LET THE TRUTH BE TOLD: REFLECTIONS OF FIRST YEAR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE UNDERGRADUATES

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THESIS

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A Thesis

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iii
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8-13-09

Date

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Abstract

of

LET THE TRUTH BE TOLD: REFLECTIONS OF FIRST YEAR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE UNDERGRADUATES

by

Michele Kimberly Dyke

Brief Literature Review

Academia is filled with studies that indicate the decline and absence of African American males in higher education (Wilson, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Gibbs, 1988). Research on the academic achievement of African American males has continuously been approached from a deficit model, a model that focuses on the problems instead of evaluating the strengths. Despite the dismal outlook for many African American males, there are stories of success.

Statement of Problem

This qualitative study explores how family members, teachers and other school personnel, peers, and the community have supported first year African American male undergraduates’ academic success. Specifically, this study will address the following research questions:

1. What role do family members play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?
2. What role do teachers/school personnel play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

3. What role do peers play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

4. What role does the community play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

**Methodology**

This study shares the story of ten academically successful African American first year undergraduates. The data was based on the participants’ responses from semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were subjected to content analysis to determine common themes.

This qualitative study addresses the decline and absence of African American males in higher education by focusing on ten first year African American undergraduate students who have successfully navigated the educational pipeline and entered higher education.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study concluded that while African American males may face hurdles in navigating the academic pipeline with the support of family members, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community to push them along, academic success is obtainable.
The results of this study can be used by educators, parents and policy makers to create initiatives to support, promote, and encourage the educational success of all students, in particular African American males.

Edmund W. Lee, Ed.D
Committee Chair
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family with love-

Mommy: your unconditional love keeps me going.

Clinton: your continuous support made this possible. I could not have done this without you.

Cherelle and Jordan: you are the reason that I do what I do. Yes Jordan, “I can play now”.

viii
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Background</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Remainder of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Historical Perspective on African American Higher Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The African American Male Experience in Education</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Trends in Higher Education Participation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Impacting African American Male Achievement</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Path to College</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Pipeline</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................ 35
   Introduction ............................................................................................................... 35
   Research Design .................................................................................................... 36
   Design of the Study ................................................................................................ 37
   Data Collection ........................................................................................................ 38
   Data Analysis Procedures ...................................................................................... 41
   Limitations of the Study ......................................................................................... 41

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS ........................................................................ 43
   Introduction ............................................................................................................... 43
   Demographics .......................................................................................................... 44
   Interview Results .................................................................................................... 44
   Role of Family Members ......................................................................................... 46
   Role of Teachers and Other School Personnel .................................................... 49
   Role of Peers ............................................................................................................ 50
   Finding Strength in Community and Culture ....................................................... 52
   Academic Preparation and Pre-College Enrollment ............................................. 53
   Other Factors ........................................................................................................... 55
   Discussion ............................................................................................................... 57
   Summary of Findings ............................................................................................... 58

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..................................... 59
   Summary ................................................................................................................... 59
   Conclusions .............................................................................................................. 60
   Recommendations .................................................................................................. 63
   Recommendations for Future Research .............................................................. 64
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Demographic Information for Research Participants</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

African American males encounter difficulty in achieving academic success throughout their educational experience. The research literature is filled with statistics and studies documenting the poor performance and underachievement of African American students in general and African American males in particular (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Roach, 2000). African American males are more often placed in special education courses, referred for disciplinary actions, and labeled as low academic achievers. Fewer than half who enter the ninth grade will earn their high school diploma. These statistics offer a sobering reminder that many young people leave public schools with or without diplomas, unprepared academically to pursue post secondary education, and are faced with greater challenges of gaining access to economic, social, and political opportunities. The lack of academic success in K-12 and the declining college participation rate of African American males raise significant concerns for educators, researchers, higher education administrators and economists throughout the nation who perceive a college education as a key to life’s opportunities (Fisher, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Gregory, 2000).

African American males are one of the most highly stigmatized and stereotyped groups in America (Cunningham, 2001). African American males are often represented and characterized as underachievers, gangsters, and school drop outs. The national
discussion on African American males is defined by these stereotypes that reinforce 
negative statistics about African American males in the research and in the general 
public. These are the stereotypes that have captivated the nation into believing the fallacy 
that underperforming African American males are the norm and that excellence and 
success do not exist. As a result, dismal statistics with little social or historical context, 
have led to educational policies and practices that use a deficit model, a model that 
focuses on the problems instead of evaluating the strengths, when working with African 
American males. The deficit model places the underachieving African American males at 
the center of the research and overlooks the relevance of high achieving African 
American males, thus a skewed perception of African American males is the result.

There is growing recognition that instead of continuing to focus on performance 
gaps and under-achievement of African American males, more research needs to be 
directed at the students who overcome barriers and successfully enroll in college. 
Changing the focus could help in the development of models of success and could also 
lead to practical strategies for improving educational achievement of African American 
students and postsecondary opportunities.

Kazis, Vargas, and Hoffman (2004) have argued that students of color, 
particularly African American students, experience obstacles navigating through the 
educational pipeline or transition from high school to college. Horn and Chen (1998) 
identified the educational pipeline as consisting of five major components: college 
preparation, successful completion of college entrance exams, aspirations for obtaining a 
college degree, access to college and enrollment in college. Most often in California,
college readiness is defined as the completion of specific high school coursework known as the A-G requirements for admission to the state's public 4 year universities. For many, the college application and enrollment process itself presents numerous hurdles, including lack of information about college requirements, admission procedures, and financial aid. This is particularly true for low-income students and first generation college-going students whose parents are unfamiliar with the process and are unable to guide them.

Generally, students must complete three tasks on their path to college: (1) meet the necessary academic qualifications for college-level work, (2) graduate from high school, and (3) apply and enroll in an institution of higher education. Appropriate intervention may be strengthened and created if a greater understanding is given to how family, teachers and other school personnel, peers, and the community provide information and support for navigating the path to higher education.

The college eligibility rate of African Americans in California is troubling. Eligibility is the criteria established by colleges to create a pool of applicants who at the very least satisfy a minimum threshold of academic standards including grade point average, specific coursework, and college entrance exams. Studies in the aftermath of the University of California's decision to end affirmation action in its admission policies (SP-1) and the California State Proposition 209 eliminating affirmative action statewide, showed a drop in the eligibility rates and subsequent enrollment of African Americans to the University of California (UC) (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Teranishi, 2002). Even prior to the report, Stony the Road We Trod: The Black Struggle for Higher Education in
California, the decline of African American eligibility rates were documented, most notably by the task force convened in 1986 by the University of California (University of California, 1990). Then University of California president David Gardner established a Task Force on Black Student Eligibility. The Task Force was charged with identifying the factors that contribute to the low rates at which African American students become eligible for the University of California and recommended strategies to address the factors. The major finding of the Task Force was that a unilateral approach to the problem was inadequate. Through its recommendation this study highlighted the disparity in eligibility rates between African Americans and other ethnic groups and the need to strengthen the UC’s outreach efforts given the low African American eligibility rates.

The university’s eligibility rate of African American students has not changed significantly in the twenty three years since the study. In 1996, the African American eligibility rate was 4.5%. In 2003, the African American eligibility rate was 6%, with only 2.4% of African American males eligible to attend the university (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2005).

The declining college participation rate and lack of success of African American males in higher education are significant concerns for educators, researchers, and higher education administrators throughout the nation. This concern is heightened when looking at the enrollment of African American males in Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) of higher education. For the purpose of this study, PWIs are institutions of higher education in the United States that have historically served a student body of 50% or more Americans of European descent.
African American males' college attendance and academic success at PWIs is statistically and proportionately the lowest of any group participating in higher education (Roach, 2001). Such disparities are often explained as a result of the interplay of the home environment, peer influence, the school environment and the larger community. Some researchers have attempted to explain the reasons for the alarming levels of academic underachievement of African American males at PWIs (Brown, 1999; Davis, 1999; Fisher, 1999; Irvine, 1990). However, these explanations have not provided a complete understanding of the key factors that promote academic success among African American males in higher education.

Historical Background

Though the problem of African American underachievement is a long standing concern, satisfactory explanations continue to elude educators and social scientists. Research on the schooling experiences of African Americans has a long history, but recent discussions, particularly those presented by popular media about the unique plight of African American males and the racial achievement gap, have captured the interest of many. From this discussion has emerged an urgency to address the educational underachievement of all students, but in particular African American males.

