VOICES OF PERSISTENCE: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN A FIRST-YEAR LEARNING COMMUNITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Organization and Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

Higher education scholars continue to investigate the factors and forces that impede enrollment and persistence of African American male students (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2004, 2006a; Pope, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). While research into the deficits of these male college students continues to underscore cognitive shortcomings and faulty secondary education as the leading causes for African American male student attrition in higher education, recently research and inquiry has shifted to affective forces and institutional factors that influence these male students to participate in higher education and persist to the completion of their academic goals. Despite this increasing interest in the influence non-cognitive factors on college persistence, the current discourse on African American male students does not sufficiently address the experiences of African American males in community colleges. The diversity in the delivery of instruction is vast in higher education and even more so in the community college setting, where experimentation on learning environments is well documented (Levin, 2000; Phelps & Evans, 2006). With the lack of research on African American male experiences in their first year of study, combined with the unique and innovation approaches that learning communities provide for cohort learning, peer development and student growth, this study will contribute to the larger body of literature on African American male college students by utilizing current persistence models and frameworks to investigate the experiences of African American males in community college first year learning communities.

Researchers have utilized Joseph Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1987, 1993) in their investigations of the persistence of community college students. Scholars continue to evaluate the efficacy and usefulness of Tinto’s theory when examining the persistence of African American male community college students (Deil-Amen, 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen,
& Person, 2006). From this research have emerged other conceptual frameworks that realign the focus of student departure in higher education to the integrative moments in both the social and academic lives of students that connects or warms them up to their educational aspirations rather highlighting the reasons why students disconnect and depart. Deil-Amen’s (2006, 2011) socio-academic integration concept suggests that students persist in higher education when institutional factors influence their experiences both inside and outside of the classroom resulting in a sense of belonging and positive self-identification as a successful college student.

This study used qualitative case study methods to investigate the lived experiences of African American male students enrolled in a large community college learning community during the fall of 2014. Purposeful sampling yielded 10 student participants and three faculty members. Student participants were all current or past participants of the first-year Together We Achieve learning community. Three face-to-face interviews took place with five of the participants simultaneously with observations of classes in the learning community and academic success center. One focus group was conducted with five additional TWA students. One face-to-face interview with each of the faculty participants was also conducted. Three themes emerged from the participants’ experiences in the first-year learning community: 1) pre-college educational experiences influence higher education enrollment; 2) institutional factors influence social and academic integration; and 3) social and personal forces erect barriers to persistence.
To my wife and children, the degree was a pursuit... you are my purpose.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This represents a section of my dissertation that I have longed to write as it provides space to both acknowledge and thank those people whose lives have intersected with mine during this mid-life pursuit of an educational goal. First, I want to recognize the young men of the Together We Achieve learning community who graciously gave of their time and energy to tell me their story. It is with their commitment and perseverance that this project was given a voice and purpose. May their words and experiences influence many. Next, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Debra Bragg, Dr. William Trent, and Dr. Anjalè Welton. Your guidance, your questions and finally your approval made this final research endeavor less of an arduous process, but more a pleasant journey of intellectual self-discovery and accomplishment. I would especially thank Dr. Lorenzo Baber, my dissertation chair. Your belief in my ability, my ideas and my desire to complete “on-time” has been unwavering. We have undoubtedly become colleagues throughout this process debating higher education policy and practice, but even more rewarding is that we have now become friends.

Since the time I was a young boy, I have always envisioned myself earning a doctorate degree. Some kids see themselves as sports heroes or police detectives; I have always wanted to be an academic. My career in higher education has spanned nearly 20 years and the absence of this highest credential has always dogged me. I would like to thank my parents, Tom and Sue Fletcher, for instilling within me a positive disposition and providing unconditional support as I pursued this dream. Though now middle-aged, the fire of self-confidence regardless the obstacle, they lit in me all those years ago, was sometimes the only “spark” I could draw from to complete assignments and courses in the pursuit of this degree. Your love is known and eternally appreciated.
My wife knew I was a lifelong learner when she married me. She had no idea that nearly 20 years of our married lives would see me inside then out of graduate school classrooms. So after the second master’s degree she celebrated the completion of my higher education goals. The decision to pursue a doctorate came as a surprise to her. We were young parents. We had bills to pay. No doubt, my decision to pursue a doctorate at the age of 40 has come with many levels of sacrifice and silent struggle. But the gratitude and love I have for my wife, Michelle is boundless. Sometimes the house would be dark when I came home from a night class or study session, but there was always a warm plate of food waiting. She knew how deep my desire was to attain this degree and her dedication to our family throughout the process has been steadfast and together we achieved this goal. I tried to insulate my three children, Averie, Ella and Zane from the rigors of doctoral study. I have used most every lunch hour and personal day for the past five years completing assignments, tests and papers so I could just be Dad when I came home from work. To have the degree on my resume is one thing, but to show my children that you can achieve anything you set your mind to is something altogether different. Dream big dreams, my children … live extraordinary lives and delight in your successes. I love you to the heights of my being.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Participation rates for African American college students are on the rise. The Institute for Higher Education Policy recently reported that enrollment in postsecondary education for African Americans increased by over 45% from 2000 to 2010 (IHEP, 2010). Yet the growing disparity between participation rates of African American women and males still remains. Even with steady increases in African American male enrollment throughout the 1960s and healthy surges throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Cuyjet, 2006), enrollment for this student population continues to be far less than White and other minority male populations (Harper & Harris III, 2012b). The disparity in enrollment is significant as African American males account for less than 15% of the total enrollment in public and private four-year colleges and universities and just less than 17% for in community colleges (Wood & Turner, 2011). These participation rates are the lowest amongst all ethnic groups in higher education. Moreover, African American male college students consistently have the highest dropout rates and the lowest persistence rates among all ethnic male groups.

A half-century of research exists on the experiences of African American college students (Allen, 1991 1992; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006: Pope, 2006; Fleming, 1984, Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003). The literature on African American students in higher education prior to 2000 (Harper, 2004) focused primarily on enrollment disparities of collegiate ethnic groups as well as research on the gender gap in enrollment for African American men and women. In the last decade, scholars have begun to shift their focus to the experiences of male African American students. Since 2000, study of African American college students has concentrated on certain constructs in higher education that impact African American
enrollment, persistence, academic achievement and overall collegiate experience. These studies have investigated variables such as institutional commitment to providing academic support and services for African American college students (Duncan, 2005; Flowers, 2006; Swail, 2000), establishing community or welcoming educational environments (Flowers, 2006). Even more had been written on variables related to African American experience, such as feelings of insecurity, alienation and invisibility (Cuyjet, 2009; Strayborn, 2008); inhospitable environments (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton & Caldwell, 2002), and faculty neglect (Flowers, 2003; and Guiffrida, 2005).

Recently scholars have begun to separate the experiential variables that impact African American male college students’ experiences from the rest of the African American college student experience research. These studies include: academic achievement and outcomes (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009), participation in purposeful co-curricular activities (Cuyjet, 2006, Harper, 2005; Harper, 2008; Harper & Harris III, 2006a), collegiate athletics participation (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Donnor, 2005; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), identity development (Harper, 2006b) and peer development (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008).

**Problem Statement**

Cuyjet (2006) points to the stark disproportion between African American men and females on college campuses across the nation. According to Cuyjet (2006), women represent about 52 percent of the total United States population and the women to men ratio on college and university campuses is even higher than this percentage, with a 56.1% female student population compared to 43.9% male population. The ethnic group with the most skewed ratios on college
campuses is the African Americans group with 63.3% made up of females and 37.7 consisting of males (Cuyjet, 2006; Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009).

In 2008, the U.S. Census reported that 26% of black men between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in higher education. This figure is compared to almost 40% of White male counterparts (NCES, 2010). In the community college, however, the number of Black male students enrolling is rising each year with over a 46% increase between 1998 and 2008 (Cook & Cordova, 2006). Setting aside enrollment gains and increased levels of access for African American male students, focus in the research shifts to graduation rates and other barometers for measuring success. Over a 25-year period between 1977 and 2003, attainment of a college credential (certificate or degree) by African American males decreased from 43.5% to 32.9% (Harper, 2006). Cook and Cordova (2006) conducted a study for the American Council of Education entitled *Minorities in Higher Education* and concluded that Black males entering the community college in 1995-1996, only 26.5% earned an associate’s degree or certificate after five years of persistence compared to 31.6% of Black male students enrolled in community colleges in 1989-1990 (Cook & Cordova, 2006).

**Purpose Statement**

For years, national data sources have reported that African American men are the most underrepresented student population in the United States (Strayhorn, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003, 2010). Reports about this problem are widely circulated and cited by scholars and educational practitioners. The leading critique of the African American males’ lack of participation in higher education is they are not encouraged to strive toward academic success in primary and secondary education (Harris III, 2008; NCES, 2003, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reported that although 50% of African
American men enter higher education through the community college system, far too many exit prior to earning a degree (NCES, 2010). The rates of retention and persistence to completion are equally dismal, especially for African American male community college students. The NCES (2010) data reveal that only 16% of African Americans attending community college persist to completion of a degree or certificate, more alarming is that less than 10% of African American men enrolled in community colleges persist to graduation.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of African American male community college students and to explore their decision to persist. Using an ethnographic approach, the research will focus on the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning community at Parkland College. As a case study, TWA will provide the researcher access to participants (both students and staff) in a community college learning community environment. The researcher will attempt to identify those factors that impact persistence and perception of academic success for African American male students in their first year of study in a community college.
Research Questions

The intent of this study is to examine the effect participation in a first-year learning community has on persistence of African American male community students. In examining the African American male community college students’ perspective on the first-year college experience, the following three questions provided the foundation for the research study:

1. How do pre-college educational experiences influence college enrollment for African American males?

2. In the first year of college, how do institutional factors influence the persistence of African American male community college students?

3. How can social and personal factors trigger the decision of African American male students to enroll in a second year of community college study?

Significance of the Research

Historically, the community college has been considered an “open access” higher education institution where diverse populations of students can receive an education at relatively low tuition rates. With the open access to a low-cost education and limited standards for academic proficiency upon enrollment, African American males are more likely to participate in higher education through the community college system (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Turner, 2011). The community college also offers the most appropriate institutional sector in higher education to examine the issue of persistence as it pertains to African American male college students. In 2012, Bragg and Durham reported that 70% of high school students enroll in higher education within two years of graduation, yet only 50% actually graduate with a degree. For African American men in higher education, approximately 30%
enroll in college and less than 15% of those graduates (Strayhorn, 2011). With over 50% of African American men enrolling at community colleges across the country, it is important to investigate the challenges and issues that affect African American men’s ability to persist to completion on these two-year college campuses (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001).

Therefore, the significance in this research project is to provide qualitative, attitudinal data that currently does not exist in relation to African American male community college students.

Methodological Approach

The case study analysis for this study relied on a single-case design as a way to identify how institutional programs, such as learning communities, can support African American males both educationally and personally as they navigate through the first semester and first year of college. The semi-structured interviews allowed for the researcher to view the first year of college through the lens of the students and their individual experiences. By identifying the Together We Achieve first-year learning community as the case to be analyzed other voices and perceptive were included to understand better how this institutional construct impacts the educational outcomes of a group of African American male students at Parkland College.

Qualitative Design

A qualitative narrative case study design was warranted to conduct this study in order to give participants the opportunity to “use their own voice of experience” and tell their unique stories about college life and study. Whitt (1991) stated that “the aim of qualitative research is understanding, not generalization” (p. 408), and as Stake (1995) argued, “qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. For qualitative researchers, the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). A narrative approach
using a single case was very appropriate for this study because I needed to use open-ended questions to drill deeper into the lived experience “and not restrict the unique experiences” of the college students for this study (Stake, 1995, p. 65). The use of a single-case study research design where open-ended questions were employed was essential to understand how African American male students at Parkland College persist in their first year of college. The questions will be posed to participants of the *Together We Achieve* learning community and flexibility will be granted to these students in order for them to interpret and reflect on their own experiences in education and participation in the first-year learning community. A quantitative design would have impeded the freedom to express opinion and deeper insight to the meaning making activities that were occurring as they were matriculating through the first year of study at Parkland College. The qualitative approach allowed for the student voice to be the focal point of the research and direct the collection of rich, personal data that help answer important issue-laden questions about African American male community college students.

**Conceptual Framework**

The American community college system has long been criticized in higher education scholarship for being a “resting place” for the underprepared, unmotivated student masses who take an assortment of classes, never declaring a major program of study and exiting after one, two or even three semesters without substantial credit earned or an organized educational pathway planned. Furthering this critique of the academic mission of the community college is the notion that underprepared students who have no clear notion of what to study or how to study, for that matter, are diverted to the community college system either through admission rejection from four year universities or from secondary counselors or teachers. The community college is viewed as a place in the education continuum where student are “cooled” out, thus
stifling their academic aspirations through enrollment in remedial coursework or vocational programs that result in careers that do not align with their original academic intent.

Burton Clark’s (1960) case study at San Jose City College investigated how the framework of the community college curriculum and the career and vocational pathways “diverts” less academically prepared students to occupational tracks and “cools out” their aspirations to pursue transfer or baccalaureate type programs and degrees (p. 42). Brint and Karabel (1989) and Doughtery (1994) also wrote of this vocationalizing of higher education for the less prepared and argued that community colleges offer far too many programs that “divert” the dreams of students who wanted to pursue higher education but are hampered by poor academic preparation, lack of financial resources and an under awareness of how to become college ready.

Community colleges have been working for over a century to discredit this idea that students who struggle academically or who lack clarity in their career pursuits are “cooled” out by the structures, polices and curriculum of the two-year college. Regina Deil-Amen (2005, 2006) offers a conceptual framework that is counter to Clark’s (1960) cooling out proposition and serves as a conceptual model for this research study.

