A ROAD LESS TRAVELED: THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALE COLLEGIANS
AT A PWI

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify the social and academic factors that contribute to the success of African American male undergraduate students at Predominantly White Institutions. While numerous authors have conducted research on black males in higher education, many seem to focus on those who have been identified as either high achieving or low achieving students.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, the author will conduct individual interviews with four participants. Each person will self-identify as a black male undergraduate student who is currently enrolled at a Research 1 university and has completed at least one semester at the university.

At the conclusion of his study, the author identifies positive factors that contribute to the academic success of these men at the collegiate level. The narratives of these scholars may assist researchers in expanding the amount of positive, rather than negative, literature on black male achievement in post-secondary education. More importantly, it could aid practitioners in better understanding how to support these men throughout their tenure in education.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During my first year of graduate school, I had the opportunity to read the narratives of four black men who successfully navigated the road of higher education. While all of their stories resonated with me as a black male, one in particular caught my attention more than the others. The autobiography, *Step Out on Nothing*, was written by Byron Pitts who is a well-known chief national correspondent for CBS news. In his narrative, Pitts discussed the early struggles he faced in the American education system as a black child who stuttered when he spoke and had difficulties reading. As with many students in his predicament, Pitts was quickly labeled by elementary school administrators as being in need of remedial services and was forced to take special education courses which stunted his academic growth. Although his mother could not prevent his school from placing him in remedial classes, she worked with him daily on his reading and communication skills. By high school, Byron’s reading and speech had greatly improved and he was no longer taking remedial courses. He eventually went on to excel in college and became extremely successful in the field of broadcasting. Throughout his narrative, Pitts consistently noted his mother as the root of his success. He also discussed using his difficulties with speech and reading as motivation to assist him throughout various life experiences. I enjoyed this particular story because it not only highlighted the scholarly accomplishments of a young black man, but showed the positive influence of having self-efficacy and a strong support system. While there are numerous stories similar to Pitts, the sad reality is that black men still have one of the lowest college matriculation rates when compared to males of other ethnicities.

Statement of Problem
According to the 2005 U.S. Census Bureau report, 89.5% of Asian men and 84.5% of white men reported having at least a high school diploma or higher in 2003. Only 79.6% of black men, however, reported the same. When college education is taken into consideration the gap is even wider. The percentage of black men (16.7%), who reported having at least a bachelor degree or higher, was lower than that of white (29.4%) and Asian (53.9%) men. In addition to males of other ethnicities, black women have also surged past black men in terms of post-secondary academic success.

In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) compiled a table showing the graduation trends of first-time degree seeking college students between 1996 and 2002. The chart was separated by race, gender, and time taken to complete the baccalaureate degree. When combined, the number of black students who graduated within six years of starting their program jumped from 38.5% in 1996 to 41.5% in 2002. When separated by gender, black males fared far worse than their black female counterparts. The 4-6 year completion rate of African American men was 32.8% in 1996 and rose slightly to 34.6% by 2002. The 4-6 year completion rate of African American women, conversely, increased from 43% in 1996 to 46.2% in 2002.

At the Illinois state level, these numbers are even more dismal. The graduation gap between black and white male high school students in Illinois (during the 2007-2008 school year) was 36% based on a Schott Foundation for Public Education (2010) report. While Illinois had the 6th largest population of black male high school students in the nation during 2001-2002, it had the 3rd highest graduation gap between black and white males in secondary education. While compiling similar research four years later, the foundation discovered that the gap between these students had grown to a depressing 41%. For the 2005-2006 school year, this
placed Illinois at a tie with Michigan as the state with the second highest graduation gap between black and white male high school students.

In terms of college completion, black male collegians in Illinois had the lowest increase in graduation rates between 1999 and 2009 (when compared to white, Asian, and Latino men). While the number of degrees granted to black men increased by 170; it increased by 311 for Latino men and by 1,049 for white men. When compared to their female counterparts, black men only made up 1,467 (33%) of the nearly 4,400 black students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a four-year Illinois college in 2009 (IBHE, 2010).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal and academic experiences of black male college students who attend a Predominantly White Research I institution. More specifically, the author will focus on identifying why these men chose to pursue higher education at this particular school and what motivates them to strive for collegiate success. While numerous authors have conducted research on black males in higher education, many seem to focus on Historically Black Colleges/Universities or specifically on low-achieving/high-achieving students. There are very few publications that evaluate students that focus on black men at PWIs in general. Additionally, many of the previous studies on this topic utilized large samples of participants and quantitative research methods.

The current research project will focus on a population of students who attend the same institution. While the author took note of the college and high school GPAs of the participants, these were not criteria to participate in the research. The data compiled by this study could provide practitioners with the information needed to advocate for initiatives aimed at this population.
Research Question(s)

The following research questions were explored: (1) What experiences have contributed to the success of black male collegians at Predominantly White Institutions? (2) How have these experiences contributed to and/or hindered their success at the collegiate level?

Significance of Study

While several studies have produced pertinent data, minimal research speaks to the experience of black male collegians that have not been identified as high achievers. Much of the existing research addresses students who the author(s) have identified as high achieving (via GPA, student engagement and/or faculty recommendation(s). It is important to expand the literature on this population because, in comparison to their high-achieving peers, students with more modest academic records may encounter a greater risk of pre-maturely withdrawing from college. Other studies that focus on the experiences of black men in college have used quantitative research designs to gather their data (Kimbrough, Molock and Walton, 1996; Strayhorn and Terrell, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Although quantitative studies are typically larger in size (resulting in more participants), this research is generally not designed to yield the same type of results as qualitative studies. When using a qualitative research method, researchers can ask their participants follow-up questions which could assist in clarifying information. Given the last two statements, the following study is significant to the field of higher education for the following reasons.

The information gathered from this research could assist administrators in better understanding how to address the academic and social challenges these men face while in college. Allowing the men to speak on the different factors that contributed to their own college success could prove to be more effective than surveys or other quantitative methods because it
allows them elaborate on their answers. It also allows them to have an informal conversation with the researcher, which could assist the participant in feeling more comfortable. Once the administration has a better understanding of these men’s issues, this information could aid in establishing effective measures to combat low persistence for this population. This can come in the form of support groups, retention programs, different pedagogical methods and several other initiatives.

Lastly, this research is significant because it affects the author personally. As an African American man in higher education, I would like to see more black men succeed at this level. During my undergraduate career, I experienced the loss of friends (black males) who did not persist through college for various reasons. Due to their early departure from college, several of them are having difficulty finding permanent employment. As a scholar in the field of higher education, I feel it is my due diligence to assist my friends (and several other men just like them) in one of the best ways I know how—via conducting research.

Reflexivity

My interest in learning about the experiences that contribute to the persistence and matriculation of black males in college stems from my own educational experience. I come from a family in which college is seen as a necessity. My mother graduated from college and expected the same from me. As a black second-generation male college student there were several occasions in which I remember calling upon my mother for guidance after feeling insecure about my academics. Through inspirational quotes and stories from her own college experience, my mother would revive my motivation to succeed. Although I had someone to depend on, during troubling times in college, many of my friends (who were first-generation
black male college students) did not. This lack of support is what I feel significantly contributed to their attrition.

Similar to other professions, scholars often grapple with the issues of recognizing their personal biases and remaining objective while conducting research. Although I have tried to portray an accurate account of the experiences that contribute to the college success of these black men, there are numerous biases that could affect my position as the researcher in this study. While it is difficult to identify them all, some of the more obvious biases that I possess include my race and gender.

One of the most significant elements that could impact my perception of the current study is race. As an African American, conducting research with other African Americans, my identity could produce an insider’s bias. By this I am referring to how it might be easier for me to relate to the students because we share a commonality; race. On one hand, the ability to identify with them allows me to better understand some of the situations they have experienced as African American college students. On the other hand, this same ability could prohibit me from maintaining an objective stance.

Another commonality shared amongst the participants and I, is our gender. As men, we are often viewed as having to be strong (physically, emotionally, and psychologically) particularly in front of women. Therefore, openly discussing embarrassing experiences or other situations can be seen as a sign of weakness. As a man, I believe the participants discussed experiences with me that they probably would not have shared with a woman due to fear of being labeled weak by the opposite sex. It could also have the reverse affect. Out of fear of being labeled weak by another male, the students may have chosen not to disclose certain details of their experience.
While not every bias is considered to have a negative impact on the study, all biases are factors that scholars must consider when conducting research. I expect that the biases identified above will have a significant impact on the development of my research. Although they can assist me in gathering pertinent data from students, they can also prevent me from approaching the study with an impartial focus (Johnson, 1997; Mehra, 2002).

Definitions and Concepts

*African American/Black:* These terms will be used, interchangeably, to describe American born persons of African descent (non-Hispanic).

*Success:* (In regard to the men in this study) Persisting through the k-12 and post-secondary education systems.
CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Chapter

The first half of this chapter (theoretical framework) will highlight two theories that I will incorporate into the present study. The second half of this chapter (literature review) will discuss some of the factors that have been identified as having a significant influence, either positively or negatively, on black men in college. The experiences that will be discussed are related to social support, self-efficacy, student engagement and college readiness. In addition to black men in higher education, this chapter will include data from studies on men of other ethnicities. It will also include research from studies that were conducted outside of institutions identified as predominantly white. This has been done to provide a broader context to the current study. Lastly, this chapter will explore previous literature which focused on the impact of factors such as social support, self-efficacy and campus engagement on college students.