The issue of African American educational achievement and eligibility is inescapably rooted in historical conditions that have shaped the structure of American society. The fact that there is a gap in educational achievement between African American and white students is not a new concern. The academic achievement between
African Americans and whites is historical and nationwide. A part of this history can be traced back to the school desegregation movement. Not long after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) decision that ruled school segregation was unconstitutional, several southern school districts used the lower test scores of African American students to justify their opposition to school desegregation. As cited by Ogbu (2003), districts argued that African American and white children should not be educated in the same school because African American children were not as academically capable as white children. Although *Brown* ended the constitutionality of separate and unequal educational systems, major educational reforms were slow to take place. Today, fifty-five years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, institutional disparities still affects the structure of opportunity in the United States.

Although African American males as well as African American females are negatively affected by schooling, some research suggest that the problems facing African American males are more chronic and extreme, thus deserving of special policy and programmatic attention (Garibaldi, 1991; Polite, 1993). The fact that more African American females are attending and graduating from colleges and universities may, over time, affect the community status, family relationships, and the leadership roles of African American men and women. The shift in earning and political power of women may potentially have devastating effects on the African American male self esteem, family, and community (Kunjufu, 2001).
Statement of the Problem

The last decade has seen a sharp increase in attention directed by researchers to the educational challenges of African American males (Davis 1999; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Kunjufu, 2001; Locke, 1999; Polite & Davis, 1999; Price, 2000). Much of the research includes studies that indicate the plight or absence of African American males in higher education, but still not enough is known about the educational successes of this same group (Hamilton, 2007).

According to the United States Census (2007) statistics indicated 15% of African Americans 25 years of age and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 24% for all people 25 years of age and older. There are a number of African American students who attend and succeed in college. How are they able to be academically successful while many of their peers struggle and fail?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how families, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community have supported African American male entry into a Northern California Public Research PWI. By understanding the role of families, teachers and other school personnel, peers, and the community, the researcher hopes that effective intervention, enrichment, and educational support programs can be created to support African American male students.

This study essentially has two purposes: (1) to contribute to the limited qualitative research on academically successful African American men in higher education at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), and (2) to identify key factors that African American male first year freshmen students at a Northern California Public Research
PWI perceive as having contributed to their academic success. For the purpose of this study, success is defined as admission and enrollment in California’s top public research institution.

The goal of the study is to give voice to and explore the perspectives of African American males in higher education with regard to the factors that promote academic success. Specifically this study will address the following research questions:

1. What role do family members play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
2. What role do teachers and other school personnel play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
3. What role do peers play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
4. What role does the community play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions apply to this study:

**Academic success**: completion of high school and enrollment into a four-year institution of higher education.

**Academic outreach programs**: programs aimed at increasing access to college for low income and first generation students.
Achievement gap: refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students.

African American: racial identity, often used interchangeably with Black.

First Generation: students whose parents did not earn a 4 year college degree.

First year student: initial year in which a student enrolls in a college or university; often used interchangeably with the term “freshmen.”

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): institutions of higher education established before 1964 whose primary mission is to provide postsecondary opportunities to African Americans.

Predominately White Institutions (PWIs): institutions of higher education in the United States that have historically served a student body of 50% or more Americans of European descent.

Significance of the Study

There has been a great deal of research investigating African American underachievement; however, there has been little research on factors affecting the academic achievement of African American males. For several decades, social scientists and educational researchers have contributed numerous theories to explain variations in the academic performance of African American students. The body of scholarly literature in the 1940s and 1950s presented ethnic self-hatred theories suggesting that the reason for academic failure in African American students was due to low self esteem based on negative perceptions of their ethnicity, while researchers in the 1960s focused on the
cultural deprivation theory in explaining the frustrating cycle of failure in the African American school experience suggesting that academic failure was due to inferior aspects of the African American culture (Lewis, 1969; Reissman, 1962). In the 1970s, researchers offered theories centered on parenting styles, family stability, and single parenting which viewed African American families as weak and disadvantaged, and in the 1980s, researchers continued to search for answers by examining social forces, such as discrimination, prejudice, low socioeconomic status, and the introduction of cultural differences which encouraged society to start looking at issues outside of the African American family for answers to academic failure (Boykin, 1983; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gay, 1993; Hale-Benson, 1986). In the 1990s, cultural variables in the classroom rose to the forefront among researchers as factors greatly influencing the achievement of African American males focusing on the strengths that they bring to the classroom (Banks, 1998; Delpit, 1994; Hale, 1994; Hare & Hare, 1991; Irvine, 1990; Ross & Jackson, 1991).

Today, the limited but growing research available on the academic achievement of African American males focuses primarily on problems or poor outcomes. Studies highlighting historically ignored perspectives and voices are critically important in any effort to improve the quality of higher education in the United States. However, current educational research has paid insufficient attention to the perceptions and insights of the marginalized groups in American society (Majors & Bilson, 1992; Ross, 1998). Research that illuminates the voices and experiences of African American males in higher education has been very limited and, although recently on the increase, still predominated
by a focus on the deficits of the group (Cuyjet, 2006; Jones, 2001; Roach, 2000; Ross, 1998). More attention needs to be paid to the strengths exhibited by this group, in particular, support from family, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community. This study will provide parents, college administrators, and pre-college academic preparation programs insight from the African American male perspective on the key factors that have helped them to achieve academic success.

In spite of the barriers in K-12 education and in society, there are still those African American males who are motivated to attend and succeed in college (Dougherty, 2007; Harper, 2006). Their voices, their stories are currently absent in the literature.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of existing research and related literature. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in collecting and analyzing the data. Chapter 4 presents the data collected from the interviews. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study along with conclusions, recommendations, and implications for future research.
Chapter 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature that focuses on the unique college preparation experiences of African American males. Specifically, this chapter presents and discusses an historical perspective on African American higher education, African American male experience in higher education and external factors that can impact academic success.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how family members, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community have supported first year African American freshmen male entry into a Northern California PWI. Specifically, this study will address the following research questions:

1. What role do family members play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

2. What role do teachers/school personnel play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

3. What role do peers play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

4. What role does the community play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?
The answers to these questions are extremely complex, in that they require a holistic understanding of the students, parents, schools, peers and communities in which students live. The review of related literature seeks to provide such an understanding.

An Historical Perspective on African American Higher Education

Historically, African Americans have considered educational opportunity the premier way to counteract and overcome many of the practices of discrimination and oppression they have had to confront since the ending of slavery (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Elam, 1989; Ihle, 1990; Lovett, 1990). African Americans have always understood and stressed the importance of education. Even when it was illegal to teach African Americans the basics of reading and writing during slavery, or when African Americans had to attend second-class schools during segregation, the record shows that African Americans took advantage of every opportunity even in a society that denied them their rights by law and practice. Many freed Africans considered education as the sole instrument that could lift them out of slavery and Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow laws were laws that imposed racial segregation and restricted the freedoms gained by African Americans during Reconstruction (Lovett, 1990). African Americans embraced the belief that the poorest and most downtrodden in the United States could achieve some semblance of equality through education (Anderson, 1988; Lovett, 1990). However, the systematic denial of educational opportunities continued for African Americans even after emancipation (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fisher, 2002; Rome, 2001).
The history of the African American struggle to attain higher education in the United States has been one of heroic efforts. African Americans battled against the odds and in some instances were successful in gaining access to educational opportunity. However, the efforts on the part of many White Americans to exclude African Americans from having equal access to educational opportunity have often been just as persistent and monumental. Nevertheless, African Americans were determined to gain educational access despite opposition from Southern conservatives, who perceived higher education for African Americans as a threat to White supremacy (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Allen and Jewell (2002) illuminated this point:

Dating back to when Black slaves were forbidden to read and write under threat of physical harm or death we have invested education with mythic qualities, seeing it as our hope and salvation for the future. No matter how much education African Americans achieved, they still suffered discrimination based on skin color. Nevertheless, Black people have continued to crave and to embrace education as the ultimate solution. Despite the paradox of societal stereotypes of blacks as lazy, ignorant and mentally inferior – even as America developed history's most elaborate institutional barriers to deny African Americans equal access to learning and knowledge-Black people continued to pursue education. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) grew out of and were shaped by this striving of African Americans for education. These institutions have embodied the hopes and frustrations of a people seeking the Promised Land. (p. 242)
In the United States, there are approximately 100 HBCUs; included in this number are private, public, four-year, and two-year institutions. These institutions are almost exclusively located in Southern states and states that border Southern states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. One of the most prestigious HBCUs in the country, Howard University, is located in Washington, D.C.

By the turn of the century, many of the states instituted policies, practices, and social obstacles that segregated students by race. The system of institutionalized racism in education negatively affected African American educational opportunity. The racially designed dual system of higher education was strictly enforced from 1826-1890 when only 31 African Americans graduated from a PWI (Ross, 1998).