In Deil-Amen’s model (2006) the community college systems and structures, especially academic support systems act as “triggers” rather than aspiration dampening agents and when exposed to institutional systems such as tutoring or occupational programming student aspiration actually is “warmed” up. For this study, I plan to employ this concept model for African American males and investigate the learning community as an institutional practice where ample academic and social support is provided through tutoring and counseling, peer mentoring and
faculty to ignite aspiration which then yields motivation in these students to persist and complete courses and degree programs.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **African American:** For the purposes of this student, *African American* will not be used interchangeably with Black. African American refers to a United States citizen with both an African and American heritage.

2. **Persistence:** As used in this study, *persistence* will refer to students who have enrolled consecutively in a fall and spring semester and have completed their first year of study at Parkland College.

3. **Together We Achieve:** The case study under investigation in this study. It is a learning community comprised of 20-30 African American male Parkland students who enroll in common courses – developmental and college level – and work together to acquire skills that will foster their success in the second year of study at the college. Three faculty members, two counselors and one administrator comprise the faculty/staff team that provides oversight for TWA.

4. **Academic Integration:** Two dimensions exist in defining *academic integration*. From a structural dimension, it means to adhere to explicit standards set by the institution. The normative dimension, students integrate by identifying with a prescribed or standard structure of the academic system (Tinto, 1975).

5. **Social Integration:** Social integration occurs when students interact with peers, faculty, staff and administration and achieve levels of engagement and congruency with the the social systems of an institutions (Tinto, 1975).
6. **Learning Community:** Learning communities employ a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes, during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. By structuring cohorts of students an intentional restructuring of students’ time, credit, and learning experiences occurs and result in to building community and fostering more explicit connections among students and their teachers (Gabelnick, Macgregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 19)

**Organization of the Dissertation**

In the following chapter, the existing literature that is relevant to this study will be reviewed. The review of literature will document that the research on African American male community college students is limited, and certain gaps in the literature exist regarding the influence institutional factors and constructs have on persistence of African American male community college students. It also evaluates deficit model research and seeks to examine why many African American male college students fail to enroll or persist to completion in higher education. Finally, the review identifies an emerging segment of the literature which identifies institutional programs and practices that appear to be having initial successes in working with African American males. This literature segment makes recommendations for colleges on how to improve enrollment, persistence, retention and completion of African American male students.

In Chapter 3, the research methods selected for this study will be described. The chapter will provide rationales for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 will describe each participant and the focus group session with a full description of the interview data collected. Finally, Chapter 5 will address the research questions, will use data to offer suggested conclusions, will identify the limitations of the study and will conclude by making recommendations for future research, improved practice and implications for educational policy.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a wide spectrum of extant literature and previous research on African American males in higher education. The categories used to organize this review will provide both a theoretical and practical foundation for the current study. The chapter is divided into five distinct sections. The first section details the demographic trends of African America men in higher education. Following this section, the scholarly research of African American men in higher education will be reviewed and discussed. In this discussion, the research of deficit model inquiry on African American males in higher education will be evaluated and the current research on what factors lead to African American males’ failure to persist in higher education will be reviewed. The third section provides an overview of the theoretical models as they apply to the impact participation in higher education has on integration, retention and departure has on male student persistence. Following these topics of discussion, the fourth section will review both the themes and concepts related to institutional engagement and the literature that examines programs, practices and initiatives at the community college level that may facilitate access, participation and success of African American male community college students. The final section of this chapter will conclude with an analysis of the “warming up” conceptual framework and its connectivity to persistence and success of African American male college students.

Demographic and Enrollment Trends of African American Male College Students

This section begins by providing an overview of the demographics of African American male college students, with special emphasis on African American male community college
students. The overview is followed by a discussion of the existing barriers to higher education that is documented in the deficit model studies on African American male college students.

Within the African American community, participation in education has long been seen as a mechanism for upward mobility. For nearly a century (1885 – 1965), African Americans received more education than the preceding generation (White & Cones, 1999, p. 52). This progress stagnated after 1965, as participation and degree attainment for African American men steadily declined and now this student demographic rests at the bottom of all student groups enrolled in higher education. Data reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2009 showed that 29.6% of African American men between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in higher education. This figure is compared to almost 41.6% of White male counterparts (NCES, 2010).

Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Data System, Completion Survey (2007) reported that participation rates for African American men who attend community colleges are nearly half as less than African American females.

**Gender Differences**

Cuyjet (2006) points to the stark disproportion between African American men and females on college campuses across the nation. According to the IPEDS Completion Survey (2007), women represent about 52 percent of the total United States population and the women to men ratio on college and university campuses is even higher than this percentage, with a 58% female student population compared to 42% male population. The ethnic group with the highest gap in enrollment rates on college campuses is the African American group with 64% made up of females and 26% consisting of males (IPEDS, 2007). These demographical factors all have a negative correlation with subsequent college enrollment and persistence of African American males.
Table 2.1: Fall enrollment Percentages by Race/Ethnicity/Gender (2000-2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**IPEDS Completion Survey (2007)**

**Persistence and African American Males**

In addition to short falls in enrollment among African American men in higher education, the ability for this student demographic to remain in school is also an area for concern. Kim (2011) found that a significant variance exists among males and females in terms of persistence during the first three years of college participation. Kim (2011) concluded that females are more likely to return for a second and third year of study in higher education, compared to male counterparts.

These claims are supported by Achieving the Dream (AtD) program data. AtD is a national initiative that collects and analyzes data on college student groups who face significant barriers to success, including minority and low-income students. Data found in a study investigating the enrollment and persistence trends and patterns of the 2003 Achieving the Dream (AtD) minority community college students showed that 72% of females returned to a second term of study, compared with 68% of males (AtD, 2008, p. 2).

As demonstrated in Table 2.3, African American females from this study showed a 6% higher persistence rate to a second term than African American males. Overall African American
males trailed their female counterparts in persistence to a second year of study by 56% to 49% margin and to a third year of study by a margin of 35% to 28% (AtD, 2008, p. 2)

Table 2.2 Percentage of the 2003 Achieving the Dream cohort persisting to the second year and third year by gender and race/ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>Persisted to second term</th>
<th>Persisted to second year*</th>
<th>Persisted to third year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>55.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>54.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other **</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Persistors are those who re-enrolled at any time during the year, completed or transferred.

** Includes Non-resident alien, more than one other.

**Degree Attainment**

Setting aside enrollment gains and increased levels of access for African American male students, focus in the research shifts to graduation rates and other barometers for measuring success. Over a 25-year period between 1977 and 2003, attainment of a college credential (certificate or degree) by African American males decreased from 43.5% to 32.9% (Harper, 2006). Cook and Cordova (2006) conducted a study for the American Council of Education entitled *Minorities in Higher Education* and concluded that African American males entering the community college in 1995-1996, only 26.5% earned an associate’s degree or certificate after five years of persistence compared to 31.6% of African American male students enrolled in community colleges in 1989-1990 (Cook & Cordova, 2006).
Scholarly Research of African American Men in Higher Education

The literature on African American students in higher education prior to 2000 focused primarily on enrollment disparities of collegiate ethnic groups as well as research on the gender gap in enrollment for African American men and women (Allen, 1991 1992; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Pope, 2006; Fleming, 1984, Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003). In the last decade, scholars have begun to shift their focus to the experiences of male African American students. Since 2000, study of African American college students has concentrated on certain constructs in higher education that impact African American enrollment, persistence, academic achievement and overall collegiate experience. These studies have investigated variables such as institutional commitment to providing academic support and services for African American college students (Duncan, 2005; Flowers, 2006; Swail, 2000), establishing community or welcoming educational environments (Flowers, 2006). Even more had been written on variables related to African American experience, such as feelings of insecurity, alienation and invisibility (Cuyjet, 2009; Strayborn, 2008), inhospitable environments (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton & Caldwell, 2002), and faculty neglect (Flowers, 2003; and Guiffrida, 2005).

Recently scholars have begun to separate the experiential variables that impact African American male college students’ experiences from the rest of the African American college student experience research. In 1997, Cuyjet authored a seminal book on how to help African American men succeed on college campuses. This research began to shift the focus from the shortcomings these male students brought to higher education and placed responsibility on how to find solutions to why these under represented students fail to succeed on the institutions. Following Cuyjet’s work, research began to examine institutional practices that impacted success
outcomes in African American male students, such as: use of academic support (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009), participation in purposeful co-curricular activities (Cuyjet, 2006, Harper, 2005; Harper, 2008; Harper & Harris III, 2006a), collegiate athletics participation (Beamon, 2008; Comeaux & Harrison, 2007; Donnor, 2005; Gaston-Gayles, 2004), identity development (Harper, 2006b) and peer development (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). In recent years, the study of African American males in higher education has narrowed its focus to community colleges. Wood (2012), Wood and Turner (2011), and Harris III (2011) have each conducted research at the community college level, focusing on what institutional variables impact persistence and academic achievement.

In order to gain a full perspective of the scholarly literature on African American college students, historical and current research was examined and critiqued, focusing attention both on the barriers African American men face as they pursue or deficits they bring to higher education and the research and scholarship on the institutional practices that are impacting African American men, especially African American community college men and their success as college students.

The literature points to explicit barriers erected in higher education that many African American males encounter (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006; Cook & Cordova, 2006). These barriers include limited financial resources, and poor academic preparation that results in low self-esteem, lack of positive role models and an overall lack of self-concept as to how to be a successful student that can make a successful transition into college. These barriers seek to identify and examine reasons why African American male college students may fail in higher education and as a result they all stem from research that is rooted in the deficit model.
Limited Financial Resources

A dilemma many African American males face as they enter community colleges is that aside from navigating courses, many of which are pre-college or developmental, they are also burdened with balancing work and family obligations. Research by Gardenhire, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010) entitled Terms of engagement: Men of color discuss their experiences in community college, reported that being financially independent was a leading issue or risk factor that threatened engagement, persistence in school and completion of a degree for African American male community college students.

With the cost of community college tuition for a full-time student reaching $2,963 in 2012 coupled with the cost of textbooks, instructional supplies, course fees and transportation not to mention childcare and healthcare expenses, many African American males work either part- or full-time while attending school (ACE, 2013). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2008) supports this claim by stating that over 46% of community college students work over 30 hours per week while attending community college full-time. Masculine, racial and ethnic cultural values many times reinforce this notion that men should work and take responsibility for their living expenses and in many cases support their families as well. Self-reliance many times can be their own downfall in terms of reaching their academic goals.

Financial assistance and African American males. The literature shows that African American males have difficulty asking for help not only with their academic pursuits but also with their financial constraints (Harper & Harris III, 2013; Wood, 2011). In order to alleviate this barrier in seeking out financial assistance, community colleges should provide informational sessions about money management, balancing work and school and how to apply for financial aid during orientation sessions such as provided in college success courses.
The research of Zeidenburg, Jenkins, and Calcagno (2007) followed by Shugart and Romano (2008) confirmed that student success courses help the transition process for first-year students and equip these students with essential social skills in integration, community and network building, academic preparedness and financial planning and work-school time management skills. By enrolling in this type of college orientation course, African American men who work while in college gain access to institutional resources, such as childcare, Pell Grants and scholarship information that can lessen the burden placed on themselves to live both financially independent and achieve academic goals.

**Academic Preparation**

The literature points to several contributing factors for why African American male students enroll at much lower rates than African American females and other student populations. Researchers such as Cuyjet (2006) and Cartwright and Henrickson (2012) have organized these factors into two distinct categories:

1) factors preventing enrollment; 2) factors resulting in under preparedness upon enrollment. The factors in the first category include incarceration, higher rates of high school dropout, increased homicide and violent crime rates and high levels of serious illness and drug abuse. In terms of the factors that contribute to under preparedness, researchers found that many African American men who do enroll in college have poor requisite skill development (reading, writing and computational or mathematical skills), have lower expectations of academic achievement, have increased levels of peer pressure to avoid higher education (from peers and family), have financial barriers, and have a lack of adult role models.

Current research on the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American male college students have concentrated on two primary areas of interest. The first
area of focus is on individual characteristics and the second area of focus is on pre-college indicators known as cognitive and non-cognitive variables. Cognitive variables are factors such as high school grade point average, levels of math and English completed, reading comprehension scores and college placement scores (Perrakis, 2008; Bush & Bush, 2010). Non-cognitive variables are factors such as social integration, self-concept, peer interaction, self-efficacy, and motivation (Hagedorn, Maxwell and Hampton, 2001; Ellis, 2002; Cuyjet, 2006).

Johnson (1993) studied the success factors for African American men at the University of South Carolina and defined cognitive variables “as those variables that objectively measure intellectual ability and are exhibited by some numerical score, rank or range” (p. 31). Non-cognitive variables as defined by Johnson (1993) are “affective, psychosocial constructs, subjective in nature that describe the feeling, perceptions, an/or attitudes” (p. 31).

Literature on African American men reveals a relationship between variables such as high school grade point average, college course completion, parental education level and social integration and the success of African American men in college (Hagedorn et. al, 2001; Flowers, 2006; Perrakis, 2008). However, these scholars and many others who are interested in uncovering the most significant factors that lead to African American male academic achievement in higher education, have not looked at the institutional characteristics that predict academic success instead focus their studies on the difference between cognitive and non-cognitive variable as a predictors of academic success of African American male college students (Bush & Bush, 2010).

In terms of the non-cognitive factors that influence of African American men in higher education have become more pronounced in the extant body of research. Tracy and Sedlacek (1985) and Sedlacek (2004) defined these non-cognitive variables as: positive self-concept,
realistic self-appraisal, ability to deal with the system and racism, persistence and long term goals, strong support, community involvement, leadership experiences and knowledge acquisition of career. The research conducted by Hamilton (2005), found that attachment to college, personal and social adjustment and positive role models are predictors of college completion for African American male student of college students. In a similar study, Schwartz and Washington (2002) demonstrated that academic integration to college life, satisfaction with social and academic opportunities, supportive mentoring, and coping ability contributed to academic performance and retention of African American freshmen men. Further inquiry on the role of supportive relationships for African American male college students and their satisfaction with college by Strayhorn (2008) found that internal locus of control, hard work and time management all positively influencing the academic success of African American male students. Zell (2011) found that many non-cognitive variables that were associated with achievement African American male college students are manifested and sustained through the participation in activities with peer communities, such as Brother-to-brother clubs.