Theoretical Framework

College Student Success Framework

Perna and Thomas (2006) have contributed greatly to the larger body of literature on college student success. Their first contribution involves the development of a model which displays the “key transitions and indicators of college success” (p. 5). Previous research has identified certain factors that appear to have a significant influence on one’s decision to continue their post-secondary education experience. Many of the influences include environmental and academic factors. Perna and Thomas (2006) use ten of these indicators to assist administrators in the creation of policies/practices which focus on undergraduate success. Some of these
influences include; educational aspirations, college access, academic performance, persistence and income.

According to Perna and Thomas (2006), college student success is defined as “the completion or maximization” of the previous indicators through four “key transitions in a success process” (p. 4). The first transition focuses on the academic/social preparation (i.e., advanced placement courses, college preparation programs, etc.) a student receives prior to entering post-secondary education (college readiness). The second concentrates on their matriculation into higher education (college enrollment). The third is concerned with the student’s success in school (college achievement). The fourth focuses on their transition to the job market or graduate/professional school (post-college attainment). This particular definition of college success was incorporated because the authors are interested in addressing the needs of administrators who are designing retention programs for undergraduates.

Perna and Thomas’ (2006) second contribution to research in higher education is their “proposed conceptual model of student success” (p. 8). This model, similar to the previous one, consists of four layers. The first layer is known as the internal context. The internal context is the notion that success is partially determined by the individual attitudes and behaviors of each student. The second layer is known as the family context which emphasizes the significance of familial support within and outside of the home. The third layer, called school context, notes the preparation that one receives before entering post-secondary education as an indicator of their success. Social, economic, and policy context is the framework’s fourth layer. This section focuses on the importance of various external factors such as social and economic conditions in conjunction with public policy.
Although this model has been incorporated within several articles many of these studies focused on the success of students at two-year colleges (Wells, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Bensimon, 2007). Literature suggests that the student experience at community colleges, however, can differ from the student experience at four-year colleges/universities (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). This study seeks to link this framework to the experiences of black male collegians that attend a four-year public university.

*Community Cultural Wealth Framework*

Similar to Perna and Thomas (2006), Yosso (2005) created a theory that has been identified as salient to the development of literature on college students and their success. Unlike Perna and Thomas (2006), however, Yosso’s (2005) theory focuses predominantly on students of color. Her ideology is known as the cultural community wealth framework. It is defined as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005; p. 77). Within her article, Yosso (2005) identifies six kinds of capital that students of color bring with them to college. These types include linguistic, navigational, familial, social, aspirational, and resistant capital.

*Linguistic capital* is the notion that students of color arrive at their university with several language and communication skills. These skills include being able to code-switch—giving students the skill to use different languages and/or styles of communication when speaking to various types of people. These skills also include the “ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

*Navigational capital* is the process of resourcefully maneuvering around a campus that was not established with students of color in mind, such as predominately white institutions.
Familial capital represents the relationships that students form/have with friends and family alike. Social capital represents the relationships that students form with peers, faculty and administrators on/off their campus. Aspirational capital is the idea of striving for success even when faced with opposition or other barriers. The last type, resistant capital, refers to the skills that one uses to combat inequalities they encounter (on and off campus).

Various authors have referenced Yosso (2005) in their research on the success of minority college students (Harper, 2010; James and Taylor, 2008). Harper (2010) sought to understand the positive dynamics that contribute to persistence for black college students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM fields). Using data from 219 students who participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study (NMBCAS) he constructed a framework designed to understand how these students obtained various forms of capital they did not possess before college. While Harper (2010) produced results pertinent to the current topic, his study only focused on black men within the STEM fields. The participants in my research were from various academic fields.

James and Taylor (2008) used a qualitative study to explore the experiences of first-generation Canadian college students who participated in a merit-based transition program. The students’ parents migrated from countries such as Ghana, El Salvador, St. Kitts and Tanzania. James and Taylor (2008) found that the students believed their merit (i.e., intellectual ability, ambition to capitalize on various opportunities, etc.) would place them in a “better position to attain the social and cultural capital necessary to compete in the job market” (p. 585).

The connection between these frameworks is that four of the six types of capital discussed by Yosso (2005) directly relate to Perna and Thomas’s (2006) proposed model of student success. Yosso’s (2005) aspirational and resistant capitals closely identify with the
internal context of Perna and Thomas (2006). Additionally, Yosso’s (2005) familial and social capitals can be linked to the family context of Perna and Thomas (2006). The commonalities between these frameworks, reinforce the impact that certain internal and external factors can have on students in the American education system.

Literature Review

Social Support

Social support has been acknowledged by previous authors as having an influential role in the adjustment and persistence of college students. For the use of this study, social support will be defined as the emotional and physical comfort provided from one person to another. While there are various forms of social support, research suggests that the most common forms are provided via family members, administrators/mentors and peers.

Studies have identified family members as having a tremendous impact (positively and negatively) on the anxiety of students enrolled in college (Wang and Castaneda-Sound, 2008; Kimbrough, Molock and Walton, 1996; Guiffrida, 2005; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Lundberg, McIntire and Creasman, 2008). While there is a significant amount of data in this research area, few articles focus on black men.

Based on a sample of 367 college students, Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) found a significant correlation between the stress levels of traditional-aged First Generation College Students (FGCS) and perceived family support. The more family support FGCS received, the less they reported feeling stressed. Conversely, however, the less family support a FGCS received, the more they reported feeling stressed. While the authors did not define the word stress, it can be assumed that they were referring to the anxiety that one may encounter (academically and socially) as a college student. One limitation of this study is that it solely
focused on first-generation college students. None of the students in my study will be the first in their immediate family to graduate from college.

Kimbrough, Molock and Walton (1996) sought to better understand the suicidal ideation of African American college students at both predominantly white and predominantly black universities. Suicidal ideation can be defined as thinking about committing suicide (p. 296). While the team did not find a difference between students based on institution type, they did find other startling statistics. Based on the authors’ findings, students who perceived their families to be non-supportive were more likely to encounter suicidal ideation and depression. While this is significant data, it is important to note that the majority (71%) of the student sample identified as women and more than 60% reported being from middle or upper class socioeconomic status families. It should also be noted that the authors did not define what they meant by social support.

Guiffrida (2005) used a qualitative study to examine the influences that shaped the college experience of African American students at a mid-size private university. His sample consisted of low-achieving students, high-achieving students, and students who withdrew from college prematurely. The low-achieving students were either currently on academic probation or could provide documentation from faculty saying they had performed below their academic potential. The high-achieving participants were students who self-identified as being “high-achieving” (no specific GPA requirement was given by the author). Guiffrida (2005) found that high-achieving black students reported the emotional, academic and financial support received from family members as among the “most important assets while at college” (p. 12). His research also revealed that low-achieving students and students who dropped out were more likely to identify the lack of support from family as contributing to their attrition. While
Guiffrida’s study further supports the connection between family support and student achievement and retention it differs from the current study. Conducted at a large, public research university, this study includes students enrolled at a different institutional type.

The support from peers, or lack thereof, can also have a significant influence on one’s college adjustment (Davis, 2004; Harper, 2006). Davis (2004) found that building friendships was a notable benefit of a preparation institute at Syracuse University. The program was geared toward first-year black college students and designed with the purpose of assisting the teenagers in becoming acclimated to the Syracuse campus. During the qualitative study, one student discussed her experience taking African American Studies courses with other black students. She stated, “you were at home in those classes because you know that the person next to you at least can relate to something you had been through in your life on some sort of level” (Davis 2003, p. 63). Although Davis’s (2004) data are pertinent to the current study, the majority of her sample consisted of female students.

Harper (2006) conducted a study which explored the burden of “acting white” among high achieving black male undergraduates at six predominantly white institutions. Acting white refers to the notion that students of color are attempting to imitate their white counterparts by excelling academically. The author defined high achieving students as those who had at least a 3.0 GPA on a 4.0 scale and had a “lengthy record” of leadership/involvement on campus. Instead of finding data supporting the notion that students were ridiculed for their high scholastic achievement, he found the opposite. The majority of the 32 men interviewed identified their black peers as being “most encouraging and validating” (Harper 2006, p. 347). Although this was a very interesting study, it is important to note that Harper (2006) only focused on students who were identified as high achieving.
In addition to support from one’s family and friends, faculty and administrators have also been identified as contributing to the college experience of students (Strayhorn and Terrell, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008; Ishiyama, 2007; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup and Kuh, 2008; Moore and Toliver, 2008). Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) used secondary analysis from a national sample of the College Student Experiences Questionnaire to explore whether faculty-student mentoring predicted contentment among black students in college. Contentment was measured via questions such as “How well do you like college?” and “If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?” The study’s sample consisted of 554 black collegians who self-identified as non-married students that lived on campus. At the conclusion of their study, the authors found that research-focused relationships (with mentors) had a positive impact on black students and their satisfaction with school. A research-focused relationship is a relationship that students establish with faculty members who they closely work with on research studies/papers. Although these results are significant to the larger body of research on persistence, they only represent a marginal group of African American males. Unlike the study of Strayhorn and Terrell (2007), the current research includes data from black males who live on and off campus.

Ishiyama (2007) conducted a study to determine how three groups of minority college students perceived their relationship with current mentors. The participants all self-identified as first-generation college students and members of the Ronald E. McNair baccalaureate Achievement Program at Truman State University. In the end, Ishiyama (2007) found that younger black students were more likely (than their white counterparts) to emphasize the importance of a personal relationship with a mentor. As these same black students advanced in age, however, the importance of personal relationships with their mentors decreased. This could
mean that when the black students first arrived on campus they tried to seek out mentors who could relate to them (culturally); but as they became more comfortable on campus, cultural relativity was less significant. It could also mean that the students gained self-efficacy, which resulted in them relying less on other people for solutions to various problems. Although this study is pertinent to the general body of data on college student experiences, it is broadly focused. While Ishiyama’s (2007) research included a participant sample of both males and females, the current study will focus exclusively on males.