Through political pressure, legal strategies and the overall struggle for civil rights, African Americans slowly began to break through the barriers of the racial caste system during the desegregation period (1954-1975). The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was the most significant ruling in favor of African American educational opportunity during this period (Patterson, 2001). The *Brown* ruling stated that segregation in public schools denied African Americans equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. *Brown v. Board of Education* essentially reversed the 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" decision (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Ultimately, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 declared segregation as unconstitutional and in theory was abolished. The Civil Rights Act was significant because it prohibited segregated
educational institutions from receiving federal funding. Despite the court rulings PWIs, were extremely slow to desegregate.

HBCUs contributed significantly to the social mobility and social stratification in African American communities. HBCUs can claim almost exclusive responsibility for the education and training of an African American professional class in the United States, particularly prior to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Despite the resistance of Southern and Northern segregationists, African Americans gained greater access to PWIs in the late 1950s and the early 1960s (Patterson, 2001). Between 1950 and 1975, African American overall college enrollment dramatically increased from 83,000 to over 650,000 (Ross, 1998). By 1975, a significant shift in college enrollment was apparent; whereas the majority of African Americans attended HBCUs prior to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education, an estimated 75% of all African Americans who enrolled in college by 1975 did so at PWIs. Allen and Jewell (2002), coined the term the Second Great Migration for this mass educational movement of African Americans entering higher education at PWIs as opposed to traditional HBCUs. The growth in the number of African Americans participating in higher education, due to government funding and shifting social attitudes, was critical to the shift of a majority of African Americans enrolling at PWIs.

In the decades that followed the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling, African Americans made noticeable progress in higher education access and degree attainment. In 1977, African Americans earned roughly 58,000 bachelor degrees. However, in 1994, the figures rose to over 83,000. The almost 45% increase in African
American student enrollment and degree attainment can be attributed to several factors during this period. The factors consisted of federal governmental intervention, a slight easing of racial tensions and violence, persistence of African Americans to struggle for education and an American economy that was so robust that racist Americans tended to have less fear of educational attainment of African Americans (Polite & Davis, 1999; Ross, 1998).

The state of California, which has the largest higher education system in the nation, has been a forerunner in the struggle for equal access and on the front line in the affirmative action admission battle. California was the testing ground for several initiatives designed to dismantle any efforts to provide greater educational access to underrepresented groups (Morgan, 1996). In 1995, the University of California (UC) Board of Regents voted 15-10 to end race-based preferences in admissions, hiring and contracting. The UC’s dismantling of affirmative action had an immediate impact on African Americans and other underrepresented groups admissions to the UC and the California State Universities. In the first full year of the ban on affirmative action (1998), UC campuses experienced an unprecedented decline, in some cases over 50%, of African American and Latino student admission (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Teranishi, 2002).

Despite African Americans having increased access to both HBCUs and PWIs, increasing their college participation rates has continued to be a national challenge. African Americans have been at the forefront of the fight for equal opportunity in education in the United States. The current political climate suggests that the fight continues. African Americans continue to face tremendous odds in their efforts to be fully
included in the educational opportunities afforded all Americans. The founding principles and practices of the educational system in this country fundamentally excluded African Americans. The United States cannot afford to affirm those past exclusionary principles (Rome, 2001). PWIs must develop and commit to bold strategies to increase African Americans', as well as other underrepresented groups, participation and success in higher education. It is not only important for the future opportunities of African Americans and other underrepresented groups, it is important for the overall prosperity of the United States.

The African American Male Experience in Education

The tremendous challenges and obstacles African American males face in the pursuit of education have received increased research attention over the last decade (Lipman, 1998; Steele, 1999). Several researchers have identified periods that prove to be critical in the educational experiences of African American males during which many of them face challenges to their ability to achieve academically. The inability of African American males to overcome these educational experiences subsequently influences their overall life opportunities and experiences (Kunjufu, 1989; Tatum, 1996). The challenges include but are not limited to, low teacher expectations (Hillard, 1992; Kunjufu, 2001; Rist, 1970), disparities in educational resources (Kozol, 1991), educational tracking (Oakes, 1985; Page, 1991), disproportionate placement in special education (Joseph, 1996; Kunjufu, 2001; Patton, 1998; Walker & Sutherland, 1993); and lack of parental involvement (Clark, 1983; McAdoo & McAdoo, 1994).
These barriers are examples of the multitude of factors that impede African American males as they pursue educational aspirations. The research literature is full of references to conditions, syndromes and language that focus on the academic achievement difficulties of African American students in general, and African American males in particular. The terminology that maintains a deficit focus includes: special education, high risk, at risk, disadvantaged, disengaged, endangered, poor achievement and behavioral problems (Davis, 1999; Kunjufu, 2001; Osiris, 2005). Unfortunately this language that labels African American males starts very early in their academic experience and continues through high school and beyond.

The majority of the research that focuses on understanding the academic achievement of African Americans has been studies that compared African American student performance against the experiences of White American students. This approach has framed the research with a predisposition to view African Americans in a negative light (Fisher, 1999).

Current Trends in Higher Education Participation

In pursuit of higher education, African Americans have experienced relative highs and lows in enrollment and degree completion over the last four decades. Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996) analyzed African American college participation in comparison to White college participation from the late 1960s to the 1990s. The researchers found that African American high school graduates' college participation rates between the late 1960s and the late 1970s were slightly lower than their White counterparts. However, this
figure does little to explain the problematic reality that it represents. During the 1960s and into the 1980s the percentage of African Americans completing high school and attending four-year colleges and universities was not proportional to their national demographics (Astin, 1982; Gibbs, 1988). In addition, many of the African American students who pursued higher education did so at community colleges as opposed to four year institutions.

Researchers have identified the tremendous obstacles that students at community colleges encounter in matriculation efforts to a four year institution and a four year degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Fewer than 25% of all students nationally that start higher education at community successfully transfer to four year institutions. For African American males, those figures have been between 10 to 15% for the past several decades. Thus, fewer than 20% of the African American students who seek to transfer from community colleges do so successfully. Therefore, although African American college participation rates have at times appeared comparable to White American college participation rates, the result did not translate into parity in four year degree completion.

Factors Impacting African American Male Achievement

The Family

The importance of social support from parents and family members on adolescents experiences at school are well documented (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis, & Johnson, 2002). High levels of parental support have been associated with higher grade point averages and academic self—concept
(Gutman, 2002). There is also considerable empirical evidence (Baker, 1995) suggesting that a lack of parent support contributes to difficulties in school. Even though economic disadvantage has been linked to early school leaving, there is also evidence that parent support is more predictive of school involvement than economic level (Connell, Spencer, & Abner, 1994). Within the social support literature there are a number of studies involving African American adolescents that provide evidence that support from parents is one of the most important factors that influence African American adolescents’ educational outcomes.

In a qualitative study, Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) explored the role of the family in the academic success of high achieving African American male students who enter the Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland Baltimore. The study found several common characteristics in how the parents of these academically successful Black male students approached child rearing. These included: (a) encouragement and unconditional positive regard, (b) strong limit setting and discipline, (c) high expectations continuously, (d) open and consistent communication, (e) the development of positive racial identity, and (f) positive male identity.

In this study researchers found that even though these students’ backgrounds differed in terms of family income, SES, and neighborhoods of origin; parent support had the greatest influence on their son’s high level of academic achievement. The researchers concluded that “the combined importance of parental determined academic engagement; strict discipline, nurturance, and community connectedness appeared to counteract potentially negative influences of neighborhood, peers, schools and society” (p.639).
Interestingly well off African American youth whose family’s had economic and educational resources in the home were not achieving at the levels of their White peers (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). Gosa and Alexander expressed that success in school had been the traditional route to upward mobility in American society where parents have been able to pass their advantages on to their children. However, this transmission of success from African American parents to their children has proven to be more problematic than for White families. Most middle class African American families are first generation middle-class. In contrast, White middle class families often go back three or four generations. According to Gosa and Alexander, this notation was significant because the cultural content (e.g., values, attitudes, and habits used by parents of successful children to reinforce the schools agenda) was cultivated over time. Thus, a family lineage of high education attainment and economic security is fostered through generations of exposure, which is relatively new to African American families.