Research that has focused on African American male college student who enroll at HBCUs and enter postsecondary education through remedial programs found that persistence to graduation is attributed to several factors. These include: Social capital in the institutional community (Palmer & Gasman, 2008); Non-cognitive factors coupled with institutional support agents (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008); Student involvement in campus activities (Palmer & Young, 2009); Family support and involvement (Palmer & Davis, 2008).
African American male community college student academic performance.

Research on African American male community college students articulates clearly the multitude of challenges this student population faces in pursuit of their educational goals (Harper, 2006a; Harvey & Anderson, 2003; Perrakis, 2008). For the most part, this body of research focuses on three primary challenges or barriers for the African American male community college student and they are: unpreparedness for collegiate-level coursework; poor retention; and dismal rates of degree attainment (Allen, 1992; Cuyjet, 2006, Jordan, 2008). In order to get an even more explicit picture of African American student community college students, the lens of inquiry most also focus on persistence and academic success (which refers to students’ grade point average and successful completion of classes toward their educational goals) measures (Pope, 2006; Brown, 2007; Jordan, 2008).

In 2010 Wood (2010) conducted a met-synthesis of the research on Black males in the community college. He found that of the 50 studies conducted on African American male community college students from 1971 to 2009 over 75% of the research came from unpublished doctoral dissertations, 15% from referred journal articles and 10% from book chapters. This inquiry also revealed that only 20 of the studies conducted over the last three decades on Black male community college students, only 8 or 16% focused on student success issues (Beckles, 2008; Goins, 1995, Hampton, 2002, Jordan, 2008, Perrakis, 2008) but with a focus on individual attributes relative to success (e.g. high school grade point average, employment, family support, etc.) instead of factors related to the community college setting (intuitional factors) (Wood & Turner, 2011).

In a mixed method study of African American male students attending a large, urban community college, Bush and Bush (2010) surveyed over 1,600 African American male
community college students throughout the California Community College system and identified two important institutional factors that contribute to low satisfaction levels and higher rates of attrition in African American male college students. The researchers found that African American male community college students are more frequently than another other student group, to be bored in class, less likely to participate in campus activities, more likely not to participate in the campus orientation process and more likely not to identify peers that could help them adjust to college life (Bush & Bush, 2010). The study also found that two institutional factor significantly correlate to African American male student achievement. The first factor is student interaction with faculty. Bush and Bush (2010) found that the relationship of African American male contacts with faculty results in higher rates of transfer and increased levels of persistence. The second is African American male interaction with peers. Peer interaction, the study found, has a significantly causal relationship in determining grade point average, transfer and degree/certificate/credential attainment (Bush & Bush, 2010, p. 54).

**Structures, Policies and Common Practices of Remediation**

A familiar mantra follows African American men. The media reports on their drug usage and violent crime. Higher education laments about their low participation rates (4% of all undergraduates) and their failures once they do enroll. In education, and moreover in community college, researchers have provided commentary and evidence to this support negative portrait of African American men by writing exclusively about their plight and struggle, their need for remediation and their propensity for academic failure even when resources are provided to assist in their success (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Harper and Davis III (2012) contend that the Black male characterization as hopeless, academic failures is a negative stereotype attached to these students early on in their academic tenure and it is a stereotype perpetuated by many structures,
policies and common practices in higher education that erect barriers in their pathway to persistence an ultimate academic success in higher education.

Just as Harper and Davis III (2012) contend in their study entitled They (don’t) care about education that the deficiencies and shortcomings of African American male college students are highlighted far more often in the research literature than their achievements and successes, a same deficit model is occurring in the community college as it pertains to remediation of African American male students. Green (2006) posits that policies, programs, and common practices in higher education can erect deficit model approaches to certain student populations or educational issues. From a deficit perspective, African American males are characterized as endangered, “at-risk” and sorely lacking requisite skills for success in college-level courses. Remediation in the community college plays into these connotations and reinforces the focus on their “inabilities rather than abilities” and promotes policies and programs that display an inequitable view of the African American male community college student as less than his peers (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012).

Research shows that 46% of African Americans were placed into remedial courses upon entering the community college and seven out of 10 African Americans men entered two-year colleges unprepared for college-level math, reading & writing (IHEP, 2010). With these staggering figures attached to remediation, many college African American male students enter higher education not all prepared for the rigors of college study, and as a result many enroll in courses that they do not have the requisite skills to succeed, underachieve in these courses and subsequently leave college during their freshmen year and do not return for a sophomore year (Astin, 1993; Barefoot, 2004; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). A long-standing remedy for students who are unprepared for college-level course work is remediation. In other words,
students who place low on college entrance exams or possess low high school grade point averages, enroll in pre-college or developmental courses in the requisite subject areas of mathematics, reading and writing (Bailey, 2009).

The community college has long since been recognized as the institution type in higher education that serves the most-at-risk and underserved populations. This gateway to access is also provided to populations like African American males who enter college with educational backgrounds that are often tainted by low expectations for their success in the K-12 system, insufficient exposure to African American male teachers, extremely low level of unpreparedness based on college entrance exams and low high school grade point averages (Dowd, 2007; Harper & Harris III, 2012). It is the contention of this research study that although community colleges grant access to higher education for the unprepared and provide pre-college or developmental education programs for those students who cannot show college-level skill in mathematics, writing and reading, the structure and design of this remedial programming perpetuates the characterization of the African American male as “less than his peers” and contributes to low levels of persistence for this community college student population.

The deficit model, according to Green (2006), biases the thinking of institutions like community colleges about unprepared students, like African American males, and creates structures like centralized developmental education programs and tutoring programs designed specifically for the most underprepared students. In both cases, the instruction takes place outside of the normal college-level courses and students are “filtered” and “cooled” out in these programs that only teach skills in basic sentence design, arithmetic and reading comprehension. Burton Clark (1960) wrote about this stratification by ability. In his seminal study, he posited
that four-year colleges and universities looked to the community colleges to “cool out” students whose performance was not up to par with university curriculum and standards.

This gatekeeping function is now apparent in the community colleges in the form of stand-alone developmental education programs where students with demonstrated low ability in general education skills sets are “diverted” to courses that only provide basic skills acquisition and do not have tangible correlation to their intended program of study (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dowd, 2007). By cooling out African American men in developmental courses and limiting their access to college-level study, reinforces not only their negative encounters with education but also causes these students to internalize such stereotypes not only about their academic ability but about their motivation to engage with other students resulting in apathy toward their educational experience (Strayhorn, 2012). Such internalization leads to self-defeating attitudes that negatively influence their performance in these developmental courses and directly impacts their persistence in higher education (Bush & Bush, 2010; Stayhorn, 2012)

**Studies on Institutional Practice**

This section of the literature review, studies on institutional practice, examines research that describes programs, learning environments and curricular programs which may encourage African American male college students to enroll, persist and succeed in higher education. Much of the research shares common recommendations for community colleges committed to success of African American male students.

**Learning environments and student performance.** Historically, the community college has been considered an “open access” higher education institution where diverse populations of students can receive an education at relatively low tuition rates. With the open access to education, the student demographic changes rapidly at community colleges. With changes in
student population researchers have noted that over the past 20 years, once considered “a special group,” at-risk students (academically) are becoming the “majority of students in American community colleges (Levin, 2000; Phelps & Evans, 2006). Central to the core mission of the community college is to create learning environments that actively promote student success for all types of students. These learning environments – tailored to the at-risk or academically under prepared student -- foster the integration of student support and academic service functions of the college and help create retention strategies that connect and transform the at-risk student (Evans & Phelps, 2006). Programs that assist the at-risk community college student are numerous and well researched. These programs – created to assist students with academic deficiencies – have included orientation seminars, study skill workshops, intensive tutorial sessions outside the classroom and learning labs (Simpson, Hynd, Nist & Burrell, 1997; Jarvis, 1998; and Boylan, 1999). In recent years, the collaborative efforts of the student services and academic affairs units of the community college in addressing the academic success of under prepared students as results in learning models such as Supplemental Instruction (SI) and learning communities (Phelps & Evans, 2010; and Grady & Carter, 2001).

The first-year experience program. According to community college research on student success, the first-year experience (FYE) program created by institutions combats the widespread increase in student attrition in course work during a student’s first year of college (Crissman Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). The FYE movement on community college campuses took hold in the mid-1980s with the birth of the first-year seminars or success courses and the learning community.
**The student success course.** Not until the 1980’s did community colleges see a definitive need for student orientation or freshmen seminar courses (Pandolpho, 2009; Stovall, 1999; Barefoot and Fidler, 1996; Walls 1996). The prevailing philosophy or attitude in higher education was students should learn to adapt to their college experience by enrolling in general education or core courses of respective programs of study (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996) and through earning required credits, their level of confidence and motivation to succeed would increase (Zeidenberg, et al., 2007; Lang 2006; Stovall, 1999; Walls, 1996). The research of Fidler and Hunter (1989) followed by Murphy (1989) confirmed that student success courses help the transition process for first-year students and equip these students with essential social skills in integration, community and network building along with core skills of academic preparedness such as study techniques, time management and test taking (Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Barefoot, 2004). Student success courses are designed around the notion that students must experience connection and direction in the first few weeks of their college tenure. Shugart and Romano (2008) contend that engagement for students with their college begins long before they sit in a lecture hall or laboratory. In their recent study at Valencia Community College, they defined the student success courses as an “intentional curriculum” which provides students with numerous learning applications in their first semester of college that will have a direct impact on their persistence and course success. Barefoot and Griffin (2010) concluded as a result of their Foundations of Excellence research project where they collected data on the course taking patterns of students in 24 community colleges from 2003-2008 that students tend to have the highest rates of failure (i.e. drop, withdraw or fail courses) in gateway or remedial classes such as developmental math, English and reading classes. They assert that community college students are unsuccessful in these remedial courses because they “simply do not know how to
Many students enter the community college with negative perceptions of education, and in many instances, failed attempts at higher education. The overarching goal of the student success course at the community college level is to help these students develop positive attitudes about learning and gain confidence in their abilities in general and their educational goals in particular (O’Gara et al, 2009; Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Lang, 2006; Stovall, 2000, Glass & Garrett, 1995).

Current research on student success courses in the community college stresses the importance of creating a safe place for students, where questions are welcome and feedback is readily given by instructors so anxiety and fear internalized by first time college students can be discussed in an open and encouraging environment (Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al, 2007; Stovall, 2000; Napoli & Wortman, 1998). The delivery of the student success course in community colleges varies by institution while some engage students in workshop and seminar formats, others offer online or hybrid instructional formats, but as the delivery methods differ across institutions, the content of the course is very universal. The design of the success course content areas by in large consists of 1) an introduction to college resources, 2) skills for transition to college, 3) career planning and development; 4) life management skills (Zeidenberg, et al., 2007; Stovall, 1999). Research conducted at a community college where student success courses were used, found that these four content areas lead to greater levels of student persistence (Pandolpho, 2009). Most of the research on student success courses in community colleges looked at the first to second year persistence of students enrolled in success courses. In particular, Walls (1996) studied the persistence to the second year of students enrolled in a two-
credit hour orientation course. Specific student demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, writing placement and high school rank were used to separate the treatment and comparison groups over three fall semesters. The study found that persistence to the second year occurred only in one of the three cohort groups and the research did not allow for academic ability as a variable that could have led to student persistence (Walls, 1996).

**The learning community.** The learning community concept or model began in earnest on university and especially community college campuses in the late 1960s when expansion in higher education resulted in innovative teaching and learning practices to meet the diverse educational needs of evolving student population (O’Banion, 1997; Smith et al, 2004). The primary objective of a learning community is to immerse students in a curriculum that is linked with other courses and relevant to their overall program of study interests. This interconnectedness in the courses provides the foundation for “intellectual interaction” with faculty and peers in a structured learning environment (Gabelnick et al, 1990). A review of the research on the learning community revealed that three distinct types of learning community exist in community colleges. These models include the linked or clustered courses, the subgroups within unmodified courses and team-taught learning communities (Levine & Shapiro, 2000; Smith et al., 2004; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Small cohorts of students enrolled in courses that are linked based skill and content are the defining characteristics of a linked course learning community (Smith et al., 2004). For this type of learning community in a community college setting, students in the cohort enroll in courses that are linked across disciplines to give them a more integrated learning experience. Students enrolled in linked courses study similar themes from the perspective of different disciplines. This offers the opportunity for students
to understand these subjects on a deeper and more meaningful level, and can lead to a more rewarding college experience (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

When a subgroup of students from two or more courses enrolls in a common course that has content which connects back to the unmodified common courses, a learning community is created. According to Smith et al. (2004), this is the most efficient form of learning community because the content development, where common themes and connections to common courses are created, only needs to take place in one class instead of two or three classes like in the linked and clustered form (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Smith et al, 2004).

The team-taught learning community is the final type of learning community and is perhaps the most complicated form to employ in the college or university classroom (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Structured around a single syllabus, the learning community integrates the core themes and learning outcomes of the community into two or more courses and also embedded academic support functions such as tutoring and counseling which extends the time period of each class (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This type of learning community is also referred to as the “coordinated” study program and students typically are recruited to participate and enroll in the program instead of individual courses (Smith et al, 2004). Seminar-based and centered around a common set of textbooks, the study program is delivered to students in a highly collaborative fashion where instructors teach different components of the curriculum, engage in in-depth discussions with students on the primary themes of the curriculum. Without high levels of commitment to collective teaching techniques and discussion-based course content, this type of learning community is not successful (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Many community colleges develop academic and student services programs that are designed to improve the chances for success for their developmental education students. The
form and function of these services and programs vary by community college, but the prevailing theme of these programs or services is that they include some type of college orientation platform, which equips the student with a “roadmap” on how to seek out services to help them with their coursework. In addition, the success courses embed counseling and advising services along with life and study skills components, geared at assisting students with test taking, time management, financial planning and personal advising to help eliminate barriers that impede academic success (Zeidenberg et al. 2007; Illich et al, 2004).