As previously stated, there are multiple types of social support that research points to as aiding students in their adjustment to college. Some of the more influential forms include the emotional support provided by family, friends and faculty. In addition to social support, self-efficacy can also contribute to one’s adjustment to higher education.

Self-Efficacy

The confidence that one holds in their abilities to prosper in college is another factor that has been linked to scholastic perseverance. Bandura (1977) theorized that “expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles” (p. 191). He also discussed how four principal sources of information (performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological state) shape personal efficacy.

The first source, *performance accomplishments*, is based on one’s personal achievements. After successfully completing something, numerous times, a person’s self-confidence may increase significantly. For example, a person who consistently receives high markings on their math exams may feel inspired to take a more difficult math course. The second source, *vicarious experience*, is based on the achievements of others. For example, a student may feel more
confident taking a certain class after finding out that one of his friends had previously taken the
course and did rather well in it. *Verbal persuasion* can be defined as encouraging oneself to
fulfill a certain task or goal even though you may not have been successful at it in the past. This
can come into play for students who may have failed a particular class but decide to take it over
again. The last source, *physiological state*, can affect self-efficacy because certain experiences
encourage people to become emotionally aroused. Hectic and demanding situations could
increase anxiety--negatively impacting one’s confidence in their abilities.

Although Bandura (1977) studied the self-efficacy of human beings in general, numerous
authors have identified self-efficacy as a major contributor to the persistence of college students
(Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Gushue and Whitson, 2006; Peterson, 1993; Chemers, Hu and
Garcia, 2001; Smith and Blacknall, 2010; Palmer and Strayhorn, 2008; Collins and Bissell, 2004;
Strayhorn, 2008). This has particularly been proven among collegians who are first-year and/or
under-represented minority students (Chemers, Hu and Garcia, 2001; Cokley, 2002; Strayhorn,
2008; Palmer and Strayhorn, 2008).

Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) used a longitudinal study to evaluate the impact of self-
efficacy and optimism on the academic performance of first-year college students. Their data
were gathered from a racially diverse sample of students from the same mid-size California
University. Through two separate questionnaires, the authors found that self-efficacy had a
tremendous impact on the students’ perception of academic work. Participants who were
identified as “highly efficacious students” interpreted academic work demands as more of a
challenge than a threat (p.60). This could mean that students who were more confident in their
scholastic abilities, held higher standards for college courses because they knew the work was
achievable. These students were also noted as performing academically better than students who
were not identified as highly efficacious. While this study produced significant data on the influence of self-efficacy in the lives of college students, it is important to note that its sample only consisted of first-year students.

Comparable to the previously discussed studies, Cokley (2002) examined whether academic performance, in college, is linked to academic self-concept. Using two separate questionnaires, the author gathered data from nearly 600 black and white college students at three different institutions. Two of the schools were Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) and one was a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). After conducting the study, Cokley (2002) found that in comparison to their white peers, black underclassmen possessed higher confidence in their academic ability (at the HBCUs and the PWI). He also found that academic self-concept appeared to have less of a positive impact on the scholastic performance of black men as they persisted through higher education. The positive correlation between academic self-concept and scholastic performance for white students, however, barely decreased overtime. On one hand, these results may suggest that some black students enter college with an unrealistically optimistic view of their academic ability. On the other hand, these results could simply suggest that black students are more likely to rely on other variables to determine their success as they get older. Although Cokley (2002) had a diverse sample of students (in terms of race and institution attended), his study was quantitative. Similar to the previous study, Cokley’s (2002) results could have been more thoroughly explained had he personally interviewed the participants.

Focusing on a more specific population, Strayhorn (2008) sought to identify factors affecting the retention of low-income African American males in college. The sample he used consisted of roughly 9,000 low-income black males who participated in the Beginning
Postsecondary Student (BPS) longitudinal study. After analyzing the data, Strayhorn (2008) found that various factors seemed to affect the retention of these men. One of the most prominent influences was the students’ ambition to succeed. As discussed by Strayhorn (2008), “Black men who aspired to earn a graduate degree were significantly more likely to persist in college than those who aspired to attain less education” (p. 79). Setting higher aspirations for one’s self may directly impact their self-efficacy and as a result, increase their chances of persisting and matriculating. Students who possess a higher level of self confidence in their scholastic ability may very well set higher standards for themselves because they believe those standards are attainable. While Strayhorn’s (2008) study is pertinent to the current research topic, it is important to note that only a limited amount of background information was given on the participants.

Using a smaller qualitative study, Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) sought to examine the academic achievement of black male students at HBCUs. The pair conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 11 black men who entered a public HBCU through its’ pre-college program. All of the men were of junior and senior status and eventually went on to graduate from the institution. At the conclusion of their interviews, the authors’ study yielded results suggesting that non-cognitive factors contributed significantly to academic success for the participants. Several of the students reported taking personal responsibility for their own success. This entailed going to class, asking for support from peers and building relationships with faculty/administrators. Additionally, students discussed the importance of “maintaining a sense of focus and direction” or in other words, keeping their eye on the prize (p. 132-133). The study of Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) closely aligns with the current research topic. One major difference, however, is that the current author interviewed black men who attended a large PWI
in the Midwestern United States. The results between the two studies could vary, drastically, because the two groups of men did not attend the same type of institution.

**Student Engagement**

While pre-college preparedness has been linked to the academic performance of college students (Sadler and Tai, 2001; Wimberly and Noeth, 2005; Reid and Moore III, 2008), student engagement appears to have one of the greatest impacts on their persistence (Pike, Kuh, and McKinley, 2011). For this particular study, student engagement will be identified as any socially or academically structured activity that collegians participate in while at school. These activities can range from social events and volunteer programs to living learning communities and first-year experience courses. Being involved on campus has been shown to assist students in their cultural adjustment to college life (Harper and Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008; Guiffrida, 2003).

Museus (2008) sought to understand the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering student adjustment and membership of students of color at PWIs. Data for the study were gathered via individual interviews with 24 students (12 African Americans and 12 Asian Americans) who attended a university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. After the interviews, Museus (2008) found that ethnic student organizations served three purposes for the participants. These purposes included: Being a source of cultural familiarity, assisting students in managing cultural expression, and providing cultural validation. These results suggest that campus sub-cultures (i.e., ethnic student organizations) assist racial minority students in becoming acclimated with PWIs. This is significant to one’s persistence because students’ who do not become socially acclimated with the campus have a greater chance of dropping out (Tinto, 1993). These findings also suggest that the presence of racial minorities on campus is simply not enough (in regard to promoting persistence amongst these students). Persistence can be
promoted more so by having organizations which stimulate and foster an environment of active student engagement. Although Museus’ (2008) yielded interesting data, his sample consisted of both African American and Asian American men.

Using a more narrow focus, Guiffrida (2003) conducted research to better understand the impact that black organizations have on students’ social integration at a PWI. The extra-curricular activities discussed included academic honor societies, Greek letter organizations, religious groups and political groups. The black academic honor societies restricted membership based on academic merit. The study’s sample consisted of 88 African American undergraduates who were interviewed via small focus groups. At the end of his study, Guiffrida (2003) found that these organizations assisted students in “establishing out-of-class connections with faculty, provided them opportunities to give back to other blacks, and allowed them to feel comfortable by being around others they perceived as like them” (p. 307). These results suggest that African American organizations can be used in the process of assisting some black students in becoming acclimated with predominantly white universities. Although the author used a qualitative research method, focus groups (rather than individual interviews) could have prevented students from voicing certain opinions because their peers were present. Additionally, certain participants could have been influenced by comments made by others which could distort the author’s findings.

Comparable to the previous article, Harper and Quaye (2007) conducted a study to determine how involvement in student organizations can support black identity expression and development among African American male student leaders. Using secondary data analysis, the authors obtained data on high-achieving black male collegians from a previous study. High achieving students were identified as those who were greatly involved and held leadership
positions on their campus. In the end, it was found that being involved in student organizations allowed these men to “uplift” the black community by defying negative African American stereotypes (p. 134). Being involved, on and off campus, also gave the students an opportunity to develop cross-cultural communication skills (enabling them to learn from others who were culturally different from them). One significant limitation of this study was that Harper and Quaye (2007) only evaluated the involvement of high-achieving black male collegians.

In addition to student organizations, much research has been performed to identify the impact of learning communities’ on college performance. Zhao and Kuh (2004) sought to identify whether participating in a learning community is linked to the success of students. In the context of their study, the authors defined a learning community as “a formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together, and may or may not have a residential component” (p. 9). Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), data from 80,479 randomly selected students were assessed. Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that being a part of a learning community was linked to higher levels of academic integration and active/collaborative learning for both first year and senior students. They also found that these students were more likely to interact with faculty members, engage in diversity related activities and be more satisfied with their college experience. While this study highlights learning communities as having an influential role on college performance, it is important to acknowledge its’ limitations. Due to the size of Zhao and Kuh’s (2004) sample, results are very general and do not take into consideration various student characteristics. The findings are based on a survey and since the authors did not disaggregate their results by race, the findings for black men may look vastly different from the general data presented in the study.
In terms of off campus student engagement, Gonyea (2008) sought to discover if study abroad programs led to an increase in the learning/diversity experiences of students after returning to their home institution. Similar to Zhao and Kuh (2004), the author used longitudinal data gathered from the 2004 and 2007 editions of NSSE. This data included surveys taken by both students who were involved in study abroad programs and students who were not. First-year student responses from 2004 were matched with those of seniors from 2007 (using student identifiers provided by the institutions). This allowed the authors to have data from the beginning and end of these students undergraduate experience. After controlling for student and institutional characteristics, Gonyea (2008) found that students who participated in study abroad reported high levels of integrative and reflective learning. Reflective learning focused on how the students analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic and when trying to understand the perspectives of others. Integrative learning focused on how often students combine ideas from various sources, use ideas from different courses/class discussions and discuss course concepts outside the classroom. The students also reported having more developed personal and social skills than their peers who had not participated in study abroad programs. One limitation of Gonyea’s (2008) work is that it involved a small population of African American students (roughly 207 of 6,925). Since the results did not separate race within gender, it is unknown how many black males participated in the study. This is significant because the overall results of Gonyea’s (2008) study may not be representative of black male collegians.

