of the literature is organized in terms of four areas: theoretical
framework for studying Tardy’s model on social support and culturally relevant
pedagogy, family support, faculty support, and peer support. Under each category of
achievement (family, faculty, and peer support) are sub-categories. The following are
sub-categories for family support: motivation & encouragement, parenting styles,
parental guidance, and parental involvement. Under faculty/staff support, the following
are sub-categories: motivation & encouragement, role modeling, and advising. For the
peer support category, the following are sub-categories: positive and negative support.

Theoretical Framework

The author used two theoretical frameworks to examine the relationship between
social factors in the development of academic achievement among African American
students. Tardy’s model on social support and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are the
guiding theoretical frameworks.
Tardy’s Model on Social Support

Tardy’s model (1985) of social support describes the important dimensions of social support and how they affect the achievement of students. Tardy’s model explains that it is imperative for students to conveniently give and receive support in order to excel academically. In other words, students need to feel as though they can easily access all of their support system as desired in order to reach their fullest academic potential. In addition, the quality and quantity of support given to students makes an impact on their educational attainment. Students need to be given support in all facets of life; including receiving, financial support, feedback and advice from mentors, and a caring attitude from faculty/staff. Tardy’s model of social support guides the present study and the notion that in order for African American students to excel academically, it is imperative for social support to be available and accessible for students.

Tardy’s social support instrument was created due to the limitations of previous social support measurement instruments. Tardy claimed that many previous measurements “lacked barriers, validity, and reliability” and there was no true definition or methodology of the components that equal social support (Tardy, 1985, p. 187). In return, Tardy did an extensive review of noteworthy articles on current social support instruments and developed an effective, concise, and reliable measurement of social support. Tardy’s model on social support has been used throughout research in education. Specifically, the Malecki and Demaray (2002) survey instrument (CASSS) used in this thesis, was created from Tardy’s social support model. Empirical research that examines
social support issues use Tardy’s social support model as a framework to support their research.

Tardy’s social support model particularly supports the current study in more ways than one. This model specifically relates to this thesis as it is seen as a foundation for academic achievement. In other words, it would be nearly impossible for African American students to succeed academically without Tardy’s five dimensions of social support.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The second theoretical framework, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, is based on Vygotsky’s Socialcultural theory and it examines culture in respect to educational achievement. Vygotsky argued that “cultural signs have a great impact on cognitive development” (Howard, 2001, p. 183; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy is the idea that cultural referencing needs to be incorporated into teaching styles and school curriculum in order to stimulate the minds of students. However, cultural referencing alone will merely make a dent in the achievement of students; relevant life experience must be integrated into teaching styles and curriculum, as students can make a connection between their personal lives and learning (Howard, 2001) African American students learn best when life experience and cultural relevance is incorporated in lesson planning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Educators who utilize a culturally pedagogical framework are very involved in their students learning and know that culture plays a vital role. In addition, they build
their curriculum around their students’ strengths and believe that it is important to have meaningful relationships with their students beyond the classroom (Howard, 2003).

Culturally relevant pedagogy supports this study, as it relates to faculty support and stresses the importance of the appropriate types of teaching methods when working with students of color; specifically African American students. Faculty working at diverse institutions must be culturally aware and sensitive in order to effectively teach African American students.

**Family Support and Student Achievement**

Many studies have examined the relationship between family support and African American students’ school achievement. This research on family factors contributing to academic achievement is important because there is a need for research-based policy and intervention strategies to be implemented in the attempt to improve student achievement for African American students (Mandara, 2006). Previous research suggests that parental motivation and encouragement, parenting styles, parental guidance, and parental involvement promote academic achievement among African American students (Attaway & Bry 2004; Allen & Smith, 2008; Charles, Dinwiddle, Massey, 2004; Comeaux and Harrison, 2007; Frank, 2003; Gaylord-harden, 2008; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Hubbard, 2005; Jay & D’Augelli, 1991; Mandara, 2006; Newman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Plybon, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave, & Allison, 2003; Russell & Atwater, 2005; Schmeelk-cone & Zimmerman, 2003; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008;
Motivation and Encouragement

Motivation, encouragement, parenting styles and guidance have been linked to children’s achievement. Hubbard (2005) conducted a study on gender roles and academic achievement. He assessed 30 low-income African American students in high school taking preparatory college coursework and found that both males and females reported receiving encouragement and motivation from their parents at a young age (Hubbard, 2005). Hubbard also found that the students whose parents were actively involved in assisting their children with homework and providing motivation and encouragement had students who achieved higher GPA’s (2005).

Other similar studies support a link between motivation and achievement. Smokowski et al. (1999) interviewed 86 African American inner-city high school adolescents in Chicago to examine resilient and protective factors. Comparable with previous research, Smokowski et al., found that parental motivation played a major role in encouraging youth’s academic achievements (1999). Motivational and informational support is the most valued contribution that parents provide (Smokowski et al., 1999). Similarly, Russell and Atwater (2005) conducted a study on African American students in a science pipeline program at a Predominantly White Institution/University (PWI/U) and found that motivation and encouragement from parents and family was the most significant predictor of achievement and persistence.
Parenting Styles

Many researchers have found that parenting styles can either negatively or positively affect student’s academic achievement (Gaylord-Harden, 2008; Mandara, 2006, Mandara & Murry, 2002). According to Baumrind’s model on parenting styles, children who grow up in households with authoritarian parents who are controlling have lower levels of achievement and lack motivation; permissive parents also produce children who perform poorly in school and display problem behaviors; and conversely, authoritative parents have a positive effect on children’s achievement (Mandara, 2006). However, these findings are specific to the achievement of European American children (Mandara, 2006). Previous research has been mixed as to whether authoritarian or authoritative parenting has the most positive impact on African American students academic achievement (Mandara, 2006). Mandara and Murry (2002) found that what would typically be authoritative parenting within European American community, is more similar to authoritarian parenting within the African American community, as African American authoritative parents are more dictating than European American authoritative parents (Mandara, 2006). By European American standards, authoritative parenting would be considered a more authoritarian style in the African American community (Mandara & Murry, 2002). Therefore, it is very difficult to determine how authoritarian or authoritative parenting styles affect the academic achievement of Black students.
Parental Guidance

Parental guidance, another contributing factor to the success of Black students, provides them with the ability to make wise decisions for their future, ultimately keeping them on the path to success (Smokowski et al., 1999). African American mothers often play a role in guiding their children’s future (Jay & D’Aguelli, 1991). Parental guidance is a significant contribution to the academic success of elementary and high school students because they often receive negative advice from peers (Hubbard, 2005). Furthermore, households that are educationally oriented, and mothers who stress the importance of higher education, influence children’s future goal orientation (Smokowski et al., 1999).

Parental Involvement

Similar to guidance, parent involvement can have a positive effect on Black student academic achievement. Parent involvement consists of parents providing academic, emotional, and physical support to assist their children in succeeding academically (Plybon, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave, & Allison, 2003). Parental involvement also consists of parents providing information to their children on opportunities to receive an education (Schmeelk-cone & Zimmerman, 2003). Unfortunately, previous research has found that African Americans’ parental involvement is lacking (Hubbard, 2005). African American parents are not heavily involved in their children’s educational studies and do not attend many of the extra-curricular academic activities or meetings present at their children’s school (Hubbard, 2005). Many African
American parents are reluctant to get involved in their children’s education because they feel their educational background cannot benefit their child’s educational efforts (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). Yet, many studies that have been conducted on parent involvement and Black student achievement have suggested that parent involvement is among the many factors that contribute to the academic achievement of African American adolescents. Other studies suggest that parental involvement is of minimal significance to the success among African American students (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Walker and Satterwhite (2002) found that parental involvement was related to preventing students from withdrawing from school; however it has no relationship to the academic success of students.