School Environment

Within the literature on teacher support there is considerable evidence suggesting that the relationship between teachers and students can affect student achievement and other educational outcomes. Notably, Clark (1995) found that students’ experiences within schools are related to motivation, their emotional well being and their academic achievement. Several research studies (McClendon, Nettles, & Wigfield, 2000; Sanders & Jordan, 2000) also provide evidence that there is a relationship between teacher support and African American adolescents school achievement. Their findings generally support the notion that positive teacher-student relationships increase the likelihood of
higher student achievement among this population of youth. The significance of teacher support is also demonstrated in the findings of other researchers who found evidence that low teacher expectation and impersonal or negative teacher-student relations can lead to low student engagement and poor achievement in school (Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Irvine, 1990). Teachers can confirm students’ ability to achieve (academic self-concept) and also challenge the students to meet and exceed expectations.

Teachers who understand students’ cultural backgrounds have been found to create an environment that will motivate and engage students in the learning process (Howard, 2001). By building a bridge between home and school, teachers can make students feel comfortable, which can encourage them to engage in classroom activities.

Brown (2004) asserted that K-12 teachers did not understand the plight of young African American males. Because of this lack of understanding, teachers often considered them as a disciplinary problem or as having learning issues. With these diagnoses, young Black males were placed in detention, suspended from school or placed in special education classes more frequently than their non African American male counterparts.

Freeman (2005) found different motivating factors contributing to African American students considering HBCUs and PWIs. African American students who attended predominantly White high schools were more likely to consider HBCUs. Freeman discovered that African American students attending predominantly White high schools wanted to search for their roots or connect with the African American African American students attending predominately African American high schools strongly
preferred PWIs. These African American students expressed wanting to get to know different cultures.

**Peers**

During adolescence, the influence of peers becomes increasingly more important in determining academic achievement. It is during this stage of development that adolescents attempt to define their individuality. Although parents have the most influence on student’s long term outcomes, during adolescence, peer relationships often exert more influence than parents on the daily behavior of adolescents in the school setting (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

Meaningful ties to ones peer group are thought to promote competence, psychological well-being, and the ability to cope with life stress, and may be specifically related to motivation and academic achievement (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Several researchers (Cooper & Datnow, 2000, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) provide evidence that peer relationships’ influence African American students’ achievement during adolescence; however, there is considerable disagreement among scholars about how much, and in what ways, African American peers exert influence on each other’s academic achievement.

Contrary to what is generally assumed about peer support within the discussion on African American achievement it is often assumed that African American peers exert a negative influence on each others’ education outcomes (Hill, 1999). This perception has been bolstered by the ethnographic research of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Ogbu (1987) who found that African American students who decide to become academically
successful were ostracized by other African American students within their school setting.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) posited that peer influence was one of a number of important social factors that contributed to the problem of underachievement among African American adolescents. Although Fordham and Ogbu's theory has garnered a great deal of public attention, it has not found conclusive support in the empirical literature (Hill, 1999). In fact the limited evidence that exist about peer support has been contradictory.

Some early studies (Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1982) reported a negative relationship between peer support and African American adolescent achievement; however, others (Cauce, 1986) found a positive correlation between peer support and academic achievement. Still others (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994), found no relationship between peer support and African American adolescent achievement. What makes the issue of peer support and African American adolescents even more complex is that there is a considerable data suggesting that African American students are just as supportive of their peers' academic achievement as students from other racial/ethnic groups (Hill, 1999).

However while developmental theory suggests that strong peer networks promote healthy psychological development, motivation, and competence, African American peer groups are typically viewed as detrimental to academic achievement strivings. Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992) argued that African American youths are more likely to associate with peers who do not value or encourage achievement and that the dominant
influence of the peer group is powerful enough to offset the positive influence of parental values. This view is consistent with Ogbu’s contention that African American youth groups actively discourage academic achievement as a negatively sanctioned form of *acting white* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Peers play a powerful role in shaping identity because the desire to be accepted by one’s peers and *fit in* with one’s peers often becomes a paramount concern for many adolescents. Research has shown that in secondary school, peer groups assume a great influence over the orientation young people adopt toward achievement (Phelan, Davidson, & Ya, 1998), and they profoundly shape the way identities are constituted in school settings.

Despite the importance that several researchers have placed on the role of peer groups in the socialization process, peers groups are by no means the only forces that share the social construction of identity within schools (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1987). The community also is a significant factor.

*Community*

As pressure is exerted to improve the quality of public education, other strategies are being devised at the community level to provide African American males with support. In several communities throughout the United States, African American parents are turning to churches and community organizations as a possible source of support (McPartland & Nettles, 1991). Drawing from the research on mentoring and student resilience that has identified strategies that are effective in supporting the academic achievement of African American males, community organizations and churches are
attempting to compensate for the failings of schools. Through after-school and summer school programs, these groups can provide young people with access and opportunities.

Anthropologists and sociologists have documented ways in which certain community influences can lower the aspirations of African American males and contribute to the adoption of self-destructive behavior. Ogbu (1987) argued that because of the history of discrimination against African Americans, many African Americans believe that even if they work hard, they will never reap rewards equivalent to Whites. These community-based folk theories could contribute to self-defeating behaviors. There is also evidence that many African American males view sports or music as more promising routes to upward mobility than academic pursuits (Hoberman, 1997). Finally, some research found that for some African American students, doing well in school is perceived as a sign that one has sold out or opted to act White for the sake of individual gain (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1990).

Despite the importance and relevance to academic performance, community pressures cannot completely explain individual behavior. Even when confronted with a variety of obstacles and challenges, some African American males still find a way to survive and, in some cases, to excel. Interestingly, less is known about resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies used by young people who have had to overcome hardships than is known about those who succumb and become victims of the environment. Deepening our understanding of how individuals cope with, and respond to, their social and community environments is an important part of finding ways to assist African American males with living productive and successful lives.
The Path to College

Although developing college readiness should optimally begin in elementary school, the early high school years still offer a significant opportunity to direct undecided, unaware and underachieving students toward college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). The number of African American males graduating from high school on the college track is already limited due to high dropout rates and vocational tracking. Those that remain on the college preparation track are often not receiving sufficient information or encouragement about the college process from the high school. College choice information, application and admission procedures, and financial aid opportunities are the basic areas that need to be addressed particularly for first generation students (Bailey, 2003; Kim, 2004). Many also are not counseled on the basic courses needed for college, or encouraged to take higher level or advanced placement courses. This is not just an issue for poor or working class school districts. Studies suggest that a void in appropriate college information exists for African American students at all socioeconomic levels (Ogbru, 2003).

For many students, financial concerns have a significant impact on college attendance (Kim, 2004). In 2000, the median annual income of African American families was $29,404 compared to $49,023 for White families. Many African American students are unable to attend college because they cannot afford college costs. According to The American Freshman National Norms for Fall 2005 approximately 16% of the nation’s entering college freshmen in the Fall 2005 were first generation students. First generation students are more likely to be enrolled at a public than private institution,
more likely to come from lower income households and more likely than their peers to be attending college within 50 miles of their home.

Twice as many first generation students reported having a major concern about the ability to finance a college education. Financing higher education has also been a major barrier to college for African Americans. While the need has not been fully met, there has been substantial growth in the federal funds and private support to help finance a college education. The Pell Grant, government student loans, state loan and finance agencies, and family loan programs have all helped to create greater access for African Americans. At the same time there has been a dramatic increase in private support. In 1999, Bill and Melinda Gates made the largest contribution to college scholarships in history with the establishment of the $1 billion Gates Millennium Scholarship Program (GMSP). The mission of GMSP is to provide the neediest achieving African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans with an opportunity to receive a college education.

Since low income, first generation and minority students have lower participation rates in higher education, recent studies have attempted to gain a greater understanding of the unique aspects of preparing for higher education. The questions guiding this emerging body of research is whether the college preparation process is consistent with or different from what is described in the literature.
Academic Pipeline

The past several decades have seen a boom in college outreach programs. Whether funded by the federal government, institutions of higher education or private philanthropies, these educational interventions are designed to smooth the path to higher education for low income, minority and first generation college goers. More than 1,000 college outreach programs operate today, each offering a unique mix of educational support and information to diverse groups of students (Gandara & Bial, 2001). With the enactment of the Federal Higher Education Act of 1965, increasing the participation of low income and minority students in higher education has become an important national policy goal.

In an effort to dismantle systematic institutionalization of inequity at the level of college attainment, the federal government established the creation of pre-college youth programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search. Academic Outreach Programs have become the primary vehicle to increase the participation of low income students of color in post secondary education. Programs like Upward Bound and Talent Search have paved the way for state, local, and privately funded institutions of higher education to develop their own college preparation programs.