**College readiness**

Another variable identified as having an impact on the persistence of students in higher education is college readiness (Sadler and Tai, 1997; Reid and Moore III, 2008; Wimberly and
According to some researchers, one’s readiness for college begins in middle school. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) conducted a study in which they surveyed middle and high school students on their approach to early planning for higher education. The researchers’ sample consisted of 2,942 eighth, ninth, and tenth graders from 15 schools across the United States. After surveying the students, Wimberly and Noeth (2005) found that while 82% of the participants expressed interest in attending a four-year or two-year institution, only 60% described their high school as a college preparatory program. This is significant because only 60% of these students feel they are receiving the college readiness needed for higher education. The authors also found that nearly 1/3 of the students and their families had not taken into consideration how they would pay for college. At the conclusion of their study, the pair noted that schools need to deliver “postsecondary planning information” to students beginning in grade six (p. 17). This could significantly increase the amount of students who are academically prepared for higher education. While this study was broadly focused, others have a more narrow scope.

Sadler and Tai (1997) conducted an epidemiological study which focused on identifying whether high school physics courses prepare students for college level physics. An
epidemiological study is different from an empirical study in the sense that it has the power to test multiple hypotheses at the same time. Their sample consisted of 1,933 students in introductory physics classes from 18 different universities. At the end of their data collection, Sadler and Tai (1997) found that seeking out a professor of the same gender and taking introductory physics (after the first year of high school) was related to better performance in college physics. Students who took introductory physics during sophomore year in high school, performed higher in college physics than those who took introductory physics during their freshman year of high school. Although Sadler and Tai’s (1997) study is pertinent to the overarching theme of this research, black students only comprised about 5% of their sample.

Reid and Moore III (2008) facilitated a study which evaluated the academic preparedness of 13 college students (prior to them enrolling in college). Ten of the participants were African American and the other three were immigrants from Ghana and Haiti. While interviewing the students, Reid and Moore III (2008) asked each to identify factors that they believed contributed to their college readiness. Some of the factors identified included: taking advanced placement courses, receiving verbal encouragement from high school teachers, and participating in college preparatory programs. One particular program discussed was an academically focused leadership institute. Sponsored by a local bank, the institute linked students with mentors who happened to be employees of the bank. These mentors assisted the students in developing techniques for professional networking and money management skills. While programs such as the leadership institute did not specifically focus on academics, it did provide students with skills that could positively affect their college persistence.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Overview of Chapter

Within this chapter I will discuss the process I used to gather and analyze the data from my participants. I will provide details about the research design incorporated in this study and why it was pertinent to use a qualitative design. Secondly, I will address the significance of using a case study approach as opposed to various other qualitative strategies. I will then discuss the background of my participants and the research site used for our interviews. Lastly, this section will cover the analysis of the research and the methods I used to establish trust and respect amongst the participants.

Research Design

While aforementioned studies in educational research have used both quantitative and qualitative research designs there are significant differences between the two.

As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) one of these differences relies on how each design captures the participants’ perspective. The authors explain that qualitative researchers feel they have a better chance of capturing one’s life experiences via in-depth personal interviews and/or observations. Quantitative research, however, is identified as being less effective overall because it relies more on “remote, inferential empirical methods and materials” (i.e., surveys, questionnaires, etc.) (p. 16). Another difference identified by the pair is the importance, or lack thereof, of rich description(s). With smaller sample sizes, qualitative researchers tend to focus on every detail of their interviews and/or observations to provide a more detailed account of the data. Quantitative researchers tend not to focus on specific details because it limits the process of developing generalizations.
For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design has been incorporated to assist the author in identifying what contributes to the persistence of black male collegians at Predominantly White Institutions. This type of design has been employed because it, according to Creswell (2011), “is best suited to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 16).

Although there is a significant amount of literature on the experiences of college students in general, there appears to be a gap in the literature on the experiences of black men who are not identified as high achieving. Qualitative research allowed me to interview each student. Rich descriptions, of the participants’ personal experiences, are extremely valuable to qualitative researchers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). This one-to-one interaction afforded me the opportunity to establish rapport with the participants and may have positively impacted the process of collecting data from the men. Since the men were individually interviewed, they could have felt more comfortable disclosing certain information in comparison to other situations (i.e., focus group). Using a qualitative method also allowed me to triangulate my data first hand. By having physical access to the students, I was able to locate them and ask for clarification on certain responses that I had difficulty interpreting. This could not occur within a quantitative study because data are typically gathered via surveys or other techniques that limit the amount of personal contact between the interviewer and interviewee. As a result, the researcher may not gather the most accurate data from the participants because both may perceive the questions differently. The qualitative method incorporated within the following research was a case study.

Methodological Approach

A case study is a methodological approach that is “expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). It is typically used to better understand complex social
phenomena and has been identified as the preferred methodology when answering “how and “why” research questions (Yin, 2003). According to Stake (1995), almost anyone or anything can be considered a case (teachers, students, academic programs, etc.). It is important to note, however, that the relationship between two people (i.e., teachers and students) or the policies of an academic program cannot be a case. For the purpose of this study, I will use a case study to assist me in better understanding the factors that influence persistence amongst Black male collegians at PWIs. It will also allow me to view the factors that influence persistence for these men from their perspective.

There are various forms of research strategies. Yin (2003) identifies three in particular that are similar to and often overlap with the case study approach. These procedures include experiments, surveys and history strategies. For example; case studies and experiments are commonly used by scholars to answer “how” and “why” research questions. Case studies also resemble the history and survey strategies because neither requires the control of behavioral events. Even though these methods are similar in certain qualities, they are vastly different in others. Case studies differ from experiments because they require the researcher to control the environment or condition of the experiment that he/she is conducting. Researchers typically do not have direct control over the environment and/or conditions of an interview because they want to capture the subject in their natural state. For the current study, natural state will refer to an informal dialogue on State University’s campus between me and the participants. This is one reason why I allowed the men to choose the interview site and the option to avoid questions they were uncomfortable answering.

Although some case studies are not entirely qualitative in nature (Stake, 2003), this research employed personal interviews to gather information from participants. These personal
interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the experiences and ask follow up questions based on their answers. While there are various types of case studies, the multiple-case study approach was utilized. Yin (2003) described this approach as providing the researcher with an opportunity to investigate the differences between multiple cases that are similar. In regards to my study, it allowed me to compare the information collected from multiple participants and identify commonalities/difference between the men. Individual interviews were chosen as opposed to other qualitative methods (i.e., student observations) for two particular reasons. Interviews are highly effective and convenient. Shadowing students around campus (for observations) could have been extremely burdensome for both parties due to schedule conflicts. The interview format allowed me to set a specific date for each individual and meet them face to face. In contrast to student observations, interviews also allowed me to receive direct responses (from the participants) to my research questions.

Several authors have used case studies to facilitate their research (Fries-Britt, 1998; Guiffrida, 2005; Palmer and Gasman, 2008). Fries-Britt (1998) used individual interviews to evaluate the social, racial and academic experiences of high achieving black male collegians in a merit-based scholarship program. Similarly, Palmer and Gasman (2008) interviewed 11 African American men to further understand their social experiences at an HBCU. Additionally, Guiffrida (2005) incorporated a qualitative constant comparative strategy to gain insight on how familial support, or the lack thereof, impacted the persistence of black students at a PWI.

Approval of Research

In order to receive approval for the current study I had to take training modules along with a series of quizzes that focused on the proper protocol for working with human subjects. I also had to submit a document to the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) which
described the subject of my research and discussed its’ significance to the academy. Once the IRB training was completed and the description of my research was submitted to the appropriate office, I was granted permission to conduct the study.

Description of Research Site

State University (pseudonym) is a large public Research I institution located in the mid-western United States. The institution prides itself on the high selectivity of its’ student population. According to the school website, 56% of the students admitted during the fall of 2010 were ranked within the top 10% of their high school graduating class. The website also states that majority of its’ incoming freshmen score between 27 and 31 on the ACT. As of fall 2010, it had a total population of approximately 44,000 students, with 2,388 of these students identifying as African American/black and 886 identifying as black men. The university is located in a mid-sized town of about 120,000 residents.