Parental support has been found to play a vital role in the academic achievement of African American students. There is an abundance of previous research that has addressed family support in elementary, secondary, and even post-secondary and how it relates to the educational attainment of Black students. Future research must focus on other social factors such as faculty support and peer interaction to determine the extent to which these influence the achievement of African American students as well.

**Faculty/Staff Support and Student Achievement**

Along with parental support, previous research indicates that faculty and staff play a vital role in the achievement of African American college students. Students who are emotionally connected with faculty and/or staff members in the institutional
environment have higher retention rates (Grier-Reed, Madyun, Buckley, 2008). Greer-Reed et al. (2008) have noted that there is a correlation between social support and the overall success and preservation of Black college students. Faculty mentors can be inspirational to African American college students, providing motivation, encouragement, advising, and role modeling (Allen & Smith, 2008).

In order for African American students to succeed in college, it is imperative to examine exactly what type of support is being administered. Faculty members need to base their fundamental classroom ethic on open and safe communication, encouraging African American students to receive regular positive feedback (Frank, 2003). In return, African American students will feel as though they are an asset to the learning environment (Frank, 2003). Few studies have examined the relationship between African American college students’ achievement and the influence that faculty and staff possess. The current study examined how faculty and staff members as motivators, advisors, and role models correlates with the academic achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment.

According to previous research, teachers’ motivation and encouragement has been found to correlate with academic achievement of African American students. Many studies have specifically studied elementary and secondary students, leaving a gap in research in regards to post-secondary education. Future research must build upon this previous research and determine the role of faculty motivation and encouragement as it pertains to African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment.
Teachers’ Motivation and Encouragement and Student Achievement

Newman and Newman (1999) recognized four elements that contributed to the retention of students: (a) student’s ongoing networking connection with the university, (c) debt free worries, (c) ongoing motivation and encouragement of faculty and staff members, and (d) mutual understanding of their peers. Faculty and staff can provide students with all the necessary educational tools and resources available on campus to succeed (Newman & Newman, 1999). Grier-Reed et al., (2008) found “seven themes that were identified in Black students’ experiences who had weekly meetings with faculty/staff members: (a) a safe space, (b) connectedness, (c) validation, (d) resilience, (e) intellectual stimulation, (f) empowerment, and (g) a home base (p. 480).”

African American students who have educators who are caring, supportive, and encouraging are more likely to report a positive self-concept (Russell & Atwater, 2005). Smokowski et al. (1999) states that teachers should provide a safe classroom environment for students to voice their opinions and receive valuable and educated feedback on school work. Moreover, teachers reinforce motivational messages that students receive at home, as well as provide additional motivational messages that parents do not express at home (Smokowski et al., 1999). Smokowski et al. (1999) studied inner-city youth and their resilient and protective factors, which revealed that teachers provide a critical type of support that could not be found elsewhere. Motivational support and role modeling were found to be positive supportive factors that teachers contribute to the resilience of disadvantaged youth.
Programs that promote faculty and staff collaborations with students support achievement and retention (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Newman & Newman, 1999). Grier-Reed et al conducted a pilot qualitative study examining 5 students between the ages of 19-23, to determine whether or not a new networking program would increase the retention rates of African American students. African and African American studies (AFAM) was a program where students spent countless hours with faculty and staff member, during lunch meetings, building a relationship with each other by sharing communication, food, guidance, encouragement, and motivation (Grier-Reed et al., 2008). Grier-Reed et al. found that the students who took part in these meetings established a cognitive and emotional connection with faculty members at their institution, which in turn, prompted retention among these students.

Similarly, the Young Scholars Program (YSP) accepted 6th grade students and promised them entrance into the Ohio State University as freshman in exchange for completion of activities throughout their middle and high school careers (Newman & Newman, 1999). These activities included assistance with coursework, career assessments and multicultural activities. (Newman & Newman, 1999). In addition, YSP students were able to regularly interact with Ohio State University faculty, staff and students. Students who were in the first YSP cohort established a retention rate of 72% and in the second cohort 88% during their freshman year of college.

Research indicates that male students particularly benefit academically from relationships with faculty/staff members. For example, Palmer and Gasman (2008) conducted a quantitative study examining social factors that contribute to academic
achievement among African American men at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU’s) and found that faculty at HBCU’s play a tremendous role in motivating and encouraging academic achievement among their male students (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Students reported that felt a great deal of support from each one of their professors. Palmer and Gasman (2008) specified that faculty at HBCU’s become invested in their students academic and personal lives, and attempt to build connections between the two. Faculty displayed empathy and assisted students in maximizing their fullest potential (Charles, Dinwiddle, Massey, 2004). Similarly, Comeaux and Harrison (2007) conducted a study on environmental factors that contribute to academic achievement of African American college athletes and found that faculty members encouraged undergraduate student athletes to attend graduate school. However, Black student athletes also chose to spend less time with White faculty members, who were the majority at the institution (89%), and more time with faculty and mentors on campus of color who lent more encouragement and acceptance. (Comeaux & Harrison, 2007)

These findings indicate that is it essential to study the relationship between faculty encouragement and student success. In the Palmer and Gasman (2008) study, students reported feeling an abundance of support from faculty members; however, this study was conducted at a HBCU. There are limits to these results because a majority of professors at HBCU’s are also of African descent, and may interact differently with students attending a diverse institution. Consequently, it is essential to extend research and examine the relationship between faculty/staff motivation and its relationship to students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. The current
study provides policy makers and prevention specialists with information regarding faculty members acting as motivators and how it contributes to the academic achievement of African American students. Knowing the difficulties that college students face can provide the appropriate information in finding intervention strategies and retention programs for disadvantaged students.

**Teachers as Role Models and Student Achievement**

The few studies that have examined relationships between African American faculty acting as role models and African American students’ college retention all consistently agree that African American faculty in universities uncommon. This may be due to the fact that African Americans are underrepresented in higher education; therefore achieving an advanced degree to educate college level students will coincide with the lack of representation (Jay & D’Augelli, 1991; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Pollard, 1993, Smokowski et al., 1999; Wilson & Stith, 1993). African American faculty representation correlates with African American retention in idiosyncratic ways (Wilson & Stith, 1993).

African American faculty serve as role models to young African American students achieving higher education. Moreover, many African American students aspire to achieve the status of African American mentors with whom they have connected (Frank, 2003). Finally, many African American students view faculty of color as leaders who could essentially guide their college careers (Wilson & Stith, 1993). When it comes to African American students and achievement, positive social support from faculty and
seeing faculty of color in powerful and prestigious positions on campus, are very influential on this populations achievement (Smokowski et al., 1999).

Black students report feeling as though African American professors act as a role model for them, providing insight into what they experienced as an African American student, and suggesting potential coping mechanisms (Wilson & Stith, 1993). Many Black students articulate that their parents did not receive advanced degrees and it is beneficial to have an African American professor to assist with the transition from high school to college, and so forth (Jay & D’Augelli, 1991). Students also contemplate that African American faculty are more prone to bring up issues that pertain to the African American community, and hold discussions on race (Pollard, 1993). Wilson and Stith (1993) conducted a study examining African American students in a Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) master’s and doctoral program and its recruitment and retention strategies. Results indicated that the African American students reported that they often felt estranged from the rest of the group because of their ethnicity. A few students stated “Since there are only a few of us it means one or all of us may be the ‘dark spots’ in the class. So it’s usually hard to ignore us, but socially we are ignored” (Wilson & Stith, 1993, p. 26). Finally, Wilson and Stith found that African American students in the MFT program believed that faculty members from the same ethnic background would “make new inroads into the Black community” (Wilson & Stith, 1993, p.25).