Many of these programs such as the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), California's largest academic preparation program, put most of their effort toward increasing the educational opportunities of traditionally marginalized students. EAOP works in hundreds of school districts throughout California, enrolling thousands of students who receive services designed to prepare them for college. Multiple studies
(Swail & Perna, 2002; Tierney, 2002) have documented the value of academic preparation programs. EAOP's efforts have largely focused on ensuring that program participants are prepared to meet the University of California eligibility requirements with the purpose of expanding students' post-secondary options.

Central to the philosophies of pre-collegiate outreach programs is the need to take a holistic approach in preparing minority adolescents for college success by providing them with curricula centered not only on academic support and performance enhancement, but on cultural enrichment, personal development and career exploration as well. These programs embody communities for young people to express themselves in an affirming, positive, and empowering environment that necessitate and encourage academic achievement. More specifically, outreach programs are the spaces that exist between the home and school lives of students. The spaces are constructed through adult and peer support networks, acceptance of students regardless of their race, ethnicity, social class or gender, invoking a sense of belonging, being valued and feeling connected. In these spaces, students are able to develop strategies to cope with the outside pressures from school and home/community.

Though more students are currently attending postsecondary institutions than ever before, low income, minority students are still struggling to gain access, and remain an underrepresented group in post-secondary institutions around the nation. Early intervention programs provide a significant opportunity for high risk students to secure the available resources, funding, educational background and guidance to enter post-secondary education (Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997). Beginning as early as
kindergarten and throughout high school, encouraging students to enter college and receive a baccalaureate degree gives high risk students the much needed support and extra attention they need. Early intervention strategies can sometime eliminate the boundaries between schools and colleges, discourage student dropout, and give students hope to pursue entrance into college and achieve their academic goals.

Among urban minority students factors such as poverty, moving during grade school, disciplinary problems and minority status all detract from academic achievement (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993). Moreover, students who are disadvantaged in other aspects often suffer from attendance at inferior schools and may receive less encouragement from parents and close friends to do well in school and move up the educational ranks. Policy efforts to boost educational attainment in urban areas alike could be most productive if educational stakeholders focused on ways to improve the educational climate and support of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. McLaughlin and Tierney’s study suggested that such strategies should begin well before high school since most student have defined educational goals, high or low, by the time they reach the ninth grade. Extracurricular activities and special programs that involve students’ parents or others from the community may be useful in increasing these students’ interest and success in school and promote college attendance. College admission at many public flagship institutions is complicated by the increasing demand for access for students and families seeking a quality and affordable education. The effect of the pre-collegiate experiences and academic preparedness on students’ college persistence is well documented (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). Research specific to African
American male college students also show the role of academic preparation (Cuyjet, 1997; Flowers, 2006).

Rationale for the Study

African American males face challenges along the entire educational pipeline. The literature review has produced a common theme: African American males are struggling and have been continuously researched from a deficit approach. This deficit model has blamed African American males for their struggles and failures and for those who do succeed they are overshadowed by the overall troubles of their peers. Instead of continuing to research African American males from a deficit perspective, attention needs to be given to those African American males who are succeeding by focusing on a success model. Instead of focusing on what prevents African American males from achieving, focus needs to be placed on what helps with their success.

Part of the reason for the lower participation rate of African American males in higher education is that students either have not taken the appropriate coursework or they have not taken the SAT or ACT, or, in some instances, they have not applied to college and/or filed an application for financial aid. Their individual situations are sometimes more complicated by their enrollment in high schools that do not provide them with access to rigorous coursework or ample counseling, or both. The absence of these items, coupled with the fact that their parents often lack the knowledge of how to assist them along the path to college, conspire against them making it to a four year college environment.
In the midst of the current environment and the need for reform, each year there are African American males who make it directly out of high school to the four year college environment. They do so by overcoming many of the same obstacles and challenges that their non college bound peers face. This study focuses on the students who have made it to a four year college with the hope of identifying and understanding influences on their successful journey so that others with the same aspirations may achieve their dream of attending a four year institution.

This research focuses on the social network (family, school resources, peers and the community) of academically successful first year African American students as a way to understand the roles of these networks in the success of the students.

The literature points out a critical need: researchers must move beyond the deficit theory approach to understanding the schooling experiences of African American males and researchers must document African American males who are meeting and exceeding school expectations despite the many schooling inequalities that impede their school success. This research provides valuable information that parents, educators researchers and policy makers can utilize to improve the achievement of African American males.
Chapter 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how families, teachers and other school personnel, peers, and the community have supported first year African American male students' entry into a Northern California University. By understanding the role of parents, teachers, peers, and the community in supporting first year African American males college students, the researcher hopes that effective intervention, enrichment and educational support can be created to support African American male students.

Research that goes beyond describing traits and conditions or comparing outcomes of African American males in higher education is relatively scant (Roach, 2001). Even more limited are studies that address the actual lived experiences, perceptions, and reactions of African American males who have achieved academically.

An analysis of interview data collected from the 10 African American male students provided the qualitative data. This chapter includes information about the population and sample of the study, the design of the study, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures.
Research Design

Setting of the Study

The site for this study was a Northern California Public Research PWI University (from here on out it will be referred to as Nor Cal U). Nor Cal U is located on over 5000 acres in a rural college town and is one of ten campuses in its system. Nor Cal U plays a major role on the social and cultural life of the city. With over 30,000 students, this University has a reputation as an excellent research institution, offering studies in more than 100 fields including the agricultural and biological sciences, arts and humanities and engineering.

The criteria for admission to Nor Cal U are very competitive with admission going to the top 12.5% of California high school graduates. In the fall 2008, the entering first year class had a 3.94 grade point average. The campus has a student enrollment over 24,500 undergraduate students. The ethnic breakdown of the student body is as follows: 41% Asian, 35% White/Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, 3% African American, and 10% Other/Unknown. Within the 3% for African Americans, African American females are the majority (University of California, 2008).

Population and Sample

The population for this study was first year African American male students attending Nor Cal U. With the freshmen class that entered the University in the Fall 2008, 127 African American students entered with less than half being African American males.
The sample chosen for this study was 11 first year African American male students attending Nor Cal U. The sampling approach that was used was purposive sample. Purposive sampling refers to selecting study participants based on specified criteria essential for a thorough analysis of the topic (Merriam, 2002). Students self-selected to participate in the study. The sample was reduced when one student who originally agreed to participate was unable to participate.

Due to the sample size being relatively small, it is not expected, nor intended that the sample will be representative of the African American male campus population. Qualitative research seeks to gain a relatively in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of these male participants as opposed to having the ability to generalize those experiences and perspectives to the entire African American male population. As noted above, 11 interested students contacted the researcher via e-mail. However, due to an unexpected happening, 10 students ultimately participated in this research. Demographic information for research participants is discussed in Chapter 4.

Design of the Study

This study used a semi-structured open ended interview process to facilitate discussion about the experiences of first year African American male freshmen undergraduate students’ pathway to this Northern California Public Research University. A qualitative study using an interview format was used to determine salient themes. Greenbaum (1997) suggested that, “researchers who use qualitative methods seek a deeper truth. Qualitative methods aim to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of
meanings people bring to them” (p. 120). The researcher employed a participatory research methodology to address the research questions since this method afforded a process of listening to, exploring and engaging in dialogue, voices that had historically not been heard, voices and perspectives that are missing from so much of the research (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). Armstrong and Moore (2004) wrote, “participatory research allows the researcher and the participant to be co-researchers, in a collaborative relationship, with each bringing his knowledge to the research table” (p.48). The dialogues were conducted in an effort to construct a body of research that takes into consideration the role of family members, teachers, and peers, and the community in the educational success of first year African American male undergraduates.

Data Collection

In accordance with the Sacramento State University’s Institutional Review process, the researcher completed the necessary forms, submitted, and was approved to begin the study. Upon approval, participant selection began by soliciting participants from an African American Freshmen Seminar class and sending a request for participants on the African American student e-mail list serve. The sample selection process entailed three steps. First, students were introduced to the purpose of the study. Second, students who fit the criteria for the study were identified. Finally, those who agreed to commit the time for participation were selected.

The researcher contacted the instructors of a freshman seminar class focused on the African American experience for assistance in making contact with African American
male freshmen undergraduates who might be interested in participating in the study. The researcher was invited and attended a class meeting to explain the purpose of the study and to answer questions about the study. The researcher asked interested students for their e-mail addresses. While there were 22 students in the seminar class, there were only 5 African American males. All five of the African American males expressed an interest in participating in the study.

Seeking additional participants, the researcher sent an e-mail to the African American student community via a list serve. The list serve serves as a community billboard for information announcements. All entering African American freshmen students are automatically signed up to be part of the list serve. From the list serve request, the researcher received 6 additional interested participants.