Many students enter the community college with negative perceptions of education, and in many instances, failed attempts at higher education. The overarching goal of the first-year experience programs at the community college level is to help these students develop positive attitudes about learning and gain confidence in their abilities in general and their educational goals in particular (O’Gara et al, 2009; Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al., 2007; Lang, 2006; Stovall, 2000). Current research on first-year experience programs in the community college stresses the importance of creating a safe place for students, where questions are welcome and feedback is readily given by instructors so anxiety and fear internalized by first time college students can be discussed in an open and encouraging environment (Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al, 2007; Stovall, 2000; Napoli & Wortman, 1998).

Most of the research on first-year experience programs that incorporate either success courses or learning academies in community colleges looked at the first to second year persistence of students enrolled in these academic support programs. In particular, Walls (1996) studied the persistence to the second year of students enrolled in a two-credit hour orientation course. Specific student demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, writing placement and high school rank were used to separate the treatment and comparison groups over three fall semesters.
The study found that persistence to the second year occurred only in one of the three cohort groups and the research did not allow for academic ability as a variable that could have led to student persistence (Walls, 1996).

Current research in FYE literature at the community college level has begun to examine the relationship between the participation of underprepared student populations in first-year experience programming and their levels of persistence in their developmental courses (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). In terms of the co-enrollment of students in developmental education courses and a college success course or learning academy, the Florida Department of Education (2006) conducted a quantitative study on the impact the Student Life Skills (SLS) course, a course similar to the traditional student success course, had on students who needed at least one remedial course and found that these underprepared students who completed the course were more likely than non-completers to achieve at least one of the study’s success indicators. These indicators were 1) earning a community college credential; 2) transferring to a state university system, or remaining enrolled in college after five years. Zeidenberg et al. (2007) argued that the Florida study only sought to compare the outcomes of students who completed a SLS class to those who did not, and failed to investigate what the overall effect the SLS class had on students. In other words, the Florida study could not quantify the number of developmental education students who completed the entire developmental education sequence or a college credential. Moreover, the study did not offer any insight on what factors lead to long-term persistence of developmental students who completed student success courses. Building of the findings of the Florida Department of Education (2006) study, Zeidenberg et al. (2007) conducted a longitudinal study using individual student data from the Florida Department of Education. The research study tracked the enrollment patterns and completion rates of all first time community college
students in fall 1999. The study controlled for student characteristics that the researchers claimed could be related to a student’s decision to enroll in a student success course or to complete a community college degree or certificate. These factors included gender, race and ethnicity as well as age, citizenship status and high school completion. The researchers also controlled for math, writing and reading test scores because they contended that higher placement scores generally meant a student would have a greater likelihood of completing a degree or certificate. Lower test scores also increased the chances of students enrolling in student success courses (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). The study concluded that over the 17 semesters that the students in the cohort were examined, 26 percent completed a degree or certificate, 25 percent remained enrolled after five years and 16 percent transferred to a 4-year postsecondary institution. The study also contended that because student success courses are targeted to developmental education students, chances of success increase. They concluded this because 28% of the fall 1999 cohort of students was enrolled in a remedial course during the study (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). However, the study could not conclusively find why taking this single class student success would be associated with positive outcomes five years after most students took the class. Zeidenberg et al. (2007) called for further quantitative and qualitative research into examining different aspects of a first-year experience program, with more focus on the learning community model and investigate its impact on levels of success and completion in students.

For this study, a review of the extant literature on African American males and their interaction with faculty and peers was privileged. Beckles (2008) found that there are positive correlations between black male student academic achievement and positive faculty interaction. In this research, he found that Black male students who communicate with their instructors outside of class and maintain continuous interactions, such as tutoring and mentoring activities,
are more likely to achieve academic success than those students who do not seek out these interactions (Beckles, 2008). Additional research shows that when learning environments are created that privilege student-faculty interaction and also create a have or “safe place” where individual student inquiry is accepted and supported, Black male students prosper academically (Bush, 2004; Jordan, 2008).

**Fostering Social and Academic Integration**

Central to the core mission of the community college is to create learning environments that actively promote student success for all types of students. These learning environments – tailored to the at-risk or academically under prepared student -foster the social integration and academic functions of the college and help create retention strategies that support, connect and transform the at-risk student (Evans & Phelps, 2006). Programs that assist the at-risk community college student are numerous and well researched. These programs are created to assist students with academic deficiencies and include orientation seminars, study skill workshops, intensive tutorial sessions outside the classroom and learning labs (Simpson, Hynd, Nist & Burrell, 1997; Boylan, 1999).

**African American male college students and social integration.** The literature points to several predictors of persistence for African American students. Research that has focused on African American college students who enroll at HBCUs and enter postsecondary education through remedial programs found that persistence to graduation is attributed to several factors. These include: Social capital in the institutional community (Palmer & Gasman, 2008); Institutional support agents (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008); Student involvement in campus activities (Palmer & Young, 2009); and family support and involvement (Palmer & Davis, in press).
In terms of research at the community college sector, a mixed method study of African American male students attending a large, urban community college, Bush and Bush (2010) surveyed over 1,600 African American community college students throughout the California Community College system and identified two important institutional factors that contribute to low satisfaction levels and higher rates of attrition. The researchers found that African American community college students are more frequently than another other student group, to be bored in class, less likely to participate in campus activities, more likely not to participate in the campus orientation process and more likely not to identify peers that could help them adjust to college life (Bush & Bush, 2010). The study also found that a primary institutional factor significantly correlated to African American male student achievement was social and academic integration. Peer and academic integration, the study found, has a significantly causal relationship in determining grade point average, transfer and degree/certificate/credential attainment in African American men (Bush & Bush, 2010, p. 54).

**Learning communities and African American males.** From the literature on learning communities, it is apparent that this program created on community college campuses effectively and proactively addresses the problem of low persistence of African American male students. It is a program that is tailored to unprepared college students, but also incorporates a cohort design where integration with peers relative to social and academic issues and endeavors is privileged. The learning community concept or model began in earnest on university and especially community college campuses in the late 1960s when expansion in higher education resulted in innovative teaching and learning practices meant to meet the diverse educational needs of evolving and diverse student populations (O’Banion, 1997; Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 2004) The primary objective of a learning community is to immerse students in a curriculum that
is linked with other courses and relevant to their overall program of study interests. This interconnectedness in the courses provides the foundation for “intellectual interaction” with faculty and peers in a structured learning environment (Smith et al, 2004).

As noted throughout this study, African American men enter the community college with negative perceptions of education, and in many instances, failed attempts at higher education. The overarching goal of learning community programs at the community college level is to help students, like African American men, develop positive attitudes about learning and gain confidence in their abilities in general and their educational goals in particular (O’Gara et al, 2009; Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). Current research on first-year experience programs, like learning communities, in the community college stresses the importance of creating a safe place for students, where questions are welcome and feedback is readily given by instructors so anxiety and fear internalized by first time college students can be discussed in an open and encouraging environment (Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al, 2007; Napoli & Wortman, 1998).

Another issue that directly relates to the persistence of African American male students through postsecondary education is the lack of institutional commitment to providing African American males with academic support services, (i.e. mentoring) and hospitable environments (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Cuyjet, 2006). The combination of these two factors results in a lack of student and faculty interaction (Flowers, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005) which in turn affects the success rates of African American men (Cuyjet, 2006) in terms of dropping out of college without earning a degree or credential (American Council on Education, 2013).
Faculty Relationships

African American students who attend predominately White colleges and universities report that the environment inside and outside of the classroom is inhospitable (Cuyjet, 2006). According to Cuyjet (2006), this inhospitable environment is a result of lack of communication between African American male students and their faculty. Supporting this claim, Bush and Bush (2010) studied African American male community college students in California’s community college system with a focus on their perceptions of their college experience. The mixed-method study found that African American males were more apt not to interact with faculty members in class or meet with them outside of class to discuss their academic progress. The study’s most significant finding was that the institutional support variable - faculty interaction was highest predictor of African American male achievement. Achievement for this study was defined by student persistence and was measured by what percentage of students returned for a second year of study in the community college system (Bush & Bush, 2010).

Faculty-student engagement in community colleges. With research in community colleges on African American male students positing that positive faculty-student relationships leads to engagement, commitment to achievement and ultimately improved persistence in enrollment, two practices that community colleges could establish to ensure that positive engagement occurs between faculty and African American males are faculty-student mentoring and faculty professional development programming.

Faculty-student mentoring programs. Education data sources, like the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that retention rates for African American men are the lowest of any student population in higher education (2012). Cuyjet (2006) cites research that attributes these low rates of persistence for African American males to college campuses not possessing
“warm, nurturing, and supportive environments to enhance an institution’s ability to recruit, retain, and graduate minority students” (p. 50). The research of Wood and Turner (2011) and Wood (2010) posit that mentoring programs where faculty help African American male community college students adjust to college by providing “safe and welcoming” environments where student mentees receive tutoring, academic advising, and personal counseling from faculty positively impacts African American male students in achieving short and long term goals as they relate to their education. Cuyjet (2006) adds that faculty can serve as mentors to African American men in class as well as outside of class by creating a safe place for expression of personal experiences, facilitating discussions where students understand the importance of difference and tolerance and finally by allowing time in class for African American men to explore and examine “Black manhood” issues (p. 32).

Community colleges can replicate the programs and practices suggested in these aforementioned studies by arranging faculty-student mentoring between African American males and African American male faculty. Though not always possible due to staffing constraints, African American male faculty do share common gender, cultural, ethnic and racial experiences that assist in developing a trusting and nurturing environment (Cuyjet, 2006). Research by Laanan (2001) found that African American males were less concerned with having an African American faculty member than they were with having a faculty member who was accessible, could be trusted and understood their social and educational barriers and was willing to offer advice on how to overcome obstacles and reach educational goals.
**Faculty training programs.** For many community colleges across the nation, faculty have not had any instructional experiences in working with minority students, especially African American males. Aside from administrators committing resources to the recruiting and hiring of more African American male faculty members, community colleges can develop training and professional development programming that provide both African American and non-African American faculty with skills and pedagogy for establishing and maintaining healthy and successful relationships with students.

Wood and Turner (2011) studied community colleges who develop training for faculty on how to work with African American male students and found that the basic elements that instructors learn in these trainings about building successful and nurturing relationships with these male students is to maintain an approachable, friendly attitude in class, routinely check with African American men on their academic progress, listen to their concerns both inside and outside of class to establish a sense of trust and belongingness for the student, and finally encourage the students to succeed (p. 147).

**Theoretical Models**

One of the major concerns with African American male participation in higher education is that many enroll, but far too few are retained to a second semester or second year of study (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001). The retention of first-year African American male college students has long been a complex and research-worthy phenomenon in higher education. Differences in student attrition from both the community college and university level are evident in the research and the need for this study to outline the theoretical frameworks on student engagement as way to better understand the experiences that African American males encounter on their pathway to success in their first semester of enrollment is warranted.
Theoretical viewpoints provide the foundation for inquiry in education research and help frame a study’s methodology, data collection and analysis and ultimately the report on findings. Mertz and Anfara (2006) contend that education research must have a sound theoretical framework. They state that “a theoretical framework can: 1) focus a study; 2) reveal and conceal meaning and understanding; 3) situate the research in a scholarly conversation; 4) provide a vernacular; and 5) reveal the strengths and weaknesses [of a study]” (p. 192).

Persistence models. The qualitative research for this proposal will view the function and role of student success course through multiple theoretical lenses. Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987) offers insight on both student integration and departure and has been widely used in educational research on student persistence and attrition in higher education.

Tinto’s (1987) Departure Model posits that students decide to remain in higher education when links between personal intentions and commitment are forged. The weaker the link or connection between intention and personal commitment the stronger the likelihood a student will exit or drop out of the institution. For Tinto (1987), the integration process for a student is directly related to how the student perceives the value of his or her experiences and subsequently the ability to manage successfully these internal and external experiences. Tinto (1987) also asserts that college students must can acquire a sense of belonging and gain confidence in their academic abilities to successfully integrate into an institution. Belongingness for Tinto (1987) can occur when students become aware and actively engaged in college social, extra-curricular, intra-mural and intellectual activities of college life. This decision to engage in these activities leads to a great chance for the student to remain at the institution. For this study, Tinto (1975) Integration Model supports my assumptions that when community colleges create environments
where students begin to assimilate internal and external commitments to their education, greater levels of persistence to a second year of study is realized.

Tinto’s (1975, 1987) argument for greater academic and social integration suggests that institutional constructs such as learning communities and social groups such as the African American male Brother-to-Brother organization are essential to improve persistence and success of this student population. Tinto (1993) also argued that African American students in general and African American male student specifically face multiple challenges in becoming academically and socially integrated into a college setting because their norms and beliefs may be incongruent with the White majority student population. From a qualitative standpoint, a study conducted by Karp, Hughes and O’Gara (2007) that used in-depth interviews with first-year students at two urban community colleges, found that community college students do develop attachments to their institutions – on both an academic and social level. Tinto (1993) contends that students are more likely to persist in their courses and stay enrolled in college if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2007). This connection at the academic and social level is developed as students interact with other students socially, participate in clubs and co-curricular activities and engage themselves in academic activities – such study groups and collaborative assignments. Tinto posits that student integration on both levels – social and academic – is difficult to achieve at a community college. Students, according to Tinto, are not in residence and they commute from class to home and as a result cannot avail themselves to enough social interactions to allow for “institutional fit” to occur (1993, p.78).
Conceptual Framework

It is the work of Deil-Amen (2005) that questioned Tinto’s (1993) original assumptions that community colleges do not provide enough structured social and academic opportunities that lead to high levels integration thus resulting in persistence. This body of quantitative research points to the Deil-Amen (2005) study where data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study examined the relationship between social integration measures and student persistence in community college students and concluded that certain activities such as study groups, small group discussions (held inside and outside of class) and structured orientation sessions are accepted by students as activities that result in a sense of belonging to the institution on both a social and academic level. From this research, this proposal will use the integration framework developed by Tinto (1993) as the theoretical foundation for this study and will build upon Deil-Amen’s work (2006, 2011) on the institutional factors that ignite or trigger a “warming” up in students thus leading to increase levels of persistence and completion.