Similarly, Palmer and Gasman’s study (2008) found that role models played a particularly important role in African American student’s success, specifically for males. Many of the male participants stated that they looked up to their professors, with whom
they shared similar interests. What is more, having faculty from the same ethnic background produced a sense of self-efficacy within them (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). One participant stated that he often looked at his African American male professors and thought “this person has been in the same situation I have, and look how successful he is” (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p. 62).

According to culturally relevant pedagogy, there is a distinct connection between culture and learning (Howard, 2003). Black students find that African American faculty are more prone to bring up topics that pertain to race, which is one of the key components of this theory. Within a culturally pedagogical framework, educators must be aware of how culture and society influence learning for students of color (Howard, 2003). In regards to achievement, African American students will excel when they are able to discuss real issues pertaining to their life in the classroom setting.

The few studies that have examined the relationship between Black student achievement and faculty role models have indicated that African American role models are an essential component in the success of students. Wilson and Stith (1993) found that a majority of the students expressed a concern with the lack of African American faculty in the MFT program. African American students are not the only underrepresented individuals in the school system (Pollard, 1993). Faculty and staff are also lacking in the institutional setting (Jay & D’Augelli, 1991). It has been found that the presence of African American faculty promote retention among Black students (Jay & D’Augelli, 1991; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Pollard, 1993, Smokowski et al., 1999; Wilson & Stith, 1993); therefore faculty representation needs to be further examined in regards to the
achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment.

The idea of faculty members at academic institutions serving as role models for young African American students is a concept that needs to be investigated further. Few studies have examined the fundamental factors of faculty desirability contributing to the academic achievement of Black college students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment. The current study will explore this critical relationship, in order for African American students to reach their fullest potential and enable policy makers and prevention specialist to create and promote interactive faculty-student programs.

**Advisors and Student Achievement**

Academic advising directly affects retention rates and persistence among college students (Allen & Smith, 2008). Students who seek advising services through their universities have a higher chance of graduating from college (Allen & Smith, 2008). However, few studies have examined the relationship between faculty members serving as advisors and the impact it has on African American student’s academic achievement. The research that is accessibly available, reveals that faculty advising is a significant determinate of successful African American students (Allen & Smith, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Researchers examining the relationship between faculty advisors and student achievement have found many significant functions that advisors serve. Smith and Allen (2008) conducted a study of university faculty as advisors to investigate (a) how
important it was to faculty that students received advising on the 12 advising functions, (b) how much of the responsibility the faculty thought it was to provide advising to students on the advising functions (c) and the satisfaction the faculty received from the advising that they performed. The 12 advising functions consisted of the following: “overall connection, major connection, general education connection, degree connection, out-of-class connection, referral academic, referral nonacademic, how things work, accurate information, skills & interests, know as individual, and share responsibility” (Allen & Smith, 2005, p.403).

Similarly, Allen and Smith (2008) found that the top-rated functions consisted of faculty members revealing accurate information to their students, feeling connected to their students overall, feeling connected to their students within their major, and making academic referrals to their students. Establishing an in depth relationship with students, taking into account their skills, abilities, and interests seemed to be unfavorable among professors (Jay & D’Augelli, 1991). According to faculty, they feel as though they are an asset to the success of students in providing educational and career assessments, as well as provide students with knowledge about resources and activities on campus (Allen & Smith, 2008)

Males particularly benefit from faculty advisors. Palmer and Gasman (2008) examined the relationship between faculty members as advisors and the achievement among African American males. Black male students reported that faculty advisors were extremely important because they offered guidance and support (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Many of the male participants had one particular faculty advisor who navigated
their college journey; which in turn, enhanced the students’ achievements. One participant noted, “If it wasn’t for my faculty mentor, I would have failed my college English course” (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p.63).

According to Tardy’s model on social support, it is imperative for students to receive social support from educators in order to excel academically (Tardy, 1985). Advisors can promote success and achievement among students, as they are a part of the network dimension of Tardy’s model. Advisors are a part of students’ support network, as they feel comfortable going to them for advice, questions, and concerns.

Previous research has indicated that students perform at higher rates if they feel as though their teachers are making an effort to know them on an individual level. If in fact, university professors are spending less time getting to know their students on an individual bases and more time on general career advising, African Americans’ college experience may suffer. The current study examined faculty members as motivators, advisors, and role models and how each role contributes to the academic achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment.

**Peer Support and Student Achievement**

Researchers have found that college students spend a majority of time with their peers; therefore peers can have profound impact on their lives, including academic performance (Somers et al., 2008). Previous research is contradictory when it comes to
peer interaction and academic achievement among Black students. Some suggest that peer relationships are an essential component that promotes achievement (Gibson, 2005; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Hubbard, 2005; Newman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Smokowski et al., 1999; Somer et al., 2008; Wilson & Stith, 1993), as they can be seen as a social and emotional comfort; whereas others suggest that peers negatively affect academic success, as African American students often hold a negative attitude towards school and ridicule each other for “acting White” (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Gibson, 2005; Harper, 2006; Hubbard, 2005; Smokowski et al., 1999; Somers et al., 2008).

According to previous research, peer support is predictive of academic achievement in African American students, both negatively and positively. Many researchers have specifically studied elementary and secondary students, leaving a gap in research in regards to post-secondary education. The current study builds upon previous research in investigating the role of peer interaction as it pertains to African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment.

**Support Groups and Achievement**

Social support plays an important role in motivating students to complete high school (Somer et al., 2008). Students provide each other with social and emotional support (Gibson, 2005). Somer et al., (2008) found that support from peers promotes academic achievement among African American 9th grade students. Peer relationships may be as important to the academic achievement of Black students as family support is
True friendships, described by Smokowski et al. (1999) are always around to provide support, as they offer positive perspectives and attitudes (2008). True or close-friendships can provide the positive interaction that students need in order to diminish the negative effects they may receive from negative peer interactions (Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

African American students who engage in pre-college programs have demonstrated a positive relationship between peer interaction and academic achievement (Hubbard, 2005; Neman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Wilson & Stith, 1993). Additionally, students who have experienced pre-college programs together often remain friends and encourage each during college (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). It is very relevant to have communications that touches-upon the effects of internalized racism, as it has an effect on the achievement of African American students. (Harper, 2006).

Students in the YSP program believed that the support that they received from each other positively affected their achievements (Newman & Newman, 1999). Ethnic students who engage in the same educational activities enhance academic achievement and reduce feelings of isolation. Similarly, female students who engage in the Advanced via Individual Determination (AVID) program relied on each other for academic support and positive decision-making. These students helped each other stay focused, and in return received higher GPA’s than non-AVID students (Hubbard, 2005).

Additional studies support the notion that Black students prevail when they are in programs with a high percentage of African American peers (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Wilson & Stith, 1993). Wilson and Stith (1993) examined graduate MFT students, and
found that many of the African American students in the program felt it would be academically beneficial if there were more Black students in their program. Many of the students admitted to feeling isolated and often singled out because they were one of the only, if not the only African American student in class (Wilson & Stith, 1993). One participant stated, “the whole concept is that there is support in numbers, you know just seeing other faces makes one more comfortable” (Wilson & Stith, 1993, p.26).

Palmer and Gasman (2008) examined peer interaction and achievement among male college students attending a HBCU and found that peer support among Black college students played a significant role in their achievements. The students admitted to feeling motivated and encouraged in school because they aspired to maintain high GPA’s with their peers within their major. One participant noted, “people that you hang around, they could lead you into doing things you do not want to do so, you have to hang around people who have the same goals and drive as you” (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, p.61). Black students count on each other for motivation, homework assistance, and to gain information about college (Gibson, 2005). Many of the students admitted to surrounding themselves with motivating and supportive peers (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Gasman and Palmer’s (2008) study examining HBCU students reveals that college students have the cognitive ability to place themselves in positive environments and with people that will benefit their academic achievement; whereas other studies (Gibson, 2005; Somers et al., 2008) examining elementary and high school students noted that they focus more on socialization. Nevertheless, the students in this particular study attended a Black university, which limits generalizations for all college students.
Previous studies suggest that African American students prevail academically when placed in environments of their ethnic majority (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Newman & Newman, 1999). The current study addressed the need to examine peer interaction among Black students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment as it relates to student achievement.