The researcher e-mailed a consent letter to the 11 participants and a request to arrange an interview. The individual interviews were arranged for each of the participants over a one-week period. Participants signed the consent waiver before the interview began.

A digital recorder was used to record interviews and field notes were taken. Each participant had a copy of the interview questions in front of him. The researcher asked follow-up questions that sought clarity and additional information based on the participant’s responses to the interview questions. The researcher transcribed responses that related directly to the research questions or were emphasized by the participant as being significant to the participant’s academic success. The researcher organized responses from all participants based on the following categories: influence of family,
influence of teachers or school resources, influence of peers and influence of the community, and emerging themes.

Instrumentation

The interview questions were field tested to determine the effectiveness and proper sequence of the interview protocol. Two sophomore students were involved in the pilot study to limit possible influence of the sample population.

The interviews focused on the following areas of inquiry:

1. The role of the family members in supporting college aspirations
2. The role of teachers and other school personnel in supporting college aspirations
3. The role of peers in supporting college aspirations
4. The role of the community in supporting college aspirations

Fourteen interview questions based on these four areas of inquiry were developed. However, the researcher hoped and expected that the open-ended format would encourage the participants to provide information about additional factors that supported their path to college. Questions 1-3 addressed the origin of the participant’s interest in going to college. Questions 4 and 5 investigated the role of parents and extended family members played in the participant’s decision to go to college. Questions 6-9 sought to understand the role of factors outside of the family that supported the participants’ pathway to college. Questions 10 and 11 investigated the role of the community. Questions 12-14 provided an opportunity for the participant to share any thoughts and experiences not revealed through previous questions.
Data Analysis Procedures

The intent of this study was to gather and analyze data to determine the experiences of first year African American male undergraduates. The process of qualitative data analysis involved the comprehensive search for general statements and themes that connect the various categories of data. The consistent findings were clustered into thematic labels to reveal the core themes of the experience. The researcher developed categories by looking for recurrent themes in the interview logs.

Limitations of the Study

All studies have some limitations and researchers should be honest about these limitations and how they affect the results of the study. The researcher of this study identified three limitations.

First, this study focused on African American males at one Northern California Public PWI. Focusing on a relatively small participant and institutional sample size of one ethnicity, one gender and one campus can limit the ability to generalize the results.

Another limitation to this study was the perceptions of the participants were exclusively from students attending a PWI. Perceptions of participants who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) may differ from those at predominantly White institutions.

Lastly, as a mother of a young African American male and as student affairs professional committed to issues of equity and access, the researcher began this study for both personal and professional reasons. First as a mother, the researcher has seen in her
son interest, excitement, and academic success and wants that love of learning to continue. Second as a student affairs professional with more than 20 years of experience, the researcher has become increasingly aware of the academic challenges, concerns, and successes African American males experience while navigating the educational system as they prepare for postsecondary education. This experience has prompted the researcher’s desire to investigate what factors contributed to the academic success of African American males and provided the context for understanding and appreciation of this study.
Chapter 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how family members, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community have supported first year African American male students’ entry into Nor Cal U. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What role do family members play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
2. What role do teachers and other school personnel play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
3. What role do peers play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?
4. What role does the community play in supporting African American male students’ entry into higher education?

This chapter reviews the results from the interview, and concludes with a discussion of the findings. The results begin with demographic information about the research participants. Data from the survey and interview are presented by order of the research question, followed by themes that emerged outside of the proposed research questions. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the data.
Demographics

Table 1 shows the following demographic information for the research participants in this study: Home city (city of residence prior to attending college), whether participant was first generation college-going, whether participant attended a public or private high school, and the participant's college major. Half of the participants call Northern California home. Six of the participants were first generation college-going. Eight of the participants attended public high schools. Participants are referred to as Participant # (number) in order to protect the identity of the students involved in this study.

Interview Results

Findings from the interviews with the ten African American males are presented in this chapter. The lived experiences of these participants demonstrate factors that have supported their academic success.
Table 1

Demographic Information for Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Home City</th>
<th>First Generation</th>
<th>High School Type</th>
<th>College Major</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Fairfield</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Exercise Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vallejo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Human Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Sociology/African American Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Crenshaw</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Exercise Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Inglewood</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>West Covina</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Animal Science</td>
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</table>
Role of Family Members

Support from Parents

Parental support is one of the most critical factors that contribute to African American academic success. Research supports the belief that students who have significant parental support for their educational goals achieve greater levels of academic success than students without parental support. Students that have consistent parental support reinforced with clearly expressed expectations ultimately have greater esteem about their ability to succeed when faced with a personal obstacle or academic challenge (Hrabowski, Maton & Grief, 1998).

All interview participants discussed the important emotional support their parents provided throughout their education and the role their parents played in their academic success. When a father or grandfather was present, he often times played the role of role model, stern challenger and motivator to be the very best. When a mother or grandmother was present she played the encouraging and supportive role by consistently expressing her unconditional love and belief in the student’s abilities to achieve despite obstacles. Participant #4 mentioned, “My mother always told me that I was smart and that I could do anything…when you tell a person that over and over again, then eventually they start to believe” and Participant #5 shared, “Throughout my whole life, my parents told me I was going to college…even before I knew what college was” and Participant #6 “My dad went to a 4 year school and wanted the same or better for me, so he constantly pushed me…even making me read during summer vacations.”
Parental support is particularly significant in cases where the participants were first generation college-going. All six of the participants who are first generation dismissed this as an obstacle to them being successful. Participant # 10 shared that while his mother “…did not go to college, she believed to be an upstanding citizen, you should be educated. She pushed me to do my best.”

Although college attendance per se, was not specifically encouraged in all the participants’ households, the participants expressed a consistent theme “knowledge is power.” As Participant #4 said “my Dad believes college is good if you can do it, but is not a necessity”. The participants also acknowledged the significance of their parental figure’s assertions about education in the form of parental advocacy. Participant #5 shared “my mother was assertive in getting resources for me…she was always up at the school and she made sure I was put me in GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) classes.”

Support from Extended Family Members

Beyond the nuclear family, the influence of extended family members was emphasized. The faith and encouragement of parents and other caring family members was very significant for the participants in helping them overcome academic struggles and challenges. This emotional support made a profound difference in their belief in their ability to achieve academic success. As participant #10 shared, “my parents provided a great support system. They would make sure I was doing my best and provide whatever resources they could.”
In terms of extended family, grandmothers, grandfathers and aunts were seen as especially influential. During the interview, Participant #2 shared, “my Grandfather is my inspiration...he had twelve children. Although there are successful women in our family, there aren’t really successful males. I want my Grandfather to see me graduate from college.” Participant #1 stated, “my sister is two years older than me, she basically had to do prepare for college by herself....she helped me along the way”.

**Family Expectations**

Many of the participants revealed that they always “knew” that either through intellectual capabilities or sheer will and determination they would attend college. They further shared that this idea evolved consciously or subconsciously because of family expectations (all participants), a need to escape a lifestyle or location (Participants #5, 6, 8, 9), or a personal desire for success (all participants). Participant #1 stated “It was innate ...I knew college was something I had to do...no one had to say anything.”

The interviews revealed that many of the participants had encountered substantial hurdles before actually enrolling in college. Participant #2 had been in the foster care system twice since the age of 7 shared “I don’t know...some people would say that the events I went through were traumatic, but everyone has life challenges. You just have to take the challenges and use them to your advantage.” Participant #6 “I did not live in the best neighborhood; there was a lot of violence and gangs. Seeing all of this was my motivation to get out of the neighborhood.”

Family expectations surfaced as an important factor for all of the participants’ academic success, but this expectation surfaced as an expectation the participants put on
themselves. Perhaps this stems from an understanding of the core values that are prevalent within the family. Participant #5 shared, “My parents stressed constantly the importance of doing well academically. For me to constantly hear that, I would feel like I was letting myself down to do less.”

According to Bandura (2001), people who have belief systems that support their competence tend to have higher aspirations, can commit to meeting difficult challenges, and can effectively manage both threats and opportunities. Bandura termed this quality self-efficacy and argued that a high level of self-efficacy is necessary to remain motivated towards a goal, effectively cope with stress and anxiety, and construct life paths that are conducive to success. Participant # 5 stated, “We moved a lot so I attended a lot of different schools. Changing schools so much, I had to be adaptable if I wanted to be successful.”

Role of Teachers and Other School Personnel

Students are more likely to enjoy their educational experience and be academically successful if they feel academically integrated into their educational institution. Four of the ten participants mentioned their teachers as playing a strong role in supporting their academic success. Participant #2 expressed “my IB (International Baccalaureate) teacher challenged us and talked about his college experience.” Participant # 8 who attended a private high school stated “my senior class had only 11 students. Teachers had a close relationship with students and the community...the
teachers were like family.” Participant # 10 shared, “my teachers constantly strived to make learning fun.”