Community college students enter higher education with diverse and varied backgrounds and abilities; as such, they engage with other students and their education in different ways. It is the intent of this proposal to show a relationship between the participation in a learning community for first-time African American male students results in higher levels of social and academic integration, thus leading to a greater chance of persistence to a second year of study.

The process of cooling out takes time to coalesce and over a few semester students engage in counseling and advising meetings, participate in placement testing, enroll in remedial course work and consider vocational education programming.

Deil-Amen (2006) affirms Clark’s (1960, 1980) notion that this weeding out or “diverting aspirations” occurs in higher education’s community college system of higher education. For
Deil-Amen (2006), the main element of the cooling out function is that the enrollment processes of the community college (counseling, placement and remediation) passively discourages student success by erecting institutional barriers in students’ pathways to the bachelor’s degree aspirations (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Crook and Lavin, 1989; Doughtery, 1994). Brint and Karabel (1989) and Dougherty (1994) expand Clark’s original notion and explain that the very framework of the community college curriculum and the pathways created by programs of study in career and technical disciplines lends itself to “diverting” less academically prepared students to these occupational tracks thus dampening their aspirations to pursue transfer or baccalaureate type programs and degrees (Deil-Amen, 2006, p. 42).

However, Deil-Amen offers a counter notion to Clark’s (1960) cooling out proposition. She argues that community college students do change their minds in terms of college aspirations and even though a student enters higher education with the goal of earning a bachelor’s degree, the switch to a technical program of study does not constitute a cooled out aspiration. Deil-Amen (2006) contends that higher education, especially the community college position in higher education has changed since the time Clark (1960) penned his seminal work. The option of self-selecting career programs and reduced reliance on academic counseling has allowed students to alter career plans almost on a semester-by-semester basis. In fact, she contends “the community college as an institution affords students many options to warm up their aspirations, experience new degree or certificate tracks of study, engage in different learning environments to master skills and become ‘college ready’ while still deciding on majors and career pathways” (p.43).
**Using learning communities to warm students up.** Data revealed from Deil-Amen’s (2006) study of three community colleges that there are three distinct aspects to the warming up process: 1) Students maintained a weak commitment to college or lack confidence that they belong in college; 2) College faculty provided support to improve student confidence; 3) Faculty are instrumental in encouraging students to pursue further education. These aspects combined with the overall notion purported by Deil-Amen (2006) that warming up is triggered in students as a result of an institutional factor or structure more so than cognitive or affective variables strengthens the overall claim of this study. This claim being that through participation in a learning community, African American male community college students become more socially and academically integrated into college in their first year of study and develop a sense of belongingness and connectedness to peers and faculty through extra- and co-curricular activity participation, resulting in a warming up or commitment to stay in school and an active desire to accomplish their higher education goals.

The connection of the *warming up* concept model to African American male community college students’ participation in a learning community directly counters the deficit model research detailed throughout this review of the literature on African American male college students. Through value-added support systems embedded in the fabric of the learning community design where students interact not only with peers in academic activities, but also have the unique opportunity to work with faculty on both academic and personal levels, resulting in better grades, high rates of persistence to second terms and second years of study at the community college and overall better sense of confidence in their ability to succeed in college.

Parkland College recently created a learning community completely tailored to the African American male student. The learning community is called *Together We Achieve (TWA)*
and it began at the college in the fall of 2011 with 17 African American male students. These 17 African American male students were recruited into the program through the Center for Academic Success based on their ACT COMPASS placement scores and enrollment in developmental reading, writing, and math courses in the fall 2011 semester. Two Parkland College counselors who coordinate the “Brother-to-Brother” African American male student support group on campus assisted the Parkland dean of academic services in the selection of the TWA learning community participants. In the three years of operation, a total of 44 men have enrolled in the TWA community, with 46%, 51% and 57% of these students persisting into a second year of study at Parkland in 2011, 2012 and 2013 respectively (Parkland IAR, 2013). The TWA learning community incorporates remedial coursework with general education courses in political science, psychology and a success in college course and the students participate in these courses as a cohort, attending all the same classes together, attending workshops of time management and educational planning and participating in social groups such as Brother-to-Brother. Preliminary research on this learning community reveals that TWA students persist in and successfully complete the developmental education sequence at 27% higher rate than African American males who are not enrolled in the TWA learning community (Parkland IAR, 2013).

Social and academic integration efforts on community college campus in the form of learning communities have taken a positive step in eliminating negative stereotypes of African American male college student’s academic ability and apathy toward higher education thus leading to increases in persistence in courses and programs of study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of African American males in their first year of participation in a public community college. This chapter begins with a rationale for the selection of the qualitative research design utilized in the study. This is followed by a description of the case study, the research sites and participants. Next the procedures used to construct a set of semi-structured interviews questions and then a set of open-ended focus group questions and prompts will be discussed. Finally the methods for interviewing the participants and analyzing the interview and focus group data will be discussed.

Qualitative Methodology

For this study, the researcher utilized a qualitative methodology with a case study design drawing from a post-positivist research paradigm. Post-positivism is a form of positivism, that according to Crotty (2004) is more concerned with probability rather than certainty and at its core is concerned with objectivity rather than absolute objectivity and approximating the truth rather than “aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence” (p. 27). Post-positivism can be traced back to the late 1950s (Hanson, 1958; Popper, 1959) emerging from the belief that reality is constructed and that research is intrinsically influenced by the values of investigators (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). Post-positivism provided the foundation for other paradigms of thought, such as constructivism, interpretivism and naturalism. Many theorists in the post-positivist era believed that some lawful, reasonably stable relationships existed among social phenomena and asserted that research is influenced by not only theory/hypothesis and but also by observation, facts, evidence and the values brought to the research by the investigator which resulted in
findings and conclusions embedded with the lived experience and personal voice of the researcher (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Onwuegbuzie, 2002).

Even though this study employed a case study design where personal narrative was privileged and issues connected to student persistence emerged from the case as the researcher was immersed in the study, theory provided a framework for how questions were created and posed and how data was analyzed and findings discussed. McMillian and Schumacher (2001) posited that a theory has a set of criterion that makes it useful in the development of knowledge of a social phenomenon. They assert that a theory (1) offer an explicit explanation of the observed traits of a phenomenon, (2) should be consistent with the observed traits and the existing body of knowledge of the phenomenon under study, (3) is considered to be a plausible explanation and should provide the means for verification and revision, and (4) should trigger further research of the phenomenon (Anafara & Mertz, 2006, p. xvii).

**Research perspective.** The post-positivist perspective was selected for this study because of the significance of the student voice about and perception of the first-year of college study at Parkland College. The Heisenberg principle underscores the importance of knowledge and experience. This sociological principle states, “what we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questions.” Denzin and Lincoln (2003) capture the essence of the post-positivism in qualitative methodology by stating, “the naturalistic researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)” (p.30). From an ontological perspective, the post-positive researcher suggests that reality is approximate and is impossible to fully apprehend. Epistemologically, the researcher in a post-positive study is
transformed into the data collection instrument and collects approximated realities. The methodology for this study employed rigorous qualitative processes and was grounded in theory.

Case Study Design

I employed a qualitative, single-case design as defined by Yin (2003) and borrowed from the traditions of Stake’s (1989, 2000) exploratory case study. Yin (2003) offered the most appropriate rationale for conducting this type case in that the phenomena under study was characterized by its lack of preliminary. Therefore the case explored the lived experiences of African American male students in community colleges. These lived and shared experiential data offered a preliminary step in what could result in a more in-depth explanatory case study. The exploratory nature of the case also allowed the researcher flexibility and independence in the research design, the data collection and overall analysis of the findings. With a scarcity of research and lack of knowledge of African American male community college experiences, the research drew upon one research study that amplified the voices of African American male community college students and privileged their point of view over quantitative methods that only magnified their deficits and failures in higher education in order to better understand the perceptions of these students and uncovered and examined the factors and forces that strengthened or challenged their resolve to persist. Freeman (1997) studied African American men at LaGuardia Community College, New York using a case study method and over the course of one year interviewed and observed a group of students in classrooms, hallways, lunch rooms and social groups on campus with the sole focus of providing a voice for these students as some struggled yet succeeded to a second year of course work.

Yin (2003) defined the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. Creswell (2003) adds that in
examining and observing cases, the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and the task of the researcher is to interpret and extrapolate data through the personal lens of inquiry. This study provided an opportunity for first-year African American male community college students to voice their perceptions, feelings and opinions about how they developed strategies and practices to promote their college persistence. The use of qualitative methodologies engaged the subjects in discussions around their feelings of relationships and belongingness, self-efficacy, and success. Yin (2003) also argued that case studies prove to be the most appropriate when the study is attempting to ask “how” and “why” questions rather than “who”, “what” or “when” questions. I selected the case study as my methodological design because my research questions focused primarily on the “how” and “why” questions this strategy and offered a means to study the following: the structure and content of a complex learning community environment and how this environment provided a platform for academic and social integration for African American male community college students. I was interested in exploring and describing in detail the interaction among students of TWA, the pedagogical approach of the faculty and their commitment, along with the college administration, to mentorship and student engagement in the learning community. Throughout the investigation, I uncovered dialogue and narrative that not only brought higher levels of understanding of the African American male community college students’ experience but also provided thoughtful answers to my research questions.

**Institutional Context**

Parkland College was chosen as the unit of analysis for this study because of its current practices in student persistence offered an exploratory case and the existence of a learning community for underprepared African American male students provided a unique contextual
condition where student insight on persistence and success in the first year of student was explored. Given these two important aspects, the case study was bounded by the current practices of Parkland College and the African American male learning community – *Together We Achieve*.

Parkland College is a mid-size, public community college located two hours south of Chicago and three and half hours north of St. Louis. Its campus is located adjacent to a land-grant, research I higher education institution – the University of Illinois. Parkland College, located in East central Illinois, is a comprehensive two-year public institution of higher learning that offers associate degrees, certificates, continuing education opportunities, and specialized training to the residents of Illinois Community College District 505. The Parkland College District encompasses more than 2,900 square miles, over 50 communities, more than 250,000 inhabitants, and over 20 public and private high schools in 12 counties: Champaign, Coles, DeWitt, Douglas, Edgar, Ford, Iroquois, Livingston, McLean, Moultrie, Piatt, and Vermilion. Parkland College has fairly diverse student population. Minority students account for approximately 30% of the student body, with 18.2% representing African American students. Parkland’s diversity provides a unique setting for examining the first-year experiences of African American male students and posing question about their success.

**The case.** Together We Achieve (TWA) is the case of this study. It was one of three first-year learning communities at Parkland College. Located in Champaign, Illinois, Parkland College was established in 1966 to serve the needs of Illinois Community College District 505 in vocational-technical and academic education. The mission of Parkland College is to engage the community in learning. The College is dedicated to providing high quality programs and services to its students; this is achieved through the College’s commitment to continuous evaluation and improvement, ongoing academic achievement, and shared governance. African American
students account for 17 percent of all credit students, a figure slightly higher than the overall average for Community Colleges in Illinois.

*Program characteristics.* The intent of the TWA first-year learning community at Parkland is to create an academic environment where college African American male students focus on academic achievement, community building and leadership development. The goals of the TWA learning community are: (Parkland, 2014):

- Create strong networking and bonding between students to enhance motivation and the create conditions for individual student success.
- Enhance support for students through social activities, advising and integration of coursework
- Produce opportunities for teamwork and collaborative learning.
- Guide students to explore career options realistically while shaping their first year of college around academic planning and success.

Together We Achieve (TWA) is specifically designed to address the needs and interests of African-American men by providing a supportive environment. The program included connecting students with faculty mentors who are committed to student learning and success. Additionally, students had access to academic advisors and student development advocates discussing the multiple barriers that affected their academic progress. Tutoring was offered to students through the two semesters with trained professional tutors and learning assistance specialists. Finally, students were awarded scholarships for academic achievement in the learning community. To be eligible for enrollment in the TWA learning community, students had be first time, full-time in the entering fall semester and needed to place into developmental
reading (CCS 099) and developmental writing (ENG 099). Each participant interviewed with a TWA counselor, wrote an essay and signed a statement of commitment.

**Program development.** The roots of the TWA can be traced back to 2010 when Parkland President Thomas Ramage, in response to rising developmental education needs among entering students, established an Innovation Fund to financially support the creation of a new system of developmental and college preparation at Parkland. Among the innovations was the establishment of learning communities, where students enroll in the same set of courses and are supported by an adviser, mentor, and tutor. Informed by institutional data that revealed a disproportionate number of African American males in developmental education and scholarship on African American males in higher education, administrators decided to create a specific learning community for African American male students – Together We Achieve (TWA).

The first TWA learning community began at Parkland College in the fall of 2011 with 17 African American male students. Parkland College’s Dean of Academic Services attempted to recruit all students for the initial cohort. However, the initial recruitment campaign netted very few interested applicants. Resulting in shifting the recruitment of students through the college’s tutoring center and locating students solely based on their ACT COMPASS placement scores and enrollment in developmental reading and writing in the fall 2011 semester.

The qualitative single case study design collected data by conducting personal interviews with students (present and past) of the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning communities and faculty and staff associated with the TWA program. Data was also collected through a focus group session of students who participated in the TWA learning community during the spring 2014 and fall 2015 semesters at Parkland College.
The personal interviews were orally asked by the interviewer and orally responded by the research participants (Gail, Gail & Borg, 2003). In the first phase, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. This type of interview format, as defined by Gail, Gail, and Borg (2003), the researcher asked a series of structured questions. Probing open-ended questions were then employed by the researcher to drill deeper for additional information relative to the question or subject area being explored. In the second phase of the data collection phase, focus groups methods were used with African American male students who are currently participating or have participated in the first two TWA cohorts.