Research suggests that academic programs geared towards African American students are beneficial when promoting high GPA’s among students. Black elementary and high school students benefit from academic programs, however there is a need to examine such academic programs for college-aged students. The current study examines the relationship between positive peer interaction and academic achievement among African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment.

**Negative Impact of Peer Relationships and Achievement**

In some cases, African American students can be negatively affected by peer interaction. The few studies that have examined peer interaction and its effects on Black student achievement have consistently found that African American students maintain a negative image of school and high GPA’s. Furthermore, African American students often ridicule their high achieving peers about “acting white” and being actively involved in extracurricular activities (Ford et al., 2008; Gibson, 2005; Hubbard, 2005; Somers et al., 2008).

Somers et al., (2008) found that African American peers can have negative influence on
academics in grade school. Like many youth, African American students attempt to gain respect and approval from their peers; however particularly with Black students, the behaviors that they engage in discourage high academic achievement among boys (Hubbard, 2005). Black male students have low ambition to attain educational achievement; consequently their attitudes about school are passed on to their peers (Hubbard, 2005).

Previous research suggests that the accusation of “acting White” is associated with lower academic achievement among African American elementary and secondary school students (Ford et al., 2008; Gibson, 2005; Hubbard, 2005; Somers et al., 2008). Many African American students who receive high GPA’s are often referred to by their peers as “acting White,” so therefore students may choose not to perform to their fullest potential (Somers et al., 2008). African American elementary and high school students are often discouraged from completing school and homework, using standard English, enrolling in honors/AP classes, spending significant blocks of time with White students, receiving high GPA’s, and pursuing higher education as they are taunted by their peer about acting like a White person (Hubbard, 2005). Gibson (2005) found that Black male participants in his study were often teased and taunted by their classmates for answering questions that the teacher proposed.

Similarly to “acting White”, Ford et al., (2008) found that “acting Black” is also a concept in which African American students perceive themselves to display. Gifted African American students in Ford’s et al. study believed that “acting Black,” meant “lacking intelligence, placing a low priority on academics, speaking poorly, behaving
poorly, and dressing in ill-fitting clothes” (2008, p. 234). “Acting Black” is a concept that has yet to be explored in detail; however Ford et al., (2008) has uncovered a concept that has potentially affected the achievement of African American students.

Many African American students who are achieving high GPA’s in grades K-12 may “camouflage” their achievements because they feel it’s a necessity in order to fit in with other Black students (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). This essentially makes African American students choose between maintaining a sense of “Black pride” or deciding to excel in academics (Hubbard, 2005). However this has not been a consistent finding among college students (Harper, 2006). Harper (2006) found that Black college students look up to their parents, and peer behavior was not significantly associated with academics.

Smokowski et al., (1999) found that associates compared to true friendships have a negative impact on the academic achievement of African American students in the secondary school setting. Instead of promoting success, associates often encourage risky behaviors such as gang activity, pregnancy, and dropping out of high school (Smokowski et al., 2008). Associates also have a negative impact on student relationships with families and teachers, which can indirectly effect academic achievement among Black students (Smokowski et al., 2008). In addition, in group settings, Black students are particular about who they talk to about their academic achievements (Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

Research on peer relationships and its impact on academic achievement is lacking and contradicting. Peer support groups seem to positively effect college students, yet,
depending on the circumstances negatively effect younger adolescents. Future research needs to examine this relationship among Black students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment in order for there to be an accurate assessment of successful support strategies for Black students’ achievements. Additionally, the theory of “acting white” has not been examined among college students and may play a role in the underrepresentation in 4-year institutions.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the need for research on African American college students’ academic achievement and the contribution of social factors needs to be further examined. The role of family support has been thoroughly examined and indicates that parental support plays a significant role in the achievements of African American students. Parents must have a clear understanding of what they can provide to the success of their children in order to promote higher education and retention. The interaction between Black students and faculty/staff have also been examined and noted as a key factor in promoting success. The representation of faculty/staff of color and the benefits that they provide are important factors that will enhance the achievements and retention of African American students. It is not clear from previous research whether or not faculty support has the same effect on African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black Student enrollment. The study will examine this population and the importance of the various types of support being offered in diverse institutions. In
addition, prior research suggests that peer interaction in relation to student achievement has positive and negative effects, which is a reason for further examination. The effects of peer support in higher education have been minimally examined and not at all examined at a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment. The study will examine the role of peers and the influence they have on the achievement on African American student achievement. It is safe to say the healthier Black students’ relationships are with parents, faculty/teachers, and peers the higher they will achieve. Previous research has not explored these social factors and how they contribute to the academic achievement of students at attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. This is why it is essential to examine what social factors contribute to the academic achievement among African American college students attending a diverse institution.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Design of Study

There were three main aims in the current study. First, the author examined the relations of faculty support and peer support to academic achievement and persistence among African American college students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. Second, the author looked at the perceived importance of faculty and peer support in relation to the frequency of support being offered to Black students. Lastly, the author employed a focus group method in order to gain a better understanding of the correlational data and students’ perceptions on the importance and frequency of faculty support and the negative and positive aspects of peer interaction.

This study was conducted in two phases. Phase one encompassed administering the *Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale* (CASSS) survey to 43 undergraduate African American students attending a university with low Black student enrollment. The CASSS was used to assess African American students’ relationships with professors, peers, and close friends in order to examine their correlations with the students’ achievement. In addition the CASSS allowed for a test of the relationship between the importance and frequency of support being offered to students.
Phase two consisted of a focus group interview executed with a subsample of four African American students who completed Phase one of the study. The focus group interview included an in-depth discussion on the role of faculty support and peer interaction and their relationship to the achievement of African American students. Specifically, the focus group session touched upon specific characteristics of supportive faculty at an institution with low black student enrollment. In addition, the positive and negative aspect of friendship support was addressed in the focus group session. An expansion of the CASSS, the focus group addressed personal experiences and specific insight into factors that promote retention and achievement. The focus group data were analyzed using content analysis to find emerging key themes. The text was analyzed and grouped into categories and phrases and coding was done for word usage within the text (Wilson, 1997; Bertrand, Brown, Ward, 1992).

**Institutional Demographics**

Participants were recruited from California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). CSUS is an institution with low Black student enrollment; specifically, only 7% of the student body is African American, in contrast to 42% of students being Caucasian (CSUS Office of Institutional Research, 2008). The remaining student population consists of 17% Asian/Pacific Islander, 14% Hispanic, 2% Foreign, 1% Native American, and 17% other (see Table 1). In 2008, 29,011 students were enrolled at CSUS, with 83% of the student population being undergraduates. The average age of students attending CSUS is
24 years-of-age with 58% percent of all students being women. The Majority of the CSUS students attend school fulltime, and one-third of the population receives financial assistance. Faculty at CSUS consists of 51.3% male and 41% of students are males.

**Table 1**

*CSUS Student Ethnicity Demographics 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Retention among students of color attending CSUS has steadily declined since 2003. Eighty percent of first-time freshman re-enrolled for their second year in 2003; whereas roughly 77% of first-time freshman continued at CSUS their second year in 2007. CSUS demographic statistics indicate that the majority of first-time freshman graduate with a Bachelors degree within 6 years. In the 2007-2008 academic school year
47.6% of White/Caucasian students received a Bachelors degree, compared to 17.2 African American students.