A group-study room in the undergraduate library was used to hold all four interviews. The private study rooms were an ideal location for numerous reasons. Although the library is typically loud and bustling with students, the study room provided a quiet, private environment for the interviewees to discuss their personal experiences. Another reason why the undergraduate library was an ideal location for the interviews is because of its’ location. Since the library is situated in the middle of the campus, it was easily accessible for all participants. Additionally, the undergraduate library is an area on the campus that many students utilize on a daily basis. While the interviews were conducted in a private room, they still occurred in an atmosphere that the students were familiar with. This was done to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible. Although the author gave the participants a choice as to where they would prefer to hold the interview, all willingly opted to meet at the library.
Sampling and Participant Demographics

Originally, I sought to interview a group of black men who graduated with less than a 3.0 GPA in high school but currently had higher than a 3.0 GPA in college. Due to the difficulty of finding students who fit this description, I decided to use a different set of qualifications. In order to be considered for the study, participants had to meet the following criteria. Each had to self-identify as black and/or African American, male and be enrolled as a full-time student at the university. The participants came from different college majors, high schools, and communities. In terms of sample selection, the author used the convenient sampling and snowball sampling techniques to reach the targeted population. Researchers using a convenience sampling technique select participants based on their willingness and availability to partake in the study (Creswell, 2011). On the other hand, snowball sampling can be described as recruiting subjects (who are already interested in the study) to identify other potential subjects. An advantage of these techniques is their efficiency. Both are commonly used to recruit large samples in a relatively short amount of time. The disadvantage of these techniques, however, is that they can create samples that lack diversity. In the interest of time, a researcher using these techniques may recruit participants from a similar background because they are easier to locate. Participants used to recruit other participants may select those who are similar to them (culturally, socially, etc.). This can cause the sample to be homogeneous. In order to avoid this issue, I purposely sought various people (administrators, graduate students, etc.) to identify students who would be good for the study.

Before reaching out to these different students, I compiled a list of administrators and graduate students who I knew worked with black male collegians on a regular basis. I then contacted these individuals either by email and/or phone and asked for their assistance. After
discussing the type of students needed for the study, my contacts (as a whole) provided me with 25 names and/or email addresses of men who fit my criteria. For those who I was not given their email address, I searched for it in the school’s online directory.

Once the list of names was received, an introductory email was sent to each of the men. The introductory email included a brief section on the researcher’s background, what type of research was being conducted and why it is relevant to them. After sending out the first wave of emails, I received two responses from students interested in the study. After two more waves of emails, I received messages from a total of 8 students who initially expressed interest in the study. While 8 expressed interest, only 4 actually scheduled an interview. Once I received a response agreeing to participate in the study, I forwarded the student a copy of my research abstract and a letter of consent. In the same email, I also suggested the undergraduate library as a location to hold the interviews but asked if they preferred a different site.

Data Collection

Once each participant and I agreed on a particular date and time, the individual interviews were conducted. Before each interview began, the student was provided with a hard copy of my abstract and letter of consent to be signed. Once the letter of consent was signed, the interview was initiated. Each interview was scheduled for 1 hour and 30 minutes. During the process, students were asked 10-15 questions regarding their academic success in both high school and college. In addition to digitally recording their experiences, I also jotted down side notes to assist me in remembering certain areas of their testimony that I wanted them to elaborate upon. After the interview was completed, the participant was given a 15 dollar gift cad as a token of appreciation for contributing to the study.

Data Analysis
Similar to previous case studies (Palmer and Gasman, 2008; Guiffrida, 2005) I used a constant comparative analysis to assess the transcripts and field notes within my research. According to Creswell (2011) “this method involves gathering data, sorting it into categories, collecting additional information, and comparing the new information with emerging categories” (p. 434). Within my study, constant comparative analysis allowed me to identify, compare and contrast major themes shared between the participants.

After all of the interviews were complete, I transferred the audio files to my computer and transcribed each interview. Once I finished transcribing the data, the audio files were deleted from my computer and transcripts were forwarded to the respective students with questions regarding areas in which I needed further explanation. This process allowed me to validate the data by allowing the interviewees to revise anything within their transcript that they wanted clarified. When students forwarded me their updated transcripts (along with answers to my follow-up questions) I began to organize and code the data. Once the data was coded, I narrowed it into major themes/similarities that the men seemed to have in common.

In discussing the results, I will use block quotes from each of the interviews. This allows me to provide the reader with a detailed account of each theme and allows the participants to be heard in their own voice. Pseudonyms are used for each of the interviewees and the various administrators, organizations, and high schools they discussed.

Trustworthiness

A member checking process was applied to this study; assisting me in better understanding the stories of these men. After transcribing each student’s data, I read their transcripts and added questions (via “track notes”) to areas where I wanted them to further explain. Once this was done, I forwarded each student’s interview to him (via email) and
allowed them to replace and/or omit areas in which they were uncomfortable sharing. This form of triangulation is important because it narrows the author’s chances of misinterpreting participant information which is one common flaw of the case study method (Yin, 2003).

Limitations

As with most research, this study contained some limitations. One limitation was that I did not have access to the participants’ academic records. Since students are protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) I relied on self-reported academic information, such as GPA. Due to feeling uncomfortable discussing their academic ability (social desirability, image management, etc.), participants could have inflated their GPA. While I believe the students reported correct GPAs, there was no way to confirm this information without documentation. This leads to a second limitation; trustworthiness.

This study focused on a particular group of men. Since the focus was on black male collegians who attend a PWI, the results from this study may differ significantly from a study focusing on women or another ethnic group. The fact that data were only gathered from men at one institution could mean that my findings are not representative of black male students outside of this institution.

Additionally, the recruitment method used to recruit participants could be a limitation of my study. Relying on campus staff and administrators to identify students could have limited the type of black males I recruited. For example, of the students I initially contacted, none of them identified as athletes and everyone was from the state of Illinois (particularly the Chicago metropolitan area).
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Overview of Chapter

The fourth chapter will discuss the results of my interviews with the four men. First I will provide short biographies of each student—highlighting factors such as their high school, hometown, and current academic major. I will then identify the themes I coded while transcribing the data and elaborate on the similarities/differences between my participants. Finally, I will relate the data collected from this study to my theoretical framework and other previous research.

Before delving into the students and the data they provided via interviews, it is important to discuss the relationship between

Student Biographies

In total, I interviewed four African American men who attend State University (pseudonym). Two of the men came from the city of Chicago, one came from a northern suburb of Chicago and the last came from a southern suburb of Chicago. One participant is a freshman, one is a sophomore, one is a junior and one is a senior. I did not expect to interview a participant from each academic level, but was fortunate to have this occur because their year in school could have an influence on the type of data they provide. While three of the students enrolled in State University directly after graduating from high school, one attended a community college before entering the institution. All of the men reported having immediate relatives (i.e., someone living in their household) who attended a college/university before they did. Therefore, none of the participants would be considered first generation college students.
Byron is a 21 year old senior at State University. He is originally from a town (of approximately 25,000 residents) located north of Chicago. According to the United States census (2010) 48.9% of the town identified as white while roughly 31% identified as black/African American. Byron graduated from a predominantly white high school and, unlike the other men in this study, transferred to State University from a community college located near his hometown. His final GPA at the community college was a 3.314. He is currently majoring in political science and plans to graduate this spring.

Derrick is a 19 year old sophomore at State University who is from the southwest side of Chicago. He attended a Chicago public high school for two years before transferring to a charter high school near downtown Chicago. In addition to receiving a high school diploma, Derrick also obtained an Associate’s degree from his charter school. Although he began his career as an undeclared student at State University, he plans to major in broadcasting. During his senior year of high school, Derrick applied to four schools (including State University) and was accepted by all of them.

Adam is a 20 year old junior studying Economics at State University. He is from a city located south of Chicago. The city has approximately 25,000 residents with 75% identifying as African American/black. He attended and graduated from a public high school with a 3.7 accumulative Grade Point Average (GPA). Although he applied to two other institutions, State University was his top choice.

Ladarius is an 18 year old freshman also from the south side of Chicago. He attended a charter high school where he graduated with a 3.36/4 GPA. Although State University was not Ladarius’s first choice, he decided to attend the institution because it was more affordable. In
total, Ladarius applied to 7 colleges (including State University) and is currently enrolled within the college of Engineering.

High School to College Success

In 2011, the Illinois Board of Higher Education published a report identifying the success rate of freshmen who entered State University between 2006 and 2008. Success was identified by GPA and persisting from first to second year. While the students were not identified by name, they were identified by the public high school they attended.

According to the report, 15 students from Byron’s high school enrolled in State University between fall 2006 and fall 2008. While the group’s average high school GPA was a 3.52, the average GPA of their first year at State University was a 2.96. Of these 15 students, 13 persisted to their second year.

Adam’s high school had 13 students admitted to the university between the fall of 2006 and fall of 2008. The average high school GPA of these students was a 3.22. The average GPA of their first year at the university was a 2.58. In comparison to Byron’s school, only one student did not return after the first year. This is significant because it shows the similarity in retention patterns between students admitted from Byron’s high school and Adam’s high school. These students were virtually admitted at the same rate and persisted to sophomore year at the same rate.

Based on the significant drop between high school and college GPA for both high schools, it is apparent that the first year of college was a reality check (academically) for many of these students. By this I mean that students did not do as well in their first year of college as they did in high school. One explanation for this is that grade inflation may have existed at the high schools. Due to grade weighting, one school’s grades may have been calculated differently.
from the other school’s grades. While these statistics are not the greatest indicator of matriculation at the collegiate level, they do highlight the difficulty that students experience when transitioning between high school and college.

A limitation of the IBHE report is that it only concentrated on students who attended public high schools in the state of Illinois. Students who attended private high schools were not included. As a result, the high schools that Ladarius and Derrick attended were omitted.

Themes

In general, the men were asked various questions regarding their social and academic experiences in both high school and college. Specifically, they were asked to identify factors that impacted their academic performance (positively and negatively) at State University. They were also asked to discuss the advice they would give to future black males who chose to attend the institution. Their results are shared within the themes below.