The importance of such an investigation was to expand understanding of the African American male college students’ educational experience, identifying the challenges and barriers that prohibit them from persisting and succeeding in higher education and to determine how to better prepare students and support programming in the community college in elimination these constraints to student success. Since the case was the entire learning community, the insight provided by students and faculty were important to understand how this learning environment influenced success in developmental and college level courses and also how faculty interaction with TWA students enhanced the first year experiences of the students in the study.

The objectives of this exploratory study offered both strategic and policy recommendations on how to reduce obstacles for African American male community college as they traversed through their first year of participation in higher education and more specifically provided African American male student at Parkland College skills for eliminating the obstacles to their persistence and success.
Participant Recruitment

The participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. As defined by Merriam (1998), “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (p.48). Patton (2005) adds that “qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases (N=1), selected purposefully ... The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information rich-cases for study in depth’ (p. 230). The decision to employ this method was precipitated by my interest in exploring the experiences of African American male students as they enrolled in their first year of college study at Parkland College. Homogenous sampling allowed me to identify participants who shared the characteristic of being African American male students enrolled in the first year learning community; Together We Achieve from 2012 to 2014. The sample was selected from 52 present and past participants of TWA. The researcher recruited 5 students for personal, one-on-one interviews and 6 students were identified for the focus group session. The researcher will also conduct one-on-one interviews with 3 faculty and staff assigned to the TWA learning community.

In purposeful sampling, it is appropriate to “begin with a key person who is considered knowledgeable by other and then ask that person for referrals” (Merriam, 1998, p. 77). This type of sampling or recruitment method is called “snowballing” wherein the researcher will speak with students where a relationship has emerged and then after interviewing them, the researcher will ask that they refer another member of the learning community to interview. Specific individuals with whom the researcher already had relationships include students met at Brother-to-Brother groups meetings, students met at presentations, exhibits and extra-curricular activities, such as sporting events, student/faculty forums, speech contests. The researcher also contacted
the director of the Together We Achieve learning community for referral of student participants. The researcher was responsible for contacting subjects for interviews, mainly through telephone calls and emails, and for arranging times/dates for these face-to-face interviews. The purposeful sampling method described above was voluntary and participation was not influenced by the researcher’s position at Parkland College. In recruiting students, faculty and staff for the interviews, the researcher underscored his role in the research as that of doctoral student conducting a study for his dissertation and emphasized that his position at Parkland College was considered separate from the research study.

The same purposeful sampling method of recruitment was followed with other participants in the Together We Achieve learning community – such as instructors, counselors and tutors. To identify informants (interviewees), the researcher contacted individuals by telephone or email.

Data Collection

The qualitative single case study design collected data by conducting personal one-on-one and focus group interviews with students (present and past) of the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning communities and faculty and staff associated with the TWA program. Data was collected from students participating in the TWA learning community during the spring 2014 and fall 2015 semesters at Parkland College. The students selected for the study were not representative of all age groups of African American male community college students, rather the participants constituted a range of experience in that each had attended high school, were traditionally aged and all were present or former members of the TWA learning community.

The personal interviews were orally asked by the interviewer and orally responded to by the research participants (Gail, Gail & Borg, 2003). In the first phase, the researcher conducted
semi-structured interviews. This type of interview format, as defined by Gail, Gail, and Borg (2003), allowed the researcher to ask a series of structured questions. Probing open-ended questions were then employed by the researcher to drill deeper for additional information relative to the question or subject area being explored. In the second phase of the data collection phase, focus groups methods were used with African American male students who were currently participating or who had participated in the first two TWA cohorts.

The students, staff and faculty who volunteered to participate in the study were informed of all procedures. The investigator acquired assent from the participants before the study began through written consent to ensure their willingness to participate in the study. Each participant was presented with two copies of the consent letter, one to be signed and collected by the investigator and one to remain with the participant for their personal records.

Participants were contacted directly by the investigator and were invited to participate in an interview at a time and location convenient to them. Before the interview, consent forms were distributed and the interview protocol was outlined and all questions were addressed. Interviews took place in a designated classroom at Parkland College. Individual and focus group interviews took place face-to-face and were recorded (audio). Duration of interviews was 45 minutes, with participants agreeing to follow up interviews within one week of the initial interview to allow for follow questions – in a face-to-face format. The focus group interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, with no follow up interview. All interviews and focus groups took place in September-October of 2014. All Participants were given a gift card in the amount of $10 at the conclusion of the third interview and focus group as compensation for their time for agreeing to be a part of the research study. In terms of compensation for participants’ time devoted to the interviews and focus groups, Patton (2005) asserted, participants in research provide us with something of great
value, their stories and their perspectives on the world. We show that we value what they give us by offering something in exchange” (p. 415). In addition to the gift certificate incentive, participants had the opportunity to tell their stories, resulting in increased awareness, academic support services and programming for similar students who find themselves under prepared for college study in their first year of enrollment at Parkland College.

The study also included one-on-one personal, semi-structured interviews with students associated with TWA. This type of interviewing technique for student groups is supported by Seidman (1991) who contended that “so much research is done on schooling in the United States; yet so little is based on the perspectives of the students … whose individual and collective experiences constitutes schooling” (p. 4). Seidman’s (1991) research also supported the second tier of interviewing of my study: the personal one-on-one semi-structured interviews of the faculty and staff associated with TWA. “Interviewing provides a necessary, if not completely sufficient avenue of inquiry” (Seidman, 1991, p. 4). For the study all interviews (students and faculty/staff) were scheduled at convenient times and were conducted in conference rooms at Parkland College. The same open-ended questions presented in the same semi-structured format were posed to each participant.

Data was collected through personal contact between the researcher and interview participants. Upon meeting with the informant (interviewee) in a 45 minute time period, the interviewer collected data from the interview via audio recording. In order to engage participants as much as possible, I took minimal notes during the 45 minutes of interview. I personally transcribed and coded the interviews and developed an identity key that linked the subject’s identity to a code number. The code key, audiotapes and transcriptions were stored separately. After the research study was completed, the code key and audiotapes was destroyed. The
investigator was the only person to have access to the audio interview tapes. The investigator also created digital audio files of the interviews, labeled each file and uploaded the files to a secure flash drive prior to transcription. Audiotapes, coded transcripts, signed consent forms and written interview notes were stored at the investigator’s home in a secure location where only the researcher will have access to the data. Upon completion of the transcription process, the audiotapes were destroyed.

**Interview Protocol**

I was granted permission from the Vice President of Academic Services at Parkland College to contact the participants of the study. Upon receiving permission, I sent invitations to each participant and in this letter was an invitation to participate in the study. The letter also included the informed consent. Specifically, the letter included a description of the study, the role and function of the participants, and the collection methods for the case study research. Also outlined in the letter was the voluntary nature of the study and that participation could be self-terminated. Details of how participants’ confidentiality and privacy were protected were also outlined in the invitation letter. The responses to interview questions and all observation data were kept anonymous in the reported finding of this study, and the recorded and transcribed data was locked in a secure location designated by the researcher. The lone person with access to the raw data of this study was the researcher and the data was destroyed one week after the publication of this dissertation.

In terms of standardized interview protocol for each student participant, I conducted the first Interview in a 30-minute time span and focused the questions on the participants’ background and high school experience. The second interview was longer and lasted one hour in duration and the questions focused on the participant’s experiences at Parkland College and their
participation in the Together We Achieve learning community. The final interview with the participants had the fewest questions and focused on experiences shared in the previous interview asking for more in-depth explanation by the participants.

**Semi-structured, open-ended interviews.** As purported by Patton (2005), “validity in quantitative research depends on careful instrument construction to ensure that the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure” (p. 14). Patton then asserted standardization in instrument design and implementation is underscored in quantitative research; whereas in “qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument and the credibility of qualitative methods hinges to a great extent on the skill competence, and rigor or the person doing the fieldwork” (p. 14). In the research I have designed, I endeavored to maintain credible, ethical, and unbiased standards and strove to adopt a position of neutrality that fostered an unbiased exploration of the experiences of the student members and faculty representatives of the Together We Achieve learning community. In my research, I prescribed to the following interviewing standards Patton (2005):

The investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective of Manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. The neutral investigator Enters the research arena with no ax to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove), and no predetermined results to support. Rather, the investigator’s commitment is to understand the world as it unfolds, be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as the emerge, and be balanced in reporting both confirmatory and disconfirming evidence with regard to any conclusions offered. (p. 51)

The open-ended questions, I developed for this study were modeled after Stake’s (1995) case study research and Patton’s (2005) examples of open-ended interviews used in case study research designs. I strove to achieve neutrality in developing these open-ended questions. The questions followed a semi-structured format. I conducted the interviews in a formal manner
where pre-determined topics were covered following an interview guide with each of the interview participants. The questions did deviate from the interview, but this deviation provided me the opportunity to ask probing questions and allowed for the participant to identify new ways of seeing and understanding the topic being discussed.

According to Bernard (1988), semi-structured interviewing is best used when the researcher may have only one chance to interview someone. For the study, I used a semi-structured interview guide in order to maintained consistency with each participant in the interview process thus resulting in reliable, comparable qualitative data. Stake (1995) claimed “formulating the questions (for case study interviews) and anticipating probes that evoke good responses is a special art” (p. 65) and for case study research, semi-structured interviews can include open-ended questions and this type of interview design is often preceded by observation, informal and unstructured interviewing (probing interview questions).

Patton (2005) outlined six types of questions that can be asked participants (p. 348-352). These questions include experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions and distinguishing questions (Patton, 2005). As interview questions were designed for this study, I was mindful of the question types purported by Patton (2005). I designed the interview with both a semi-structured format yet with questions that allowed participants the latitude for reflection on past and present experiences. Moreover, I wanted participants to address each of the topic areas, yet fully responding to open-ended questions that required all students to formulate response based on their behaviors, feelings, opinions, attitudes and knowledge.
For the study, I asked all participants the same set of open-ended questions. Patton (2005) asserted that when participants answer the same set of open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, responses can be easily compared, thus reducing interviewer effects and research bias (p. 349) The interview guide was constructed modeled after the Patton’s (2005) interview question development recommendations and is contained in Appendix D.

By using open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, I was able to drill deeper into the African American male participants’ experiences. Whitt (1991) and Patton (2005) recommended these interview types as they allowed for “emergent design flexibility” during the interview process. Whitt (1991) instructed the researcher to develop a set of initial interview question that were based on the researcher’s baseline of knowledge of the phenomena. “Then when the study progresses, questions can be added as needed for clarification such as when contradictory information is obtained, or to obtain additional information” (p. 411). Adding to this recommendation, Patton (2005) argued the need for the researcher to avoid a rigid “getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursue new paths of discovery that emerge” (p. 40). In entering into the interview data collection, I did not add additional interview questions to the one-on-one interviews with students and faculty and staff of the TWA learning community, but there were instances where I needed to ask participants follow-up questions in order to clarify or elaborate on responses to initial interview questions.

Focus group interviews. With the overall purpose of this study to chronicle the experiences of African American men in a community college learning community and these experiences, perceptions, beliefs and opinions impacted their participation in college during their first year of study; the focus group sessions offered three distinct advantages for collecting this type of experiential data. First, the focus group design fostered participant cooperation in
divulging personal experience. Kelly (2003) purports this claim by stating that by their design focus groups “elicit perceptions, information, attitudes and ideas from a group in which each participant possesses experience with the phenomenon under study” (p. 50). Second, the researcher was able to ask open-ended questions and then followed up with probing questions that clarified not only individual responses, but were then posed to the entire group to determine if common ideas and experiences occurred within the student cohort (Posavac & Carey, 2003; Creswell, 2005). Finally, as an administrator at Parkland College and from my perspective as a researcher of this student group and the TWA as a learning construct, I had the unique opportunity to embed myself in the case under investigation and casually observed and recorded interactions among TWA members and the staff and faculty who administered the program.

The importance of the student voice was essential to this study on African American participation in a unique learning model. With this noted, my ability to participate in the one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions enabled me to extract important information about students’ feelings, apprehensions, worries and impressions and at the same observe how these students not only reacted to the learning model, but to each other inside and outside of class, during down times where socialization was privileged over study and these observations were as important to offering validation for the African American male student voice. In case study research, Stake (1998), Yin (2003) and Creswell (2005) acknowledged that this “participant-observer” role is an important source of evidence and helps to not only balance the data collected through interview but also question and confirm findings that have be examined in the more formal interview-type scenarios. The focus group interview guide is contained in Appendix E.
After interviews and focus group data were transcribed, all data was analyzed. I used procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the data, data limitations, and the procedures used for data analysis are described in the following sections of this chapter.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis began after the first set of interviews with the student participants and faculty members of the Together We Achieve learning community, and remained ongoing until all interviews, both one-on-one and focus groups, were completed. I used a hand analysis method for the analysis of data rather use a computer based data analysis method. Creswell (2008) argued that this method of analysis is appropriate for researchers who are collecting experiential data and “want to stay close to the data” and attempt to capture emotionally charged and experiences (p. 247). I also contend that by personally transcribing the data from audio recordings, I was able to evaluate the conversations in the one-on-one interview, drilling deeper into the tone of voice and nuances of the responses to track emerging themes in the data collection process. Additionally, by hand analyzing the focus group data I was able to play back the audio recordings and focus on dialogue and conversation of the participants to determine if similar or different themes emerged from the one-on-one personal interviews. Seidman (1991) agrees with the use of hand analysis in research where personal connections forged in the interview process need to be captured and analyzed, something a computer program cannot accomplish. “Although there are computer programs that can sort out and combine all the text in which a particular word appears, a computer program cannot produce the connections a researcher makes while studying the interview text” (p. 85).