Less than one-fourth of the faculty population at CSUS is of color (see Table 2). Seventy-two percent of CSUS faculty are White/Caucasian according to the 2008 University Faculty and Staff Demographic Facts book. Just 22.8% of faculty is of color, and only 4.3% African Americans. More than half of CSUS staff are White/Caucasian (56.5%), and only 9.5% are African American. The majority of staff members consist of women (60.3%). Table 2 depicts the ethnicity breakdown of faculty at California State University, Sacramento.

**Table 2**

*CSUS Faculty Ethnicity Demographics 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants

One hundred and one participants were recruited from lower and upper division courses in the Pan-African studies minor program at CSUS. They were specifically enrolled and recruited from the following courses: Introduction to Pan African Studies (ENTH 70), Pan African Studies (ENTH 170), and Africa: Myths and Realities (ENTH 10). A majority of the participants identified themselves as being of only African American descent. Seven students labeled themselves as being half African American and half of another ethnicity (Puerto-Rican, Cuban, White/Caucasian, Hispanic, Ethiopian and Korean). All of the participants were undergraduate freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior student attending CSUS.

In Phase one of the study, 101 students completed the CASSS survey. Of those students, 43 identified themselves as being an undergraduate African American student and served as the sample for the current study. The average age of the African American participants was 19.05 (SD= 1.61). A majority of the participants were female (n = 27) freshman students (n = 26). Fourteen students were the first in their family to attend college, and 11 students had taken community college units prior to enrolling in their ethnic studies course(s) (Table 3).

In Phase two, four students (one male and three females) participated in the focus group session. The average age of the participants who joined the focus group was 19 years. One participant was of sophomore status and the other three students were first-year freshmen. Eighteen students in the recruitment classes showed interest in joining the
focus group by signing up to be contacted; seven of those students identified themselves as being an African American freshman or sophomore students. Out of the seven self-identified African American students, six agreed to participate in the focus group session and only four out of the six actually participated.

**Procedure**

During recruitment, the coordinator of the CSUS Pan African Studies Minor program was contacted. The program coordinator recommended courses to target that had a high percentage of African American students. The recommended professors were contacted via email, telephone, and office hours to arrange which courses would be the most effective in administering the CASSS survey to their students.

The primary researcher arranged to visit each classroom in the beginning of the fall semester to ensure that each student had sufficient time to complete the CASSS survey. The students were given a general overview of the research topic and informed that every portion of the survey was voluntary and confidential and they had the choice to withdraw themselves at any given time. The interested participants were asked to complete a consent form stating they were willing to complete the CASSS survey.

Participants who signed the consent form were given a background questionnaire and the CASSS survey to complete. Any interested student could complete the CASSS survey, including students who did not identify themselves as being of African American
Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and Cuban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and Korean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and Ethiopian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
descent. One hundred and one participants completed the CASSS survey; from those, 43 identified themselves as being an undergraduate African American students. A majority of the students completed the survey within 15 minutes. Participants were offered compensation in the form of healthy snacks.

After the CASSS survey materials were retrieved from all of the participants, they were given general information about the focus group session. Interested students who completed the CASSS survey were asked to sign-up for the session, and were informed that a group would be randomly selected from the sign-up sheet. Students who did not identify themselves as being of African American descent were allowed to sign-up for the focus group. Eighteen interested participants signed up to attend the focus group session, seven of them identifying themselves as being of African American descent.

After all CASSS surveys were retrieved, they were sorted through in terms of ethnicity. CASSS surveys were only included in the statistical analysis when participants identified themselves as being all or of partial African American decent (n=43).

All of the seven interested African American participants were contacted to join the focus group session. The focus group session took place on the CSUS campus in a classroom environment. The primary researcher collected the focus group consent forms, facilitated the discussion, and audio taped the participants; a second researcher took extensive notes on key themes.
Measures

Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale

In Phase one of the study, the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) by Malecki, Demaray, Elliott, & Nolten, (2002) was used to assess social factors (parents, teachers, classmates, and friends) that promote children’s and adolescents’ achievement. CASSS is a multi-dimensional scale that has four different subscales, with 12-questions per each subscale of social support (Malecki and Demaray, 2002). In this study, the “teacher,” “classmate” and “friend” subscales were used. The CASSS measures both importance and frequency of each item. Frequency was rated by measuring the questions on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Always.” Importance was rated by measuring the questions on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from “Not Important” to “Very Important.” The original CASSS had two levels of questions; level 1 for 3rd-6th grade students and level 2 for 7th-12th grade students. In the current study, Level 2 questions were utilized and adapted from the original questions in order to measure freshman and sophomore college students’ perception of social support. The faculty support questions were changed to state “professor(s)” in place of “teacher(s).” The phrasing of five of the questions (7, 8, 9, 10, & 12) in the “professor(s)” subscale were adapted to reflect freshman and sophomore college students’ experiences. The following are examples of adapted questions: “my professor(s) cares about me,” “my classmates treat me with respect” and “my close friend gives me ideas when I don't know what to do.” A sum for
each subscale (faculty, classmate, and close-friend) was computed and correlated separately with GPA. See Appendix E for instrument.

**Background Measure**

Each participant filled out an individual background survey, which consisted of questions regarding the age, gender, grade level, previous community college units, family generation status in the US and ethnicity of the students. The background survey also asked participants to self-report their grade point averages, as it was used as an outcome variable for measuring academic achievement and persistence. Research suggests that undergraduate students are accurate in self-reporting their GPA’s (Talento-Miller & Peyton, 2006). Grades were rated on a 4.0 scale, with 4.0 being the highest possible GPA. See Appendix A for instrument.

**Focus Group Questions**

In Phase two, questions from a CSUS student’s thesis project (Harven, 2003) were adapted for the focus group session in order to assess the specific predictors of faculty and peer support in relation to academic achievement. The focus group categories consisted of faculty and peer support, which included questions pertaining to the importance of each support group. The following are examples of adapted questions that were utilized in the focus group session: “How do you know that your professor(s) care about you?”, “How important is it for your professors to discuss the contributions of your culture in class?”, and “How comfortable do you feel about talking to your peers about
school assignments and personal life?”. The focus groups questions were an extension of the survey, giving specific insight and personal examples to the areas identified in the survey. The focus group session was 2 hours and 22 minutes in length. See Appendix D for interview protocol.

**Data Analysis**

A descriptive and correlational analysis was conducted on the 43 applicable surveys. The primary researcher analyzed the focus group data using content analysis to find emerging key themes. Content analysis determined frequent occurrences of certain words or concepts within a text. The text was analyzed and grouped into categories and phrases and coding was done for word usage within the text (Bertrand, Brown, Ward, 1992; Wilson, 1997). The focus group data was transcribed and coded for key themes.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The results of the statistical analysis and the focus group are divided into two Phases. The first Phase focused on the CASSS survey data; these data were first analyzed for the effects of frequency of social support on GPA, and then analyzed for the correlation among the frequency and importance of social support. Two types of social support were analyzed: faculty and peer support. Phase two involved the focus group data; these qualitative data were analyzed for emerging faculty and peer group support themes.

Phase 1: Survey Data

There were 101 students from classes in the Pan African studies major who completed the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale. Of those students, 43 participants identified themselves as African American undergraduate students; their survey data were selected and analyzed. A correlation analysis was conducted with the subscale scores of the CASSS (faculty support, classmate support, and close-friend support) and GPA was used as the criterion of academic performance.
**Frequency of Social Support**

The CASSS was used to examine the relationship between the frequency of social support and the GPA’s of African American students. Responses to each category of support (faculty, classmate, and close friend) were summed, with each participant having six support scores—i.e., three scores for frequency of support and three scores for importance of support. Students’ possible scores were 0 to 72 on the frequency of each kind of support and 0 to 36 on the importance of each kind of support. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations for scores within each of the three separate categories. The mean for the students in classmate support (55.54) was the highest, followed by faculty support (52.7), and then classmate support (47.28).