The majority of the participants did not remember any teacher in particular who supported their academic success. Participant #6 noted “most of my teachers had very low expectations of me.”

Two participants mentioned counselors as a helpful resource “my counselor looked out for me” (Participant # 5) and “the career center were very helpful in helping me to apply to colleges” (Participant #9).

Many of the participants played sports in high school and acknowledged their coach or coaches as playing a key role in their academic success. Participant # 1, “the coaches shared their stories, they served as role models.” Participant #5, “my coach told me to select Nor Cal U because he knew people here and they would look out for me.” Participant # 8 “my coach stayed on me about my grades...he pushed me to do my best and helped me to establish a strong work ethic.”

Role of Peers

Nine of the ten participants emphasized the importance of positive peer influence. The research literature affirms the importance of peer support in African American male academic success (Fisher, 1999). For some, bonds with other high achieving African American students provided the positive peer influence. For others, the support came primarily from White classmates.
For the participants in this study, responses suggest that peers played a supporting role by helping to maintain academic aspirations. The following responses suggest that peers played a supporting role by helping to maintain college aspirations, and that there was purpose to the peer groups the participants chose to surround themselves with:

- My friends have been my support group. We pushed each other academically and never accepted mediocrity from one another. (Participant #1)
- Some of my friends became complacent...they saw graduating from high school as their major accomplishment. (Participant #3)
- In my neighborhood, there was not a lot of motivation to go to college, but those who did not choose to go to college respected my decision to go. (Participant #5)
- My girlfriend is the reason I am in college! (Participant #4)

Participants shared the following indicating some of the peer challenges:

- I was called square and sell out. (Participant #6)
- I was teased for not having a lot of girls. My dad said there will be time for girls later. (Participant #8)
- I wanted to be part of the successful group. I was called an oreo. I did not know what that meant, but I always tried my best in school. (Participant #2)

Participant #10 felt that peer support was not particularly important to his academic success. He stated “I have not found a support network, so the best way for me to succeed academically is to work alone.”
Finding Strength in Community and Culture

The majority of the participants consistently expressed that having cultural pride and a strong sense of who they are as African American men helped them to succeed academically. The ability to understand and deal with racism is very helpful for African American students trying to navigate the educational system. Often times issues of culture, race and racism mediate how African Americans learn to navigate a system and how others in the system react to them (Steele & Hilliard, 2003). The awareness of these factors empowers students to understand how to best access resources and support for academic success. This study furthers the current research in that it shows academically successful African American males as active participants in their efforts to understand how to make a system work for them. Participant # 2 was adamant in saying “I made a promise to myself not to fall into the negative stereotypes about African American males.”

The majority of African American males in this study expressed the need for successful students to be very independent in their academic and personal goals, yet maintain a strong sense of how their personal achievement may indirectly benefit the larger African American community. They often spoke of the notion of “giving back” and helping other students reach the levels of achievement they have attained. Participant # 5 shared “I witnessed a lot of violence and crime in the community...I was just tired of the environment and wanted to get out”
Academic Preparation and Pre-College Enrollment

Early involvement or pre-enrollment programs in higher education play an important and significant role in helping African Americans prepare for and successfully transition from high school to the university. This study confirms the findings of previous research about the important role pre-enrollment programs play in the academic success of African American men. Nor Cal U sponsors a four week intensive academic pre-enrollment program designed for incoming freshmen students who want to prepare for the academic rigors of university life. Six of the 10 participants had participated in pre college enrollment programs. Pre-enrollment programs had effectively provided over half of the participants with awareness of the campus support systems and the necessary guidance and academic advising to succeed academically.

The majority of the participants shared the importance of having clear goals to motivate their academic success. From the participants’ stories, it seemed that taking action on investigating specific colleges, gathering admission materials, taking appropriate tests, and researching available financial resources did not occur until well into the junior year or early senior year. Participant #7 stated, “I was pretty lazy in high school... I waited until the last minute to do everything.”

All of the participants indicated that their college choices were heavily influenced by financial considerations. They were all reliant on financial aid to assist with the paying for college. Many of the participants expressed that they knew they would go to college, but were not aware of how the college process worked or the steps they needed to take to enroll. Even though four of the participants were not first generation, none of the
participants seemed to have had deliberate guidance on how the college process worked. Reasons for the lack of college planning activities in African American families have been offered in the literature. African American families have historically valued education. Yet many parents today are not aware of the sophisticated resources that are available to help students access the widest possible sphere of information and opportunity. This situation is not bound by income levels. Ogbu (2003) found in his study of African American families in a relative affluent suburb that although the African American parents had lofty aspirations for their children, they often allocated most of the responsibility for the college preparation process to the school system. Ogbu posited that the African American parents believed that their ability to live in an affluent neighborhood and send their children to a suburban school would automatically command a more rigorous education and quality student support services. Ogbu asserted, however, that assuming the school has the time, resources, or interest to properly guide students toward appropriate postsecondary option is erroneous. In addition, this research revealed that not only were students not receiving adequate college choice and admission assistance, they were often not placed in or encouraged to take the higher level courses that would prepare them for college.

Other Factors

Two significant themes emerged outside the proposed research questions as important factors contributing to the participants’ academic success. Those themes were
the role of sports participation and family socioeconomic status in student’s academic success.

The fact that many of the participants identified sports participation as part of their academic experience prompted further analysis of the relationship between athletic participation and academics. The research suggests that this relationship can be a complex issue for young African American males. On one level, it is an integral part of the social and identity development of many American men. However, for African American males, sports participation has historic as well as economic consequences.

Sports participation and academic progress receives mixed reviews in the literature. Braddock’s (1991) study of African American males confirmed the body of research that finds participation in athletic programs is positively correlated with postsecondary attendance. However, a more recent study by Eitle and Eitle (2002) implied that extensive sports participation for African American males may supplant the need for educational attainment. Although the males in this study received various benefits or opportunities from sports participation, they each appeared to have a pragmatic view of its importance. The meaning they attached to athletics seemed to complement rather than conflict with educational values. Further, their athletic experience was not perceived as essential to their identity or relevant to their future goals. This is an important distinction compared to males who see their future more closely aligned with a sports arena than an academic classroom.
Sports allowed the participants’ entry into the social environments of the various high schools they attended. Participant # 1 states “playing sports helped to balance out the geek factor of being a high achieving student.”

Higher education is often perceived as an opportunity to change a family’s economic circumstance and lifestyle. Seven participants shared their family’s low socioeconomic status (SES) as a strong motivator for pursuing higher education. This finding is contrary to research indicating students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to pursue college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Responses for the participants follow:

- My mom knew she could not support me financially, so she helped me apply for scholarships (Participant #10)
- My parents did not know how to help me with the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), but I did not expect them to be able to help. (Participant #2)
- When I got stressed out about the college process, my grandmother did not know how to help me, although she tried very hard.(Participant #3)

Discussion

This study allowed for an examination of the family, academic, social and community factors that lead to academic success from the perspective of ten African American male participants. The data provides some perspectives on what successful African American males perceive as being important to their academic success. Their
perspective simultaneously affirms and dispels some of the previous notions about the academic success of African American males.

Because studies on why African American male students do not go to college permeate academia, the researcher wanted to know from African American male freshmen what they believe would assist African American male high school students in preparing for college. All ten of the participants responded that setting goals, being focused and having a strong support system would assist other African American males in getting into college. The following responses to this question summarized what these African American males wanted other African American males to know:

- Be open to change and listen to what people are saying...don't be a hard head
- A strong support system is important. Parents must stay involved
- Read, read, read. Read stuff you like. Reading will help you write better
- Challenge yourself and do your best
- Don't think college is impossible...there is no reason to fail
- Get involved in the community
- Don't get discouraged...believe in yourself...don't let others get you down
- Find a mentor
- Have a strong faith
- Don't let the cost of college discourage you...there is financial aid.

Although qualitative research does not purport to generalize, the findings of this study may offer implications that can be considered in a variety of academic settings. For
educators at all levels, this overview suggests a new framework from which to evaluate what is currently being done to promote postsecondary attainment for African American males and other underrepresented populations. Perhaps most importantly, the family members, teachers and advocates of young African American males can be informed of the critical points of intervention that may influence future possibilities.

Significantly, the concept of family included but exceeded the traditional biological and legal definitions of family. These students identified lifelong relationships with a strong mother, an involved father, concerned siblings, and supportive grandmothers as influences on their success. The extended family also played a part in their success as did athletic coaches, academic mentors, church leaders, and family friends.