I examined the data on a question-by-question basis for both the personal interview and the focus group. I employed a structural coding schematic that allowed me to categorize the data
across multiple participants via this question-based coding because I wanted to make sure that I used a prober cross-analysis of the data. I consulted Maxwell’s (2005) guidelines for cross-case analysis when I began to organize the text data to ensure that I captured overlapping themes and negotiated how to analyze the large sets of text and dialogue segments from the audio transcriptions, field notes and journal entries. In terms of ease of access to the data, I employed the structural coding method from Saldana (2013) that suggested that labeling data by an indexing scheme such as by question or color coding, allowed me to both code and categorize the themes, resulting in the ability to examine comparable themes, commonalities and differences in responses to questions. By employing a structural coding scheme in my first cycle of data analysis, I was then able to focus my second level of coding on theme development as it emerged over a large set of transcribed interview data and track these themes through a simplified reference to issues, themes and research questions as they emerge in the analysis. Saldana contends that by using this second cycle approach known as pattern coding, the structural layout of my interview data allowed for “the identification of themes to surface through the large data set and tell the complexity of a story that adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (p. 521) in the final cycle of the coding, resulting in a clear set of themes and patterns of evidence directly tied to one of the three questions framing the entire research study.

**Role of the Researcher: Trustworthiness**

Replicability is intrinsic to quantitative research. Data is generalizable to multiple setting and populations. In qualitative research, replicability “is impossible, given the context-boundedness of qualitative studies” (Whitt, 1991, p. 413). For the data and subsequent finding generated in qualitative studies to be considered credible, researchers must prove that their
methods and findings are sound, credible and most of all trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) followed by Twycross and Shields (2005) developed a standard of trustworthiness in order to bring legitimacy to qualitative researchers. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is garnered through the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Creswell (2004) and Patton (2005) both contend that Lincoln’s and Guba’s trustworthy standard overturns “the traditional mandate to be objective … by being balanced, fair, conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interest, and multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 575).

**Credibility.** The proposed research required that I spent an extended period of time interviewing students and in these interviews I engaged with the participant in order to drill deeper into their personal experiences as they related to college enrollment and persistence. In order to ensure high levels of credibility, research in qualitative studies in general and case study research in particular, prolonged engagement is necessary and my credibility was achieved through this prolonged engagement with the participants. Schwandt (2001) stated that credibility plays an essential role in ensuring that the researcher accurately portrays the experiences of the respondents when interviews are conducted and subsequently reported. This study used one-on-one personal interviews, follow-up personal interviews and focus groups with respondents. Schwandt also underscores a key point in data collection in qualitative study and its role in bringing credibility to the researcher, when he stated, “The importance of obtaining information and feedback from insiders throughout the process of data collection and analysis – not only about the phenomena but also about the researcher’s emerging interpretations and understandings – cannot be overemphasized” (p. 143). Heeding the recommendation of Schwandt (2001), I conducted follow-up interviews, constructed with questions that helped
check and verify my understanding of the interview data and to also allowed the respondents and opportunity to clarify their responses or add corrective feedback to the data, if necessary.

Transferability. Since this study employed a single case study design, I needed to show transferability of the study’s findings to similar student demographics (i.e., African American females, Latino/a, and Asian Americans). Transferability as defined by Twycross and Shields (2005) is the “ability to see similarities in a study’s findings in other potential research populations, settings and locations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that researchers can also heighten transferability by collecting “rich and thick” data. In my study, I will attempt to collect rich, thick data by posing open-ended questions in the one-on-one semi-structured interviews with students, faculty and staff of the Together We Achieve learning community. By collecting thick descriptions of the student participants’ experiences in TWA required “the researcher to provide a lot of detail about the setting and the events taking place (Twycross & Shields, 2005, p. 36). The emergent data in this study provided a certain narrative quality to the research study (Stake, 1988) but also increased it transferability to other student groups at Parkland College.

Dependability. In qualitative research, the onus of responsibility rests with the researcher to provide consistency is how data is collected and appropriateness in how the data is treated prior to analysis. Whitt (1991) defines these qualities a researcher brings to a study as dependability Whitt (1991) argues that dependability in a qualitative study heightens when a researcher provides evidence of the “appropriateness of the inquiry decisions made throughout the study” (p. 413). Dependability has also been called “auditability” (Creswell, 2005) and in this definition, emphasis is placed on the researcher in leaving an audit trail of documents and artifacts of the research process and ultimately the decision-making processes of the data collection and subsequent data analysis. Whitt (1991) purported that a researcher should leave an
audit trail that consists of “raw data (tape recordings, transcriptions, and notes from interviews and observations), products of data analysis and synthesis (all phases of category-development and themes), process notes (including decisions about research strategies and researcher reflections, questions, and insights), and materials relating to the intentions of the research drafts, such as notes and journals” (p. 413-414). For this study, I maintained a file that organized all research proposal drafts and separate repositories for collected data and transcripts and a email or cloud drop box file for all feedback from the dissertation committee. These documents and artifacts of the study along with a reflexive journal, I attempted to bring dependability to this study.

**Confirmability.** The reflexive journal enhanced the four areas of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The broad-range application of reflexive journal improved confirmability by allowing the researcher to chronicle the ongoing documentation and reflection of the case under study. It also allowed me to record notes from the field and the overall study’s schedule, methods and data collected. The personal journal allowed me the opportunity to reflect on each individual interview and the focus group session examining whether or not I brought any biases to interview data transcription or jeopardized the validity of the study. I sought data-triangulation in this study and by using a reflexive journal I used to look for consistency in the initial interview responses, the follow-up interviews and the focus group sessions. I also sought reliability in the data that was transcribed through the personal interviews and focus group session. Creswell (2003) defines reliability as a mechanism to check for accuracy in data. Member checking served as the primary means for confirming accuracy in the semi-structured interviews of this study. Member checking was done by “[asking] one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of an account [which]
involves taking findings back to participants and asking them (in writing or in an interview) about the accuracy of the report” (Creswell, 2005, p. 252).

**Limitations**

As the sole researcher of this study, I brought distinct limitations to this study. I am a middle-aged, white researcher. This could have, but in my research did not limit the willingness of the African American male community college students from freely sharing their experiences. Moreover, I am an administrator at Parkland College and from my position at the college, could have made students and potentially faculty and staff reluctant to share their opinions and experiences of college study, the TWA and other institutional factors that have shaped their viewpoints.

While I do not share the same ethnicity of the participants, I have worked with African American male community college students for over 18 years. I make up a team with two other deans at Parkland College that address the needs of first year students. Prior to my research, I worked to establish first year learning communities, success in college courses and orientation workshops for all first time student at Parkland. I have removed my self from this organizing team three years ago to concentrate my efforts on research design and data collection of the Parkland College First-Year Experience program.

Other limitations of the study are interconnected with the call for future research. One of the primary limitations of this study is that a qualitative study with 10 student participants and three faculty participants cannot be generalizable to all community college students or even to all African American male students. To strengthen the significance of this study and overcome this major limitation, more research must occur using both qualitative and quantitative methodology. Qualitative inquiry that identifies additional themes and patterns of evidence on this topic will
prove important to our understanding of college student persistence in general, and more specifically persistence of African American male community college students. Employing quantitative methodology on this topic can measure the impact these themes have on student persistence and identify how pervasive these factors and forces are across multiple community colleges.

Another limitation of this study relates to the single college approach and how the data was collected. Future case study research on this topic may benefit from a collecting qualitative data from multiple community colleges using case study research design. This may result in new themes and experiences that could lead to greater understanding of persistence in African American males.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter details the study’s methodology. I offered insight and rationale for selecting the ethnographic or qualitative narrative research design where a single case study was investigated. Next, I described the use of purposive sampling that identified participants for the study. Then, I discussed the data collection process where I provided not only an interview protocol and but offered rationale for using both semi-structured questions in an open-ended interview guide for both personal and focus group interviews. Finally, the chapter outlined how the research processes of the study was built on a foundation of trustworthiness and the analysis of data employs methods used by leading qualitative researchers.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this case study is to understand the experiences of African American male community college students within the ethnographic context of a first-year learning cohort called the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning community at Parkland College. The researcher will analyze the experiences of students and the perceptions and perspectives of the TWA faculty and staff to identify factors that trigger persistence and perception of academic success for these African American male students in their first year of study in a community college. In examining the African American male community college students’ perspective on the first-year college experience, the following three questions provided the foundation for the research study:

1. How can pre-college educational experiences influence higher education enrollment for African American males?

2. In the first year of college, how do institutional factors influence the persistence of African American male community college students?

3. How can social and personal factors trigger the decision of African American male students to enroll in a second year of community college study?

Two primary objectives will be achieved in chapter four of this study. The first objective is to provide a comprehensive description of each of the African American male student participants of the study. These participants were given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity throughout the case study. Paramount to the case is the written account of phenomenon under study. These accounts serve as the selected data and represent the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of the case study participants and will be used by the researcher to craft rich
descriptions through both quotations and paraphrased in-depth commentary of the participants in order to present a vivid and real sense of the encounters that took place in the study.

The second objective of the chapter is to present the significant themes that have emerged from the iterative, data analysis process described in chapter three. The emerging themes resulted after two coding methods were employed: Structural (first cycle) and Pattern (second cycle). The findings have been categorized into three thematic areas that are supported with eight patterns of evidence (Saldana, 2013).

**Descriptive Portrait of Participants**

This section of Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of each participant in the study. Each participant is identified with a pseudonym that the researcher assigned during the data analysis portion of the research. Basic demographic information, such as age, hometown, and program of study is included for each participant. Within the findings section of this chapter, the researcher will provide a more thorough description of the students’ experiences in secondary and postsecondary education thus providing a context for their experiences and perceptions of college life at Parkland College and their participation in the Together We Achieve learning community during their first year of college.

There were 10 participants involved in this study. Nine were African American male students enrolled or completers of the TWA learning community at Parkland College. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25. All these men were single. Nine of the 10 student participants were out-of-district students, with hometowns in the Chicago land area. One student was in-district and shared the same hometown as the college. Three participants of the study were members of the faculty and staff that supported the TWA learning community. One
member was the lead administrator and two other participants were faculty who provided direct instruction to the students. Each participant was given a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality.

Participants reported their program of study and employment status. The self-reported data revealed that all participants were enrolled in college transfer programs, one in Broadcast Communications, two in Criminal Justice, two in Psychology and five in General Studies, and one in a pre-computer science program. All 10 students placed into developmental education in their first year of study at Parkland College. Eight placed into all three developmental education sequences (Math, Reading and English) and two placed into two developmental education sequences (Math and English). The following is a brief description of each participant.

**Participant #1 Marcus.** Nineteen-year-old Marcus came to Parkland from Chicago’s south side community of Englewood. A predominately African-American neighborhood about 2 miles southwest of Lake Michigan, Englewood is prone to gang activity and violence. His mother and father never married but have lived together since his younger brother (age 8) was born and have both worked for the Chicago Mass Transit District “since I can remember.” When his 20-year-old cousin Darvin was murdered two summers ago in a fight over “a girl,” his mom and dad insisted he “get out of Chicago.” When asked in general about his feelings of education, Marcus talked briefly about his high school experience. “Everybody looked like me … black, young. Probably acted like me too.” He told me that he did not think he was a very good student. “Bad habits … no one cared if I studied or not.” Marcus is a very serious young man and many of his responses to my questions resulted in practical, common sense responses. He says that participating in the TWA learning community has made him focus on his educational goals for the first time in his life. Marcus completed the TWA program in May 2014 and returned to
Parkland College for a second year of study in August 2014. Marcus is currently enrolled in the Criminal Justice program, having earned 24 credit hours.

**Participant #2 Larry.** Larry is a 20-year-old African American male who was born in Homewood, Illinois about 10 miles south of the Chicago Loop, but moved several times during his elementary and junior high school years and graduated from John Marshall Metropolitan High School, a west Chicago High School in one of the poorest regions of Chicago – North Lawndale. North Lawndale, or also referred to as K-Town because the north-south avenues that crisscross the neighborhood between Pulaski Road and Cicero Avenue all begin with K. However, K-Town has also been referred to as “Kill Town” by notable Chicago newspapers (Tribune and Sun Times) because of its high crime rates. In 2012, North Lawndale ranked atop the most dangerous places to live in Chicago (Chicago Tribune). Violence coupled with extreme poverty of residents makes North Lawndale a place young people want to escape. Larry stated that he decided to attend Parkland College the summer after his high school graduation …“I have a strong desire to improve upon my family image. Many of my family members don’t have any education. I want to be the first one to get a college degree. My past haunts me but I am going to be the one that *conquers* it.”

Asked why he decided to participate in the TWA program, Larry responded that he felt out of place when he arrived at Parkland and really nervous on how he would be able to fit in with so many students “who didn’t look or act like him.” He added that an advisor in the College’s Center for Academic Success told him before classes started in the fall of 2012 that he qualified for TWA based on his placement scores. “At first I was put off. So because you’re saying I’m not prepared for college classes I get to go into a learning community. I thought Mr.
Tranchant was calling me dumb at first, but after I thought about and realized he just cared about me. I decided to do it. Best decision I’ve ever made.”

Larry has worked all throughout his time at Parkland. Sometimes more than 30 hours a week at a local grocery store. He has earned 33 hours, successfully completed all his developmental education courses and is enrolled in his third year at Parkland in the college transfer curriculum as a Psychology major.

Participant #3 Oscar. Oscar, a stocky 21-year-old Maywood native, was reluctant to join the Together We Achieve learning community when he first arrived on campus nearly 3 three years ago. “At first I thought we were being profiled. I mean I get to school and here is this little Asian woman asking me to enroll in this ‘Community’. She said it was for black students and at first that really pissed me off, but a day or so later I thought, ‘wow this is the first time a teacher had come up to me and asked me about my classes.’ In high school, the only time a teacher came up to me outside of class was to ‘run me in’ for causing trouble.”