**Table 4**

*Means and Standard Deviations of Frequency Social Support Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>(n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate Support</td>
<td>47.28</td>
<td>12.04</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Friend Support</td>
<td>55.54</td>
<td>14.50</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, the scores for each of the subscales were analyzed for correlations between frequency of support (from faculty, classmates and close friends) and students’ GPAs (see Table 5). The results for faculty support ratings and GPA were not statistically significant, \( r(41) = .007, p > .05 \). The correlation for classmate support ratings and GPA were also not statistically significant, \( r(41) = .062, p > .05 \), and the correlation for close friend support and GPA was also not statistically significant, \( r(41) = .061, p > .05 \).

Means and standard deviations for each question in the frequency categories of professor, classmate, and close-friends support were computed. In the faculty category, descriptive statistics indicated that the ability for professors to make it easy to ask questions in the classroom \( (M=5.0, SD=1.04) \) was rated as the most frequent quality of social support that professors provide. The least frequent support characteristic of professors was making sure required text was available \( (M=3.83, SD=1.27) \). In the classmate category, the most frequent quality was treating each other nicely \( (M=4.94, SD=1.12) \). The least frequent behavior for classmates was to spend time doing things together \( (M=3.55, SD=1.50) \). Finally, the third section described that close friends stick up for each other when others are treating them badly \( (M=4.87, SD=1.34) \). However, statistics show that close friends do not frequently tell each other they like what they do \( (M=4.48, SD=1.50) \).
Table 5

*Correlations Among frequency of Social Support Source Scores and GPA*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>$r$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate Support</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Friend Support</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

*Correlation Matrix for Frequency of Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faculty Support</th>
<th>Classmate Support</th>
<th>Close-Friend Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-Friend Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceived Importance of Social Support

The CASSS was also used to examine the perceived importance of social support to students’ academic achievement. Responses to each category of support (faculty, classmate, and close friend) were summed, with each participant having three support scores. Students’ possible scores were 0 to 36 on the importance of each kind of support. Table 8 displays the means and standard deviations for the three separate categories.

### Table 7

Means and Standard Deviations of Importance of Social Support Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>(n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td>29.94</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate Support</td>
<td>24.45</td>
<td>7.57</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Friend Support</td>
<td>28.51</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each question in all three categories of importance (faculty, classmate, and close friend) was averaged to find the most important social support qualities, as perceived by the students. The mean for the students in faculty support (29.94) was the highest, followed by close friend support (28.51), and then classmate support (24.45). In the faculty category, descriptive statistics indicated that the ability for professors to make it
easy to ask questions in the classroom ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.38$) and explaining things well ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.41$) were rated as the most important qualities of social support that professors provide. The least important support characteristic of professors was to care for students ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 0.52$).

In the classmate category, the most important quality was for classmates to give good advice to each other ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.66$). The least important behavior for classmates to display was to notice the hard work of the students around them ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.79$). Finally, the third section revealed that students want their close friends to help them when they need it ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.55$) and explain things that they don’t understand ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.4$). However, students rated as less important for close friends to share their personal items ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.62$) or tell them what they like to do ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.78$).

**Correlation between the Frequency and Importance of Social Support**

A correlational analysis was conducted on the importance and frequency ratings of social support. For instance, faculty frequency was correlated with faculty importance scores. Each of the three categories (faculty, classmate, and close friend) of importance ratings and frequency ratings were examined separately to determine the relationship of the quantity of social support being offered and how high the importance of the support was rated. The correlation between faculty support and the perceived importance was not statistically significant, $r (38) = .185$, $p > .05$. 
A second correlation analysis was conducted on the frequency of classmate support and its perceived importance, and results indicated it to be statistically significant, \( r (38) = .442, p < .01 \). This implies that the more classmate support that students reported, the more highly they rated it as important. Finally, the importance of close friend support and its relationship with the frequency of support being accessible was not statistically significant, \( r (38) = .292, p > .05 \). Table 8 shows the correlation scores between frequency and importance ratings.

**Table 8**

*Correlation among CASSS Importance Rating and Frequency Rating*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Support</th>
<th>( r )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmate</td>
<td>.442**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Friend</td>
<td>.192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01**
Summary of Statistical Analysis

In this statistical analysis, the correlations between each support factor (professor, classmate, and close-friend) and African American college students’ GPAs were found not to be statistically significant. The correlation between the perceived importance of professor and close-friend support and the perceived frequency of professor and close-friend support were also found not to be statistically significant; however, the perceived importance of classmate support and the perceived frequency of classmate support were found to be statistically significant.

Phase 2: Focus Group Data

A focus group meeting was held with a subsample of four students taken from the larger survey sample, in order to expand on the statistical analysis and further examine how faculty support and peer interaction might affect the achievement of African American students. Transcripts of the focus group were examined for salient themes related to social support in the university context. Three support-related themes emerged in the focus group discussion on faculty support (accessibility of professors, role modeling, and teaching styles), and two support-related themes emerged from the focus group discussion of peer support (positive influence on achievement and negative influence on achievement).
Faculty Support Themes

**Accessibility of Professors.** All of the participants’ responses regarding faculty support indicated that they wanted faculty members to be more accessible in order to promote academic achievement among students of color. More accessibility would offer students the ability to individually meet with professors when they are struggling with assignments. Participants felt as though professors need more office hours so students may have more one-on-one time as desired. The students also mentioned that they felt professors need to be more motivated and passionate about what they are teaching; which would ultimately encourage and inspire students. One female student expressed “a teacher isn’t the right word to use because I don’t think they are really teaching, they just give you the material and that’s it.” In addition, participants expressed that professors need to be more approachable. One female freshman student explained, “I don’t even want to ask questions in class because I will be embarrassed that my question is stupid.”

**Role modeling.** All of the four participants specified that faculty of color act as role models and inspire them to pursue prestigious positions. The students believe that it is imperative to see successful African American people, especially professors, because it boosts their (students) confidence and promotes success. One freshman male student explained how he felt the first day of class, as he found out one of his professors was African American, “Wow, I have a Black professor, I was shocked!” Many of the participants agreed that it is always shocking, yet inspiring, when they have an African American professor. Another sophomore female student expressed her concerns about what African Americans are taught in America, “We (African Americans) are taught by
America that we are below other people, so that’s what we start to believe.” All of the students expressed the importance of not only having more African American professors, but more faculty of color in general.

**Teaching styles.** All of the participants agreed that the following are all behaviors that faculty can do promote the success of ethnic students: incorporate more of students’ culturally relevant experiences into lectures and class discussions, include more examples of personal life experiences that relate to the lives of students of color, and provide the opportunity for more group activities and peer discussion in the classroom. All of the participants felt as though professors need to make more of an effort to relate course readings, lectures, and assignments to the students’ cultural and real life experiences, as it would be more interesting for the students, ultimately keeping them motivated to learn. Participants explained that they wanted to learn more about culture in general, not just about the African American culture. Group activities are very beneficial in promoting diversity and cultural awareness because they allow students to express their point of view and discuss reasoning behind it. One sophomore female explained, “I had a political science class once, and my teacher told us to get into groups and talk about affirmative action; it was the best discussion I ever had.”

**Peer Group Support Themes**

**Positive influence on achievement.** All of the students agreed that classmates and close friends can be both a positive and negative influence on their academic achievement. Positively, classmates and close friends can motivate and encourage
students to complete assignments and stay in school. One male student explained, “classmates offer a variety of different views which will stimulate your mind.” All participants agreed that classmates help each other to be more responsible, dependable, and better managers of time. In addition, students agreed that close friends who are on the same academic level as you (or a higher academic level) act as motivators. One freshman female student’s response was “it is important to have the right friends, people who are going to provide you with support and motivation.” In addition, participants agreed that students of color are of great importance in the classroom because they offer various personal experiences that are relevant to all ethnic students’ lives. The participants expressed that they value classmates that express similar experiences as their own.