Summary of Findings

Chapter four presented the findings of the study, examining the experiences of ten African American first year male undergraduates. The findings of the study were analyzed from the interviews of ten first year African American male undergraduates attending Nor Cal U.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

African American males have frequently been studied from a deficit perspective in which they are to blame for their struggles, hardships, and academic failure. Although this approach has laid the foundation for studying African American males, this study provided an avenue in which researchers can begin to approach African American males from a different perspective, one of success.

The purpose of the qualitative study was to understand how family members, teachers and other school personnel, peers and the community have supported first year African American male students’ entry into Nor Cal U. Specifically this study addressed the research questions below:

1. What role do family members play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
2. What role do teachers and other school personnel play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
3. What role do peers play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
4. What role does the community play in supporting African American males’ entry into higher education?
The students in the study shared their viewpoints and opinions about what they believed to be the most critical to their academic success and how other students might overcome obstacles to experience academic success.

Conclusions

The African American males in this study were academically successful despite having to overcome struggles and hardships. As indicated throughout the study, African American males who develop nurturing, supportive and yet challenging support systems have a greater chance of achieving academic success. Simultaneously, African American males must believe they can take control of their situation despite the challenges to insure their success. Responses from the ten students who participated in this research were consistent with this finding. All of the participants had the presence of at least one caring person in their lives. They had someone who conveyed compassion and gave support and encouragement.

Hrabowski, Maton, and Grief (1998) studied the correlation between family environment and the academic success of African American males. This study concluded that family was a viable support system for African American males. In essence, family was a common denominator of motivation for the ten participants in this study. Caring relationships included mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, sibling and aunt. In response to questions about the role of family in the students’ academic success, it is apparent that family plays a critical role. Participant #4 said, “I guess my family always thought I was smart...when I was little they called me doctor.” Interview results were
consistent with Cabrera and La Nasa’s study (2000) that, among other factors, high expectations from parents is part of encouragement.

Family socioeconomic status played a significant role as a motivating factor for the participants to pursue higher education. Seeing family members and people in the community struggling, Participant #10 said “I see people in my community not doing well. I believe education will provide an opportunity for me to get to a place where I won’t have to worry about finances.”

The role of teachers in supporting the academic success of first year African American males was not noted as a significant by the participants of the study. Although the literature acknowledges the role teachers can play in the academic success of students, low income and minority study often experience teachers who are not culturally competent, have low expectations of the students and have the least teaching experience. Other school personnel, in particular athletic coaches, were seen as playing a significant role in the participants’ educational success. Teachers, counselors and coaches provided encouragement and mentorship.

Peers played a significant role in the students’ academic success. For the participants in this study, responses suggested that peers either played a supporting role by helping to maintain academic aspirations or played a transformative role that participants credited with changing life choices. Sokatch’s (2006) research, which indicated the single best predictor for four year college enrollment is the friends’ plans, supports the findings.
The perspectives shared by the ten academically successful African American males in this study emphasize the importance of positive support from family, school personnel, peers and the community because of the tremendous influence these factors can have on African American male student success. These participants expressed confidence in themselves and their abilities because they were able to depend on significant support throughout their academic experience. Family members, school personnel, peer and the community all played a role in supporting first year African American males who participated in this study. Parents and other family members provided the motivation and expectation for the students. The participatory role of teachers, other school personnel and peers provided information, support, guidance and inspiration. The community and its challenges provided motivation to want to do better. As African American males continue to struggle through the academic pipeline, families, communities, educators, schools and post secondary institutions all have a role in moving them through the educational system.

The African American males in this study were academically successful despite having to overcome obstacles. Findings from the interviews of the ten African American male undergraduates focused on their lived experiences and sought to identify influences that contributed to their successful journey to a four year university. Responses from the ten students who participated in this research revealed four important themes that participants considered important to their academic success. The themes were: (a) support and guidance from significant others (b) the belief in one’s self and ability (c) selecting
like-minded peers for close friends. Lastly the theme of (d) recognizing the important role of early college/pre-college programs in a smooth adjustment to college life.

Reframing the issues was significant in the findings of this study. The ability to view African American males as successful in education and to create a model from their success is key. The interviews of this study offered a blueprint of success. Ten first year African American male undergraduates explained what factors assisted them in getting to college.

Recommendations

The path to higher education literally begins in elementary school. As Kunjufu (1995) highlighted in his book, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, African American boys begin to show signs of school disengagement as early as the fourth grade. Public policy can help to create environments where low income and first generation college-going students are directed toward college early in their educational development. Public policy can be developed that will encourage African American students in middle and high school to aspire to participate in higher education. Comprehensive and culturally relevant outreach to students and their parents can play an important role in increasing African American male academic success and participation in higher education.

The institutional culture of the K-12 system, like most institutions of higher education, is not uniformly supportive of African American male academic success. The K-12 educational system has not developed an inclusive culture that nurtures and
recognized the potential in African American male children. African American males as a group are tracked away from the most rigorous academic programs in high school, thus limiting their access to college preparation courses. The culture of high schools must be changed to be more inclusive of the academic and social aspirations of African American males.

This study revealed that the African American participants were not fully aware of the requirements, processes, or expectations of college enrollment. Many school systems rely on college fairs or occasional recruitment visits to provide college information to all students. This assumes that the high school student is already aware of the steps necessary for college admission and financing their education. The literature tells us, however, that college choice and transition is a complex, culturally bound process (Freeman, 2005).

Recommendations for Future Research

More qualitative studies about the experiences of academically successful African American males are needed. This study presented the perspective of academically successful African American males in their own words. A study that included a larger sample of successful African American males across institution types – community colleges, HBCUs and private and public four year institutions - might be helpful in further exploring these themes. This study would be beneficial in confirming or disaffirming the findings of this study.
The researcher hopes this study has opened the minds of people who have the will and the power to create resources for African American males to succeed academically. However, the researcher believes that African American males and their families must take some responsibility to *reframe the issues* to identify their own needs and wants. In conclusion, African American males must write their own experiences and history to be properly included in scholarly books, journals, and American history for others to grasp and comprehend the truth. Let the Truth be Told.

The voices of the African American male participants who generously shared their stories for this study have allowed for an increased understanding of the opportunities and challenges on the path toward higher education. It is only fitting that this study concludes with the words of one of the participants: “I am going to be the President of the United States.” Today, in 2009, those words no longer seem unimaginable.
APPENDIX A

Consent Letter

Dear Student:

My name is Michele Dyke, and I work for the University of California, Davis as an Assistant Director for the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP). I am also a graduate student with the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at California State University, Sacramento. I am conducting a study about potential factors that lead to the academic success of first year African American male undergraduates.

In order to accomplish this, I need to identify a few students who are interested in giving their time and reflecting on their educational experiences via an interview. The interviews will be conducted separately and will be recorded to assist the researcher in analyzing them. The recordings will be destroyed at the end of the research project and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation includes an interview on the subjects of college awareness, the role(s) your parents, teachers, peers and your community have played, and any other resources or experiences that you believed contributed to your success. The findings of all the interviews will be analyzed and compared. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes, and will take place at your convenience on campus. Your anonymity will be protected and the process does not pose any risk of harm to the participants whatsoever.

You may not personally benefit from participating in this research. However, your reflections about your experiences will add to the growing body of research about the educational barriers and successes of African American males.

In the published research report, the researcher will use fictitious names or refer to respondents as “the respondent” or “the student.” This will preserve your anonymity and privacy. However, the findings from this study will be published in the form of a thesis for California State University, Sacramento.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact me at (530) 752-2521 or by email at mkdyke@ucdavis.edu. Thank you for your support in this research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decline to be a participant in this study without any consequences. Your signature below indicates that you have read this page and agree to participate in the research.

Signature of Participant: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your background (where you grew up, your schooling, your family)

2. What made you decide to go to college?

3. What was the greatest challenge you faced when you decided you wanted to go to college?

4. Describe the role that your parents have had in your education.

5. Describe any areas where your parents were not sure how to support you.

6. Describe the role that your high school teachers had in your decision to go to college.

7. Describe the resources/support the school provided outside of the classroom that you believe were significant to your success.

8. Describe the role that your peers and school friends played in your decision to go to college.

9. How many of your closest friends also went to a 4 year college/university?

10. Describe the role your community played in your decision to go to college.

11. What elements in your community contributed to your decision to go to college?

12. What could have made your journey from high school to college smoother?

13. What advice would you give to African American male students who are still in high school?
14. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to include in this interview?
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