College was the only way (college readiness)

As men who came from families with college graduates, higher education always seemed to be in their future. Derrick talked about always knowing that he was going to college—even when he was doing poorly in his classes during freshman and sophomore year of high school. He stated:

I can’t think of a moment where I didn’t think I [wasn’t going to college]. My mom is an English teacher…so college was always the option I was seeking after high school; it was never nothing else so I never knew anything different. Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to go to college.

Similar to Derrick, Byron also knew college was in his future despite graduating from high school with less than a 2.5 GPA. When thinking back on his high school career he shared that:
“…going to college in my family was not foreign and actually the funny thing, I think back on it, in high school even though I was struggling I knew I was going to college. I knew I planned on finishing college so it’s so funny to think that you’re struggling so much, here now, but you already know the next steps going to be taken care of.”

Different from other participants, Adam shared that having a college educated parent didn’t impact him directly at State University but having “expectations” for himself in high school did. He went on to say “…My mother actually [graduated], she graduated from college but she made some bad choices early in her life, so if anything, I would say my parents were an example, but they were basically an example of what not to do…” He also states:

“…I never wanted to be an individual that had to be on welfare to feed his children, um live paycheck to paycheck, not be able to travel and go do things, not be able to give my kids things that they wanted…”

The comments made by the men in this section directly correspond with the ideas of aspirational and social capital discussed by Yosso (2005). Yosso’s concepts relate to the current theme because these men identify family and personal ambition as influencing their decision to pursue higher education. Their quotes also highlight the impact of the internal context and family context shared by Perna and Thomas (2006). Although Derrick and Byron faced academic hurdles in high school; both aspired to be college students. This could have been linked to the fact that each came from families in which they were not the first to attend and graduate from college. As a result, the students felt more confident in their ability to matriculate from high school and persist into higher education. Having high expectations (i.e., self-efficacy) for ones’ self, seemed to encourage Adam to pursue higher education. He knew that in order to establish financial stability for his family, college was a necessity. It is interesting to note,
however, that having a parent who graduated from college did not seem to have the same impact on Adam’s experience as it did on the other participants. From his perspective, his mother’s education did not appear to have a sound influence on his college experience. In general, I identify this theme as being a part of the first transition (college readiness) that Perna and Thomas (2006) discussed in their framework. Having the motivation (internally or externally) to attend higher education was obviously a denominator in these men’s college enrollment.

**Knowledge of campus before attending (college readiness)**

Interesting enough, all of the men, except one, discussed visiting State University before attending the institution. Ladarius notes that State University has been in his life since grammar school:

“When I look back on it, think about it, [State University] has been in my life since like 6th grade because I was in their [high school engineering program] and we used to come up here and visit [State University] all the time.”

Although he was quite familiar with the school’s campus, Ladarius noted that he was not originally interested in attending the institution because he wanted to attend college out of state. Derrick discussed having family members who attended the institution before he did. When asked why he chose State University he said:

“A lot of the people in my family who graduated from high school…[came] here so it’s kind of like a tradition and I really like the school. I just knew that right off the bat…if I got into [State University], that’s where I was going.”

Similar to Ladarius, Adam talked about his first interaction with the school. He noted that he was invited to the university for a campus visit during his senior year of high school: “Truthfully, after I came to visit this campus I told myself ‘I’m going here’ and I didn’t accept…I wasn’t
going to accept no for an answer so I didn’t.” While visiting State University, Adam learned more about its’ academic reputation and had a chance to explore the physical landscape of the campus.

The information discussed in this section closely aligns with Yosso’s (2005) family/navigational capital and Perna and Thomas’s (2006) family/school contexts. On one hand, Derrick received a lot of his knowledge about State University, from family members who attended the school. He also talked about wanting to continue his family’s tradition of graduating from this particular institution. On the other hand, Adam and Ladarius talked about receiving a wealth of knowledge about State University from visiting its campus. Their visits could have assisted them in knowing how and where to locate various resources once enrolled at State University. Similar to the previous section, I feel this theme was a part of the college readiness transition that Perna and Thomas (2006) discussed. Through various ways, the men obtained knowledge of the university that could have assisted them socially and/or academically once arriving on campus as freshmen.

**College Preparation**

Whether it was learning how to study for college level exams, gaining time management skills or socializing with peers, each participant shared the struggles they encountered during their academic career. In this section, they discussed the process of transitioning between their high school or community college and the university. The shift from secondary to post-secondary education was a part of Perna and Thomas’s (2006) third stage; the college enrollment transition. For the most part it appeared that the students’ social transition was much easier than the academic transition.
With exception to a calculus course he took, Adam talked about not feeling equipped by his high school for the academic rigors of college. When asked about the transition between high school and college, he said “It was a wakeup call, wakeup call academically because I realized that none of my classes in high school prepared me for what I was about to go through…” He attributed his lack of preparation to low funding and low expectations he felt some administrators had for the students. Adam’s comments, about the lack of preparation he received in high school, highlight his use of Yosso’s (2005) concept of resistant capital. Due to feeling underprepared by his high school, Adam could have simply given up after his first year of college—but he did not. Instead, he acknowledged some areas of improvement and has focused on becoming a better student.

Unlike Adam, Derrick shared that the organization of his high school prepared him for collegiate success. After his sophomore year, Derrick’s mother moved him from a local public high school to a charter school near downtown Chicago. As a result of the new school’s rigorous academic structure (which included block scheduling1) he felt better equipped for State University:

“At [new high school], I had a lot more freedom…we were taking college classes in high school so it was a lot of sometimes free time…That free time kind of made me decide ‘ok, I can go play basketball or I could sit down, do homework and study’ and that really helped me…”

These college courses assisted Derrick in earning an Associate’s degree in addition to a high school diploma once he graduated from the charter school. This comment highlights the

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1 According to education.com, Block scheduling is defined as “a method of scheduling the six-hour school day into ‘blocks of class time’.” Instead of having the standard 6-7 periods in a day, schools that use block scheduling typically have 4-5 periods in a day—which allows for more interaction between teachers and students.
significance of taking college level courses in high school and learning time management skills along the way.

While Ladarius also believed his high school prepared him for higher learning, he discussed the trouble he encountered with his first college math class: “…Academically, I failed my first math test and I was like ‘wow! [that’s] never happened before, never failed a math test’. And [the math class] is like, kinda like freshman high school math- it’s algebra.” Ladarius contributed his difficulty in the class to not having taken an algebra course since the beginning of high school. Socially, the transition into college seemed smooth for the Ladarius. His biggest adjustment, however, was moving from an institution with a few hundred students to an institution with several thousand.

Byron, who transferred to State from a community college, predominantly spoke about his social acclimation with the campus. He discussed underestimating the move and how he transformed from a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big pond. When asked about the experience, Byron stated:

“I knew on that [community college] campus of 17-18,000 students…I in every 12 people I knew in the hall ways, you know? And I come here and I’m surrounded by thousands of people that I did not know. You feel faceless, and you try to make a niche of friends but, you know? They’re a niche you don’t want to be defined by that one group or the thing that you have in common, so it’s like it takes time to start to build a wide network of friends…”

The idea of Yosso’s (2005) social capital was apparent when Byron spoke about creating a network of friends at State University. Within his interview, he addressed the importance of establishing friendships/relationships with not one but various types of individuals on campus.
This theme highlights the significance of pre-college preparedness or as Perna and Thomas (2006) called it; the school context. Students who felt underprepared by their high school may experience difficulty with their academic and/or social acclimation with the university. Students who did feel prepared by their high school, however, may experience less difficulty because they have learned key strategies such as time management and studying techniques for college level exams.

Campus engagement/involvement (college achievement)

Each of the men discussed being active within various organizations and taking advantage of different campus-wide resources. Most of the organizations the men highlighted were identified as predominantly black or African American. Derrick talked about being a member of an organization that focused on uplifting black male college students. Currently, he is only a member but plans to join the group’s executive board relatively soon: “…A lot of [members in organization] are upperclassmen. [name of organization’s president] and a couple other members are leaving because they’re graduating-so next year, I’m definitely going to have to take on an executive board position there.”

Adam noted being involved in a pre-dominantly black organization designed for students to express their artistic ability via singing, poetry, dancing and rapping. Although he considers himself to be shy when singing in front of others, he states that the group has helped him feel more comfortable when performing on stage:

“I’ve always been timid with singing so, but it’s always something that I’ve done personally. I never really did it in front of people cause I was always timid and nervous. Just by joining [name of organization] I’ve been able to do that a lot more often and kinda build up that confidence, just not for that, but confidence overall in myself.”
Adam also discussed his membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) and involvement with a program designed to bring high school seniors (mostly black and Latino) from the Chicago area to visit and interact with students at State University. The program, which occurs over a weekend, gives the high school students an opportunity to reside with a current State University student in the residence halls. Additionally, the students attend a panel hosted by current students of color at State University and are allowed to ask any questions they have about college life in general.

Other participants, such as Byron, discussed being involved with organizations that were not identified as predominantly black or African American. Although he was only involved with one organization at State University, because he wanted to focus predominantly on academics, Byron discussed his involvement at the community college level: “…I was in Student Government…I served on the school board…I was a student trustee member and I went and served on the State Community College Board of Trustees.” He also talked about his involvement with Campus Crusade for Christ, the international club and Asian student Alliance. It is interesting to note that Byron did not discuss joining any predominantly black clubs/organizations at either institution. While he did not state why, he later discusses not wanting to limit himself to one particular type of organization or one particular group of people.