**Negative influence on achievement.** All of the participants believed that close friends could potentially have a negative impact on academic achievement. One female student explained a divide between friendships and education, “I feel like it (the problem) is friends vs. education, I don’t want to be too smart because it will be hard for me to find other educated African American friends and a companion.” One participant expressed, “when I go back to my old neighborhood in Oakland, I have old friends who hate on me because I go to college.” Participants expressed that there is a pressure not to “act White,” which was defined as speaking properly, receiving good grades and taking honor classes. One male student stated, “I have to separate my school friends from my neighborhood friends because they wouldn’t mix.”
Summary of Focus Group Analysis

From the analysis of the focus group session, three themes of faculty support and two themes of peer interaction emerged: accessibility of professors, role modeling, teaching styles, and the positive and negative effects of peer interaction. The accessibility of professors and teaching styles were new emerging themes that have not been previously discussed in prior research. These findings imply that African American students respond positively to professors making themselves available and approachable to students. In addition, these African American students preferred professors whose teaching styles relate to their own culturally-based life experiences. Furthermore, consistent with previous research, peers can provide positive support, as well as a negative impact on the achievement of African American students.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to first examine the relations of faculty support and peer support to academic achievement and persistence among African American college students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. Second, this study looked at the perceived importance of faculty and peer support in relation to the frequency of support being offered to Black students. Lastly, the study employed a focus group method in order to gain a better understanding of the correlational data and students’ perceptions of the importance and frequency of faculty support and the negative and positive aspects of peer interaction. The discussion is divided into two sections: faculty support and peer interaction.

Faculty Support

Survey data on associations between faculty support and academic achievement of African American students who attended a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment was the first main focus of the study. The correlation between faculty support and GPA was found not to be statistically significant. These findings are not consistent with previous research, which shows that faculty support provides students with encouragement and motivation, role modeling, and student advising services (Allen & Smith, 2008; Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Newman & Newman,
In addition, the importance of support in relation to the frequency of faculty support was found not to be statistically significant. These findings may not have been statistically significant because of the low sample size, the restricted range of GPA’s, and a possible lack of reliability and restricted range of the CASSS instrument.

The descriptive statistics from the survey revealed the faculty behaviors and characteristics that African American students find support their achievements. Students find it important for faculty to explain things well and make it easy to ask questions during lectures. These findings correspond with previous research, as Russell and Atwater (2000) explain the importance of having caring, supportive, and encouraging educators who are knowable and approachable. These findings suggest that students’ views on the factors that they believe to be important to their own achievement should be valued by faculty trainers and professors.

Many themes emerged in the focus group analyses that correspond with previous research. The first emerging theme found was the importance of cultural and relevant life experience referencing in lectures and course curriculum, which reported by the students as promoting the achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. These findings coincide with the theoretical framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This theory states that students of color are most receptive to learning when relevant life experiences and cultural referencing are implemented in school curriculum (Howard, 2001). These findings indicate that course curriculum needs to be re-evaluated and relevant cultural referencing and relevant life experiences need to become a consistent part of national
Secondly, an emerging “role modeling” theme was reported as a significant factor in promoting the achievement of Black students, as it builds confidence and self esteem, and motivates students to achieve prestigious positions in leadership. According to Wilson and Stith, (1993), Black students view African American professors as mentors, people to whose status they aspire to reach. Furthermore, Black students can relate their personal life experiences with those of their African American professors. These findings suggest there is a need for more African American professors in diverse institutions with low Black student enrollment.

Lastly, a new theme emerged in the focus group analysis on faculty support, not yet widely studied in previous research, suggesting that professors who are more accessible and approachable may have a positive impact on the achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment. Black students excel academically when they have the ability to meet individually with their professors for clarification of assignments or course curriculum, suggesting that professors teaching at diverse institutions with low Black student enrollment need to be more accessible for students of color. As previously stated, Allen and Smith (2008) found that faculty provide a wide-range of duties, all the way from career assessment to goal planning. Faculty are an asset to the achievement of students as they provide them with information in regards to valuable resources and multicultural activities that are on campus. If faculty spent an adequate amount of time assisting their students through individual meetings, many of these components of success could be addressed. The
emerging themes from the focus group analysis comply with Tardy’s model (1985) on social support. Tardy (1985) explained that the five dimensions of social support (direction, disposition, description/evaluation, network, and content) are the foundation for understanding the achievements of students. It is important for students to give, as well as receive, an adequate amount of support that is beneficial to their individual situations. For instance, financial support, advising, and faculty displaying a caring attitude, are examples of supportive factors that are imperative for educational attainment.

Although the students in the focus group session found faculty at CSUS to lack diversity and accessibly, it is important to contextualize these findings. Most of the participants in the focus group session were either first year freshman or sophomore students who have not yet established meaningful relationships with faculty on campus. In addition, many of the courses that the students were recruited from were large classrooms, ranging from approximately 30-40 students. Therefore, students may have felt the large classroom sizes affected the accessibility of their professors.

**Peer Interaction**

The second main focus of the study, the relation between peer interaction academic achievement (GPA) of African American students attending a diverse institution with low Black student enrollment, was also found not to be statistically significant. These findings are also not consistent with previous research showing that
peer interaction has positive and negative effects on the achievement of African American students (Gibson, 2005; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Hubbard, 2005; Newman & Newman, 1999; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Smokowski et al., 2008; Somer et al., 2008). Positively, peers act as motivators, and provide social and emotional support (Somer et al., 2008). Negatively, African American peers ridicule each other for achieving to their fullest academic potential (Hubbard, 2005). These findings may also differ with previous research due to the small sample size and restricted range of variables.

However, the perceived importance of classmate support was found to be significantly correlated with the rated frequency of support. This implies that African American students believe classmate support to be important in relation to the amount of support being offered. In other words, Black students who perceive classmate support to be important are being offered support more frequently. This finding was not found to be true of close friendship support. The correlation between the importance and frequency of close friend support was not found to be statistically significant. This finding reveals that positive close friendship support is not perceived to be important to how much it regularly occurs. Discounting theory is the process of students not receiving social support and “downplaying” or “discounting” the importance of supportive factor(s) (Demaray et al., 2009, p. 15). In accordance with this theory, African American students do not receive adequate amounts of social support, therefore they downplay the importance of supportive factors. This implies that African American students are not fully aware of what social support consists of and further research needs to investigate this notion.
According to the descriptive statistics from the survey data, students rated the following peer qualities as the most pertinent to educational attainment: the ability to give good advice, help out when needed, and explain things that are difficult to comprehend. Palmer and Gasman (2008) described all of these qualities as being imperative to the achievement of Black students.

The focus group findings found two emerging peer support themes (positive influence on achievement and negative influence on achievement), from the analysis of four African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. Peer interaction was a social support factor examined in the focus group, which also produced emerging themes not consistent with the survey data on peer support. In accordance with previous research, the focus group members said that peer interaction had both a positive and negative effect on the academic achievement of African American students. Positive peer interactions provide African American students with encouragement and motivation, as well as promote responsibility, dependability and management of time. Palmer and Gasman (2008) explain that Black students who surround themselves with motivating and encouraging individuals are more likely to excel academically. This finding should prompt parents, teachers, and students to be more aware of outside influences affecting academic achievement.

The second emerging theme revealed the negative effect that peer interaction has on the academic achievement of African American students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student enrollment. The concept of
‘friendships vs. education’ is the driving force for students failing to reach their fullest academic potential. Students who are surrounded with individuals who are not headed in the same academic direction as themselves, and who cannot offer motivation and support will negatively impact the achievements of Black students. “Acting White” is a term that previous researchers have identified as African Americans taunting each other about trying to act like a White person, by excelling academically, completing homework assignments, and enrolling in AP courses (Gibson, 2005; Hubbard, 2005; Somers et al., 2008). Hubbard (2005) explains that Black students feel the need to gain respect from their African American peers, which may cause conflict to occur between friendships and school. Future research needs to expand on this concept of ‘education vs. friendships’ in order for these important factors to coincide with one another. John Obgu, a pioneer in educational research among African American students, argued that the community and children’s social systems have a profound impact on their attitudes towards schooling, and attaining achievement in not solely rested on the shoulders of the child (Foster, 2004). Furthermore, the emerging concept of “acting Black” should be further examined in order for students to feel comfortable and confident in performing to their best ability.

**Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations in the study that may have affected the significance of the correlations. First, the study was conducted on freshman and sophomore college students who obtained a high enough GPA to be accepted into the CSU system. The high
GPA’s (M=3.05) used as the criterion for academic achievement could have affected the significance of social support for African American students because there was not a significant comparison between high and low GPA’s. The GPA's ranged from 2.4 to 4.0 on a 4.0 scale. Students who participated in this study could have volunteered due to their high GPA, ultimately distorting the high and low range of academic achievement. In addition, many of the first year freshman students did not yet have GPA’s from CSUS, therefore they reported their GPA’s from high school.

Second, the only significant correlation was the relationship between the perceived importance and frequency of classmate support. This implies that African American students may have received such minimal academic support from faculty and close friendships, that they are not fully aware of all that faculty and close friendship support truly entails; consequently rating the frequency and importance of support to be insignificant. Third, many of the participants were first semester freshman students who have not had the opportunity to acquire a positive support relationship with faculty and classmates.

Fourth, the testing instrument utilized (CASSS) was designed originally for 7th-12th grade students, which could have affected the correlation analysis. Even though CASSS instrument and the focus group questions were adapted for college level students, they might not have been relevant enough towards college level students. Finally, the low sample size (N=43) may have affected the significance of the data. Survey analysis typically requires large sample sizes to detect significance.
Conclusion

Inconsistent with previous research, this study has not found social support to play a vital role in the academic achievement and persistence of Black students attending a diverse institution of higher education with low Black student’s enrollment. Although the only statistical correlations to be found significant was the relationship between the perceived importance of classmate support and the rated frequency of support, the focus group analysis validated the importance of faculty and peer support. This study found role modeling, employment of cultural referencing and relevant life experiences in lectures and course curriculum, and the accessibility and approachability of faculty members to play a vital supportive role in the achievements of Black students. Furthermore, peers can provide support in the form of motivation and encouragement, as well as teaching valuable characteristics, such as responsibility, dependability, and time-management. Unfortunately, peers can be a hindrance to the achievement of Black students, as they can discourage students from performing to their best abilities.

This study has added to previous research and has found new concepts that have yet to be examined. Specifically, this study found teaching orientation to play a role in the achievement of Black students. Black college students learn best when they feel their professors are passionate about the topics they are teaching and motivated to challenge students to learn. What is more, Black students desire professors who are open-minded and amicable, as they will become more comfortable in the classroom, and feel free to express their opinions.
Several future studies can be conducted from limitations emerging in this study. First, due to the statistically insignificant correlation results, a follow-up should be conducted with a larger sample of freshman and sophomore students using the CASSS. Second, this study should be extended to other ethnic groups, as it may provide insight to the social support factors contributing to all students of color. Third, social support factors contributing to the achievement of African American students should be examined using more focus groups and individual interviews, to provide research with more personal insight and real life experiences as they pertains to achievement. Finally, the concept of education vs. friendships should be further examined in order for Black students to understand how to balance the importance of both.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Background Questionnaire
Background Questionnaire

Age:

Current Grade Point Average (G.P.A) on 4-point scale (1-4):

Sex: (Male or Female)

How would you describe your Ethnicity?

Grade Level: (Freshman or Sophomore)

How many generations has your family been in the United States?

Are you the first generation in your family to attend college (Yes or no)?

Have you taken any units at a community college? If so, how many?
APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions
Questions for Focus Group Discussion

**Faculty Support:**

1. How do you know if your professors care about you?

2. What can your professors do to make the classroom feel like home?
   
   a. *Are you allowed to work often with your peers?*
   
   b. *Does your professor allow you to express your creativity with assignments?*

3. What comments have your professors made that remind you of a family member? (Has your professors said or done anything to remind you of your mother, father, grandmother, etc.)
   
   a. *How important is it to know that you can trust your professors?*
   
   b. *How do you feel when your professors listen to your comments?*

4. What values has your professors taught you?
   
   a. *Respect; responsibility; perseverance? Working together w/classmates?*

5. How important is it for your professors to discuss the contributions of your culture in class? (Values, customs, language, holidays)
   
   a. *Would this make you feel uncomfortable?*

6. What do your professors do when you do not understand something?
   
   a. *Use personal examples; relate assignments to real life situations*
   
   b. *Take time to help you understand; help you to develop/improve academic skills?*
c. Do you feel “smarter” after your professors help you to understand something?

7. What goals have you discussed with your professors?
   a. How do you know if your professor’s support your aspirations/dreams/future plans? Have they discussed the possibility of going to graduate school?

8. Do you feel more comfortable taking courses with professors of the same ethnic background as yourself?
   a. Do professors of the same ethnic background as yourself encourage you to stay in college and complete assignments?
   b. Do you perform better academically in courses where your professor is of the same ethnicity as you?

Peer Support:

1. How do you know if your peers care about you?

2. How do your peers make learning fun and exciting?
   a. What can your peers do to make you want to learn or focus on assignments?

3. What values has your peers taught you?
   b. Respect; responsibility; perseverance? Working together w/classmates?

4. How comfortable do you feel talking with you peers about school assignments and your personal life?
   a. Do you often have conversations that are not school related?
5. Do you feel more comfortable working on assignments with students from the same ethnic background as yourself?
   a. Do peers from the same ethnic background as yourself encourage you to stay in college and complete assignments?
   b. Do you perform better academically in courses where you have more peers that are the same ethnicity as yourself?

6. What are the benefits of working in group?

7. What goals have you discussed with your peers?
   a. How do you know if your peer’s support your aspirations/dreams/future plans?
APPENDIX C

CASSS Survey

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SOCIAL SUPPORT SCALE
My Professors…

...Cares about me.
...Is fair to me.
...Makes it okay to ask questions.
...Explains things that I don’t understand.
...Shows me how to do things.
...Helps me solve problems by giving me information.
...Acknowledges positive qualities in my assignment.
...Provides helpful suggestions on improving academically.
...Tells me how well I do on assignments.
...Makes sure the required text is available.
...Takes time to help me learn to do something well.
...Is available to provide feedback at office hours and individual appointments.

My Classmates...

...Treat me nicely.
...Like most of my ideas and opinions.
...Pay attention to me.
...Give me ideas when I don’t know what to do.
...Give me information so I can learn new things.
...Give me good advice.
...Tell me I did a good job when I’ve done something well.
...Nicely tell me when I make mistakes.
...Notice when I have worked hard.
...Ask me to join activities.
...Spend time doing things with me.
...Help me with projects in class.

My Close Friend…
…Understands my feelings.
…Sticks up for me if others are treating me badly.
…Helps me when I'm lonely.
…Gives me ideas when I don't know what to do.
…Gives me good advice.
…Explains things that I don't understand.
…Tells me he or she likes what I do.
…Nicely tells me when I make mistakes.
…Nicely tells me the truth about how I do things.
…Helps me when I need it.
…Shares his or her things with me.

…Takes time to help me solve my problems.
REFERENCES