As a result of joining various organizations on campus the participants discussed meeting upperclassmen and administrators who either became resources or connected them to resources on campus. Derrick shared, “…when me and my friends first came down here, we actually met a lot of upperclassmen at the [cultural center] and since then they’ve always looked out for us…they check our papers and stuff like that…” Derrick also stated that via campus administrators, he learned of free tutoring services offered on campus. Adam also discussed the
type of connections he made on campus with various people: “…Here [at State University] you have counselors, you have tutors, you have the Dean, you have your advisors, you have just so many different resources that can point you in the direction that you would need…” Although he did not take advantage of all the resources he was presented with, Adam noted their reliability:

“I know [pause] I know they have the [Minority Study Office] (acronym). I never utilized [MSO] as much as I should but I know that if I went online and signed up for a tutor session for [MSO] tomorrow, I could do that tomorrow, I wouldn’t have to wait or anything…”

While Adam does not directly state why he chose not to utilize the resources provided by MSO, he later discusses some “bad habits” that transferred with him from high school to college. One of these “bad habits” was procrastination—which could have negatively impacted his reliance on services such as tutoring.

The comments from these men highlight the influence of Yosso’s (2005) social, aspirational and navigational capitals. Campus engagement assisted the students in different ways. For Aaron, joining a particular club helped him gain confidence in his daily interaction with other students. Campus involvement assisted Derrick in meeting upperclassmen and administrators who referred him to different free services provided by the university. Through his involvement in various types of organizations, Byron was able to interact and become friends with people from different cultures. The comments in this theme also show the importance of what Perna and Thomas (2006) identified as the social, economic and policy context. Providing various clubs/organizations and other social/academic programs assisted these students in navigating State University. It also aided them in feeling more comfortable as members of the school’s community.
Motivation to strive for success

In each of their interviews, the men discussed having different factors which contributed to their motivation to strive for academic success. I believe one’s ambition to strive collegiately can lead to Perna and Thomas’s (2006) fourth stage; college achievement. I feel this way because research suggests that students who set long-term career goals have a better chance of persisting to graduation than students who do not set long-term career goals (Strayhorn, 2008). For this particular section, academic success referred to graduating from high school and persisting through higher education. Three of the men, in particular, discussed the impact of immediate family on their motivation.

Derrick mentioned a conversation with his mother in which she addressed him on his low academic performance during high school. He went on to say:

“…I had realized that [during] my sophomore year I was messing up my GPA and um, at that point I was thinking about college and my mom sat me down and told me college won’t be an option if I keep messing up my grades…”

This dialogue between Derrick and his mother seemed to motivate him to improve his grades. By senior year, he had established a 3.8 GPA.

Adam talked about depending on his older brother for emotional and physical support. He stated:

“…It’s just always been me and my brother [pause] at all times, if it was anyone there it was always my brother…when I go home, I don’t go home to my grandmother’s, I go home to my brother’s ‘cause my brother always gives me a place to stay under any circumstance…”
Adam also shared that while he was only interested in applying to State University for college, his brother motivated him to consider other options: “…I told him, ‘I don’t wanna apply to any other schools, I’m going to [State University]…and he was like ‘well, you need to apply to other schools [too]’…” Derrick’s testimony is congruent with Ladarius’s statements about following the footsteps of his older sister (academically) and repeatedly telling himself that “if she can do it, I can do it.” The comments made by Ladarius, Adam and Derrick showed the significance of Yosso’s (2005) concept of familial capital. They also highlighted the impact of emotional and physical support from loved ones who are not always the parents.

In addition to their families, some participants talked about the need to provide financial stability for themselves (and others) as motivation for success. Adam noted that he wanted to own a home within the next 15 years. He also spoke about not wanting to depend on others for financial assistance:

“…I don’t want to be, I never want to be that person [who’s] 25 or 30 years old and I’m not able to put myself in a position where I can own a house [pause] I can put food on my table without government assistance…I would rather be someone that can do on my own…”

Derrick talked about being able to provide for his family, especially his mother, and not being poor:

“What motivates me to strive for success would have to be my family and hopefully taking care of them and making enough money where I can support my mom…and that’s what kind of motivates me; not being broke when I get out of college.”

Comparable to Derrick, Byron discussed his passion for serving others (family or not) as motivating his success at State University. He went on to say:
“I look and I think I’ve been blessed with certain skills and abilities…I have particular interest and I’ve been afforded this opportunity to come learn at an institution like this, so really, I feel like if I can combine those three things; my skills, my interest, and my opportunity [pause] there’s the potential to help a lot of people.”

Byron went more into detail about giving back to the people who assisted him in his life, he shared “…When I get down about writing a paper or [ask myself] ‘why am I doing this?’ I think about all the different constituencies I [had] growing up, and how I can serve those individuals’ needs.” The comments made by Adam, Derrick and Byron highlighted the influence of Yosso’s (2005) aspirational capital. The ambition to provide for themselves, in addition to others, appeared to influence the men to strive for collegiate success.

**Additional Finding**

*Advice to a younger brother*

I asked each of the men to discuss the advice they would give to a black male freshman coming to State University. The men’s comments were most likely influenced by the amount of time they had been at the university and their overall collegiate experience. I say this because each of the men were at different stages in their collegiate career which means they may have faced different challenges. Since Ladarius is only a freshman, he probably has not taken as many upper-division courses as Adam (who is a junior). Byron, who is a senior, may have more advice regarding preparation for post-undergraduate career plans than Derrick who is only a sophomore. No matter where the students stood in terms of year in school, each gave pertinent information that could be useful for incoming freshmen.

Some of the participants discussed sharing advice pertaining to the social aspect of college life. Byron’s guidance focused on how students should establish relationships with
others who do not look like them. When asked about his advice to a black male freshman at State University, Byron stated:

“I would tell him, don’t do things because you’re quote un-quote supposed to. So like you’re black on campus, you’re a minority, so you’re naturally probably going to want to associate with only black people- there’s nothing wrong with associating with that group by any stretch, but don’t be afraid to branch out…”

He went on to say that students should “think outside the box” and create their own college experience instead of allowing society to create it for them. My interpretation of Byron’s statement is that African American students should not limit themselves to predominantly black clubs/organizations. Instead, they should reach out to people and organizations of various cultures to diversify their college experience.

Other students gave advice on adjusting to the academic rigors of the university. When asked about the type of guidance he would provide, Derrick stressed the importance of time management:

“…I would just give them advice to just pick and choose when to hang out with friends, go to events and when to study. Just make that distinction early and I think they’ll be just fine…be able to say ‘okay, I’m not going to go to this party, I’m going to go to the library’ [pause] be able to make those decisions…”

Similarly, Ladarius discussed telling the student to utilize their time effectively and not become overwhelmed with the social aspect of college: “You know, party hard but study harder. You came here for one reason, that’s academics [pause] don’t get caught up with girls [pause] everything else will fall into place once your academics are straight.”
In accordance with Derrick and Ladarius, Adam discussed encouraging the student to “hit the ground running”. By this he is referring to gaining a high GPA during the first academic year because the classes are typically less challenging than other years. Adam also stated that the way advice is distributed to students is just as significant as the message itself:

“I would just have to find a different way to kinda communicate that and make them realize it… I used to hear the same stuff, ‘you all gotta study, blah blah blah, you can’t go out every night of the week’. I didn’t go out every night of the week, but on the nights I didn’t go out- I didn’t utilize my time. I just played the video game and chilled.”

He contributed nights like these to the academic difficulties he encountered later during sophomore year.

The advice given by these men ties directly into the concepts of Yosso (2005) and Perna & Thomas (2006) research. The influence of Yosso’s (2005) social capital was evident within the statements made about diversifying ones’ college experience. Joining organizations that are not identified as predominantly African American can provide the students with an opportunity to meet (i.e., socialize with) others from different backgrounds and expand their knowledge on numerous diversity issues. Advice given on the different skills deemed important to academic success shows the importance of college readiness as discussed by Perna and Thomas (2006). Learning various techniques, such as time management, could assist students in feeling less stressed about daily life and result in higher grades as a result of remembering important homework, quiz or exam dates. Taking freshman courses seriously, or “hitting the ground running” as Adam explained it, ties into Yosso’s (2005) aspirational capital. Adam’s statement ties in with aspirational capital because it encourages students to aspire to earn good grades during their freshman year in order to establish a strong GPA. Lastly, all of the remarks made in
this section can contribute to Perna and Thomas’s (2006) third transition (college success) because the advice from these men comes from their personal experience in higher education.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored the collegiate experiences of four African American male students at a large predominantly white research university. Each of the participants identified as being a first-year, second-year, third-year or fourth year student. All four men were at least the second person in their immediate family to attend college and none will be the first in their family to graduate. The first section of this chapter will provide a summary of the overall study. I will then provide a discussion that will expand upon my findings and link data gathered from the interviewees to previous literature. The next section will note implications for future research and provide suggestions for various individuals who influence the success of African American male scholars at predominantly white institutions. Finally, I will conclude this section by addressing the contribution of my findings to the larger body of literature and how future research in this area should be guided.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the various factors that contributed to the success of black male collegians at a predominantly white institution. Since all of the participants were still in the process of matriculating, success was measured by their ability to persist from semester-to-semester at the university. This research provided insight on the positive as well as negative experiences these students encountered at the secondary and post-secondary education levels. The primary research question I used to guide the study was: What social/academic experiences have contributed to the success of black male collegians at Predominantly White Institutions? My secondary question was: How have these experiences
contributed to their success at the collegiate level? How is the second question different from the first?

While previous studies have produced significant data on the persistence of black male collegians, many tend to focus on students who are identified as “high achieving” (Harper, 2005; Harper, 2004; Fries-Britt, 1998) or students who attend Historically Black Colleges/Universities (Palmer and Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer and Gasman, 2008; Harper, S. R., Carini, R. M., Bridges, B. K., and Hayek, J. C., 2008). The current research, however, focused on a general group of black male collegians at a PWI who were not selected based on their academic standing at the university.

A qualitative research method was used to gather data from the four participants. This design allowed the students to elaborate on their academic/social experiences from high school and college. The type of qualitative method used was a multiple case study approach. As defined by Yin (2003) a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context…” (p. 13). Once the interviews were complete, constant comparative analysis was used to assess the participants’ data. This analysis method allowed me to sort student data into categories and compare the responses of one student to the responses of another student.

To establish trustworthiness, I carefully read each of the participants’ transcripts’ and added questions (track notes) to sections where I wanted clarification. After adding track notes, I forwarded the students their transcriptions and allowed them to insert additional information or omit certain passages they were uncomfortable with sharing. This gave students control over their own words. It also allowed me to triangulate their data via member checking. Member
checking is the process in which participants are allowed to review/edit the author’s interpretation of their personal narrative.

There were four limitations of this study. The first was that I did not have access to the academic records of the participants due to the Family Educational Rights and Protection (FERPA) Act. The second limitation was that the research focused on a particular group of students (black male collegians) at a particular type of university (predominantly white institution). Another limitation of the study was using a limited amount of campus staff and administrators to identify potential interviewees.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the findings that emerged from the participants’ interviews, six themes were created. Within these themes, the men discussed factors that appeared to have a sound impact on their collegiate success thus far. Much of the participants’ data directly correlated with four specific findings highlighted by previous literature. These findings included the importance of social support, self-efficacy, student engagement and college readiness for students in post-secondary education (particularly those of color).

The influence of social support was evident via the testimonies of the four men interviewed. In various situations, the men relied on the expertise of family, older peers and administrators to assist them at some stage of their academic career. Derrick talked about meeting older students, during his first year, which referred him to various academic resources on campus. These students also assisted him and his friends with homework assignments. Derrick’s comment directly correlated with the findings of Davis (2004) which suggested that friends and other peers assist students of color in becoming acclimated with the university’s campus.
The significance of self-efficacy was also highlighted by the men in their interviews. All of the men discussed knowing they were going to college regardless of different barriers they encountered in their life. Although Byron experienced academic challenges in high school, he consistently told himself college was possible. While this may have highlighted Byron’s unrealistic expectations as a high school student, it also highlighted the confidence he possessed in regards to his academic ability.

This is consistent with the findings of Strayhorn (2008). Students who set long term goals (such as attending college or a professional school) are more likely to be academically successful than those who do not set long term goals.

In addition to social support and self-efficacy, student engagement also appeared to be a factor that contributed to the students’ adjustment at State University. Adam discussed being involved in a predominantly black organization that assisted him in feeling comfortable when singing in front of large groups of people. He also shared that in addition to giving him more confidence to sing in front of others, his experience in the organization has given him more confidence in his ability to socialize with other students. Adam’s comments directly align with the findings of Museus (2008) who identified ethnic student organizations as assisting scholars in managing cultural expression and providing cultural validation.

Lastly, the college preparedness these students received in high school, or the lack thereof, impacted their adjustment to State University. Derrick noted that due to the academic structure of his high school, he felt better prepared for college. The student discussed learning core strategies (i.e., time management skills, studying techniques, etc.) and taking college level course work. These factors most likely prepared him for college more so than other students who didn’t receive similar preparation. Derrick’s discussion correlated with the findings of
previous authors who identified college preparedness in high school as contributing to success at the post-secondary education level (Sadler and Tai, 2001; Reid and Moore III, 2008).

Implications

There are numerous implications that should be considered when discussing the success of black male collegians in higher education. Based on the findings of the current study, I have crafted suggestions that could assist various individuals in addressing the needs of black men at the post-secondary education level. These individuals include K-12 administrators, college administrators, researchers and the federal government.

K-12 Administrators

As previous literature suggests, college preparedness should begin at the middle school level (Wimberly & Noeth 2005). One way this can occur is by having teachers sit down with students/parents and develop a college readiness action plan. Some of the topics within this action place could include: short/long term goals for academic success and the importance of ACT/SAT examination scores. Another important topic teachers should discuss with students and parents is the significance of a competitive high school curriculum for college preparedness. This process should occur during the last year of middle school and continue throughout high school (via parent-teacher conferences). Beginning this process around 8th grade is important because it gives students and their families roughly five years of preparation for college.

College Administrators

At the college level, I feel it is pertinent for administrators to establish programming that aims to increase enrollment, persistence and matriculation amongst black male collegians. One particular type of programming that should be incorporated by institutions of higher learning is a college preparation program for incoming freshmen. While many universities have summer
programs geared towards increasing the representation of underrepresented minorities in general, very few have programs which place an emphasis of men of color in particular. This would be a great opportunity to enroll black high school males in college level courses and prepare them for the first year on campus. This type of initiative could also assist the students in establishing friendships with peers who can relate to them. I also believe colleges and universities should incorporate mentoring programs and learning communities which link incoming freshmen with upperclassmen or professors. Derrick’s comments regarding mentors, who assisted him in finding resources on campus, highlights the positive influence these individuals have on students. This type of programming is significant because research suggests that initiatives such as learning communities can positively impact student persistence (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). Learning communities could also encourage black male collegians to embrace cultural differences and identify commonalities with students who may not look like them but possess similar career interests. This would assist them in learning how to navigate the college campus in terms of working together (in student organizations, in classrooms, etc.) with people who are not always African American.

Campus administrators could also create additional research studies which focus on how to retain and encourage academic success among black male collegians at their particular institution. Institutions could allocate funding for professors and graduate students to conduct focus groups or distribute surveys on their campuses. This could encourage universities to take a more hands-on approach as opposed to hiring consultants to do the job for them. It could also assist practitioners in better understanding how to serve these students and increase their chances of graduating from the university.

Federal Government
One way universities can provide additional services for black male collegians is through adequate funding provided by the federal government. As mentioned via previous literature, federal policy that warrants access to higher education and academic support programs is essential to the success of black men in higher education (Strayhorn, 2006). These policies assist in the continuation of initiatives such as McNair Scholars, Upward Bound and other TRIO programs. Adequate funding from the government can also assist with the creation of small-scale and large-scale research studies that will assist administrators in finding ways to support these men.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study suggest that, consistent with previous literature, various academic and social factors contribute to the persistence of black male collegians. These factors included, but were not limited to; social support, self-efficacy, college preparedness and student engagement. While the preceding influences were discussed in great detail, it is interesting to note that other less-discussed factors seemed to affect persistence as well. In his interview, Byron highlighted his devotion to “God” and how his faith, in a higher power, encouraged him to pursue his passion. Since none of the other students discussed religion, it was not a common theme between the men but Byron’s comments warrant further research. More research is needed on the impact of spirituality on student persistence because there is a minimal amount of data on this factor. I also believe more research is needed on the impact of having a parent or parents who graduated from college. While it is often assumed that second-generation college students appear to have an academic advantage over their peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini, 2004), it would be interesting to see a study conducted on second-generation students who do not live in the same household as the parent who graduated from college. This
could highlight the importance of second-generation students having a positive and consistent relationship with the parent or parents who are college educated.

The findings of this study add to the breadth of knowledge on student success at the collegiate level. Prior to this study, minimal research focused on the persistence of the broader population of black men at PWIs. Much of the earlier data pertained to high-achieving black males at PWIs or black males (in general) at HBCUs. This study sought to bring awareness to the positive factors contributing to the persistence of black male collegians at a PWI who were not identified as high-achieving. It also sought to expand the amount of literature on these men’s academic experiences.

In addition to evaluating the impact of one’s religious faith on their college success, future research should delve deeper into the K-12 experiences of these students. A longitudinal study, similar to the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLS), should be conducted to further understand the academic experiences of black men before and after their enrollment in college. The HSLS is a newer study, conducted by the NCES, which follows approximately 21,000 9th graders from the beginning of their freshman year in high school to their senior year in college. While the HSLS begins in the 9th grade, I would like to see a study which begins in the 6th grade because research supports the idea that college readiness begins in middle school (Wimberley and Noeth, 2005). This research could aid scholars and practitioners in thoroughly understanding how and where to implement retention efforts for these men.

Lessons Learned

If I were given the opportunity to conduct this study again, there are two particular things I would change. The first is that I would interview more students. Since all of the students in this study were from the Chicago metropolitan area, it could have been nice to have the
perspective of a student who was from another area of Illinois or from another state. Secondly, I would ask the students to elaborate more on their answers during the interview. While the older students seemed to have a lot of information to give, the younger students did not. Having everyone, in general, expand on their responses could have yielded pertinent data that was not originally recorded.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Background/High School Experience

1. Where are you from (home town)?
2. Where did you attend high school?
3. In addition to UIUC, what other schools did you apply to?
4. What was your final high school GPA?
5. What was your accumulative high school ACT score?

College Experience

6. What is your major here at UIUC? Minor?
7. What year are you in school right now?
8. What does academic success mean to you? (Can you define it, or describe it?)
9. What has motivated (or what motivates) you to strive for success? skills
10. Transition from high school to college
11. How have you overcome your academic struggles (from high school or early in your college career)? Seems a little repetitive
12. What were some of your goals (professional, personal, academic) during your senior year of high school? Have these goals changed? Why or why not?
13. Are you involved in any Registered Student Organizations? If so, what position(s) do you hold?

Academic Performance

14. What things do you feel have impacted your academic performance here at UIUC?
15. Were you the first in your immediate family to attend college? If so, how do you feel this has shaped your college experience? (If not, then ask them more detailed questions about their family member’s education)
16. What academic advice would you give to a Black male freshman at UIUC?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?