Oscar said he joined the Community that very day. Oscar continued by stating that his experience in the TWA learning community has been “better than I expected” and talked about how Dr. Elmer Chandler and other teachers really cared about their progress in the classes and how they did things with the students outside of class as well. “I think what really sold me on the Community was the Hobo dinner Dr. Chandler had for us right before Halloween my first year of school here at Parkland.” Oscar recollected that Dr. Chandler invited all 17 TWA students to a park near the college on a Friday night and he and his wife brought food and the guys roasted hot dogs and marshmallows and Chandler made his “famous” hobo stew. “I mean here is a white teacher who doesn’t really need to spend time with us outside of class … he’s got a wife and kids and all … and he’s making us food. It felt good … it felt like I was a part of something.”
Oscar attended Proviso East High School in Maywood, a west side Chicago community that has seen some positive economic change over the last 10 years with new businesses locating to the area. Violent crime has decreased since 1995.

Participant #4 Kelvin. Kelvin, a 20-year-old broadcast communications major, is a Parkland College basketball player from South Holland, Illinois, a West Chicago neighborhood. Kelvin attended Marian Catholic High School, 20 minutes from his home for educational and athletic reasons. He was raised by his father and stepmother, and he had very little contact with his birth mother. His older brother was murdered dealing drugs on the streets of his South Holland, Illinois neighborhood. Since his brother’s death, Kelvin has a sense of responsibility to his family to “do good” and be successful in school and on the basketball courts. “I came here to Parkland to not only play basketball but to make my family proud of me as a student.” As a past member of the TWA learning community Kelvin successfully completed all developmental courses, has earned 28 credit hours and is now enrolled in general education and major specific courses as a Mass Communication major. Along with his athletic responsibilities, Kelvin works as a disc jockey on the Parkland College’s student operated radio station.

When Kelvin describes is past educational experiences that lead up to attending Parkland College, he admits that high school did very little to prepare him for college life and studies. “I was a lazy student. I just got by.”

Participant #5 Landon. Landon, an 18-year-old freshman from the Champaign, Illinois and is lone participant of the Parkland College district. He lives at home with his mother and stepfather. Landon struggled in high school, but gained confidence to attend college after he enrolled in an alternative high school program that focused on the development of leadership skills. Landon, undecided in his major likes computers, recollected on a memorable trip to
Washington, D.C. with the leadership group and stated “it was my first time being away from home, but I really enjoyed the friends I made and the leader, a black male, always made a point to talk to me and ask my opinion of the stuff we were seeing – museum stuff you know. It was cool, and kind of made me think maybe this is what college may be like.”

Entering college, Landon has placed into three developmental education courses – mathematics, reading and English – and more than one occasion during our interview sessions describes being stressed and overwhelmed with the amount of homework in his first semester. “I knew it would be different from high school, but some days I am not sure I can handle all of the work.” Asked how he copes, Landon talks about the support he receives from his mom. “She helps me out, she knows what I can do. She also calms me down. If it weren’t for my mom, I’m not sure I would still be here.” Landon then talks about his “loner” personality and that he has never relied on peer support for his motivation. “I like TWA and Brother-to-Brother, but I like to stay to myself, you know … just the way I am.” He then explains that his mother is enrolled at Eastern Illinois University pursuing her bachelor’s degree and that most nights he studies with her. “We are doing this together, so we support each other the best we can.”

Aside from dealing with anxiety, Landon has a diagnosed learning disability. “School has always been a challenge for me because I am dyslexic. I have always hated school and because I can’t read and process information very well, I thought everybody – my teachers and my classmates – were looking down on me. Since I was in grade school, I always thought that my teachers did not care if I learned or not. I always thought that … my problem was my problem.”
Focus Group

In order to obtain additional reflections on the TWA Community, a focus group consisting of five members from past and present TWA learning community cohorts was conducted after a Brother-to-Brother weekly meeting. The setting used for the focus group was a large conference room in the Student Union of Parkland College.

Cedric. Cedric is the oldest TWA member of the study at 25 years of age. He is from the Hyde Park area of South Chicago. He is his a member of cohort 2 and is the only TWA member from that cohort that remains on campus. Cedric is a past president of the Brother-to-Brother group. He works part-time at a local retail store and has a steady girlfriend. Cedric lives adjacent to the campus in an apartment and uses public transportation to travel to school and work. He is a psychology major with hopes of transferring to Eastern Illinois University.

Keon. Keon is a 23-year-old third year student at Parkland College. He is a member of cohort 3 of TWA. He is from the south side Chicago neighborhood of Kenwood. He graduated from Morgan Park High School. After high school, he began working at local meat packing factory after his step-father passed away. He admits to several run-ins with the police and that many of his high school friends are now gang members. Keon came to Parkland College at the age of 20. He is the only participant of the study who works full-time and maintains full-time enrollment status at Parkland College. He lives in an apartment near the Parkland Campus and owns his own car. He used to live with two TWA classmates but now lives with his girlfriend.

LaTroy. LaTroy, a third year student at Parkland College, is 21-years-old. He and his twin brother LaWayne are from Chicago Heights. He is a graduate of Bloom Trail High School. The brothers were friends with Kelvin before coming to Parkland College. LaTroy has been a student at Parkland the longest of all the participants and has the most earned credits. He began
working part-time in the fall 2014 semester. LaTroy is one of two participants who are majoring in Criminal Justice. He plans to attend a four-year university and pursue law enforcement as a career upon graduation from Parkland College.

Quinn. Quinn is a 19-year-old second year student. He is from the western suburb of Chicago Lawn or commonly known as Marquette Park. A former gang member, he enrolled at Parkland College to pursue a teaching degree. He works part-time and lives with a fellow TWA member in an apartment adjacent to campus.

Faculty and Staff Participants

Barb Hightower. Barb Hightower, formerly a developmental education instructor at Parkland College, is Dean of Academic Services and director of the Together We Achieve (TWA) Learning Community. She provides direct oversight for the curriculum and delivery of instruction in TWA and meets regularly with TWA faculty to discuss the effectiveness of the program. Hightower is also co-director of the First Year Experience (FYE) program along with the Dean of Students. Along with providing early intervention services, the FYE model designed by Hightower emphasizes faculty-student mentoring, intrusive counseling and educational planning, orientation and student success courses for under prepared students. Contextualized developmental education is also a primary focus of FYE and Hightower has helped train reading and writing instructors to design curriculum in the career and technical education departments that integrates basic reading and writing instruction with programs such as automotive, welding and industrial technology.

Herman Day. Herman Day is a first year English and Reading instructor at Parkland College. He is African American and has worked in the community for several years advocating for young African American male students in the local school and community organizations. Day
worked at Parkland College as a part-time faculty before his promotion to the full time ranks. As a part-time instructor he worked on the evaluation of the TWA program and also was instrumental in updating the FYE success in college course for the learning community formats.

**Michael King.** Michael King is a part-time instructor at Parkland College and has been very active in the development of the TWA learning community. King or MK as he is referred to by students is a first generation African American college graduate and is a licensed social worker. He is also the advisor for the Parkland College Brother to Brother Club. His work with the First-Year Experience program has led to the development of a structured teacher-student mentoring program, known as I-Connect. MK is a resident of the Champaign-Urbana area, but was raised in south Chicago.
Table 4.1

Student Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
<th>Employment (FT, PT or None)</th>
<th>Collection Type</th>
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Thematic Findings

The findings that emerge from this case study tell an inspiring story about the experiences of African American male students at Parkland Community College. The data describe their decisions to pursue higher education, their level engagement and self-identification as college students, interactions with peers and faculty, and perspectives about the factors motivate or impede their continued college enrollment.

The findings of this case study research are organized by the three research questions. Three themes emerged from the research and from these thematic areas, eight patterns of
evidence support to support the themes and answer the research questions. First, findings relative to the pre-college experiences of African American male student participants will be revealed. Next the findings focus on the institutional challenges that enhance or detract from the student participants’ decision to persist are identified and described. Finally findings emerge around social and personal factors outside of the classroom that support and detract from the student participants experience in college. For each of these thematic categories, patterns of evidence will be identified and analyzed. Faculty and staff perspectives of the learning community are included in each one of the findings sections. At the conclusion of each finding discussion, analysis of the major emergent themes and patterns of evidence will occur.

Conceptually, Deil-Amen’s (2006) the social and academic integration (or warming up) framework guided the analysis of these findings. Various data collection techniques were employed in the study and are outlined in chapter three. The overall analysis of the data from both student and faculty participants focused on the reoccurrence in words, thoughts, phrases, ideas and experiences. This pattern approach to both coding and analysis of the data were framed around a diverse set of topics that all related to the central questions that guided this study.

The case consisted of a population of students with diverse backgrounds, previous experiences and perspectives on higher education. In spite of these differences, clear similarities surfaced among the participants. These findings were then analyzed and this section of Chapter 4 addresses the most salient themes. Within each theme, I identify patterns of evidence that amplify the complexities of the voice of the student participants.

African American male students who participated in this study talked about the forces and factors that shaped their decisions to persist at Parkland College. In organizing the experiences of the participants these factors were classified into three distinct thematic groups.
Pre-college influences, institutional agents and structures, and social and personal supports and barriers. In each of these thematic categories, student participants talked about the positive influences that shaped their motivation to participate in higher education as well as the negative forces that erected barriers on the pathway to their educational goals. These themes and the patterns of evidence that support the findings of this study are organized in figure 4.1.
Figure 4.1: Themes

Question 1: How can pre-college educational experiences influence higher education enrollment for African American males?

Theme 1: Early educational perceptions

Patterns
P1: Academic and social obstacles
P2: Teacher involvement as catalyst

Question 2: In the first year of college, how do institutional factors influence the persistence of African American male community college students?

Theme 2: Institutional Agents and Structures

Patterns
P3: Student/Faculty Interaction
P4: Remediation
P5: Perception of Career Choice

Question 3: How can social and personal factors trigger the decision of African American male students to enroll in a second year of community college study?

Theme 3: Supports and Barriers to Success

Patterns
P6: Peer Groups
P7: Financial obligations
P8: Family connections
Theme 1: Realizing the possibility: Participant experiences before college enrollment. Capturing experiences of the participants prior to enrolling at Parkland College was essential to understanding how participation in a first-year learning community might result in social and academic integration. Consistent with the literature that portrayed the deficits many African American males acquire in secondary education, such as poor grades, lack of motivation, high dropout rates, participants in this study were not immune to the obstacles that are erected on the pathway to higher education for many African American male students. Noting this, the first theme, using early perceptions of education to trigger motivation, describes how the experiences participants had in elementary and secondary education levels helped them to overcome barriers of deficit, develop self-efficacy and develop higher education plans.

The participants of the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning community consisted of present and past student cohorts. In the face-to-face, one-on-one interviews and the focus group, these participants shared both stories of their experiences while enrolled in the community as well as their educational experiences prior to coming to college. In looking across the participant interviews, descriptions of pre-college or high school experiences seemed to represent how the participants developed their initial perceptions of education and began to define their eventual participation in higher education. For most of the young men, the experiences that helped shape their perception of education occurred both inside and outside of the classroom and included interactions with teachers, peers and family members.

Pattern 1: Desiring to overcome academic and social obstacles. I first met Landon after a Brother-to-Brother Club meeting during the third of week of school of the fall 2014 semester. An 18-year-old freshman, Landon enrolled in the TWA learning community in the fall of 2014. The first time we talked he was just getting comfortable being around the other male TWA
participants. “I’m a loner, so this learning community thing is a challenge for me.” When asked about how high school prepared him for this new experience, Landon shared that he struggled in high school:

I got kicked out of school my junior year for fighting. I got fed up. My grades were terrible. I guess I quit caring about school. I was a loner and didn’t have many friends. So one day a kid I didn’t like called me a name and I popped him in the mouth. Honestly, I was ready to leave so I was happy to be expelled. But my parents sent me to Novak (Champaign Central High School’s Alternative School) and things turned around. I liked the teacher, and I just starting getting involved. I really surprised my parents when I graduated.

Landon’s comments focus on the social and academic obstacles he faced in the first years three of high school. His subsequent enrollment in the Novak Academy revealed how he used this experience in an alternative high school to “turn things around” by getting involved in a mentoring and leadership program. Landon described a trip to Atlanta, Georgia with the Man Up African American male leadership group that was affiliated with his alternative high school. In this group, Landon admitted to bonding with his mentor and how this relationship helped him to decide to go to college. “One night on the bus, I told Mr. Rose that I wanted to own my own computer business and that I wanted to feel good about myself, you know have a successful career. He told me in order to make my career goal a reality I probably needed to go to college.” Landon explained that he did not immediately decide to attend college after his conversation with Mr. Rose, but the thought of going to college began to grow stronger when the teachers at Novak started realizing his potential as a leader and asked him to mentor other African American males who had been referred to the alternative high school.

Landon finished eating his pizza, shifted in the student union couch and talked about how he made the decision to attend college. “When the teachers stopped judging me, started listening
to me and then hooked me up with other brothers I could help, I kind of thought I could go to the next level.”

Student participants interviewed explained that once they experienced some level of engagement or connection to a high school teacher they then developed a sense of belongingness to their educational pursuits. In the one-on-one interviews, Landon and Kelvin both discussed the times in their secondary educational experience where a teacher took the time to get to know them on a personal level and this connection lead to a positive outcome. For Landon, he connected with the Guidance Counselor at his alternative high school at a time where he had almost given up on his high school education because of his lack of success and the overwhelming anxious feelings of being different from the other students because of his quiet and reserved demeanor. Similarly, Kelvin, a 20-year-old basketball player, who completed the TWA learning community in 2012 and is currently enrolled in broadcast communications courses, discussed the experiences he had with a high school math teacher and a varsity basketball coach.

I had many interactions Kelvin during the fall 2014 semester. In our final interview session, he was waiting for me outside of the men’s locker room on a late Friday afternoon. He told me he was finished with classes for the day and had just finished a treatment on his tender ankle from the basketball trainer, when I pulled an old office chair up to his study hall table in the Athletic Center. He had his abnormal psychology homework laid out. I had been meeting with Kelvin for several weeks and our comfort level with each was high. I started out our session with a question about how he felt about his high school experience. He responded quickly:

I remember in my freshman that I got into trouble for talking and goofing off in class. I like to talk to my friends, you know cut up and stuff, and I got busted by this math teacher, but you know from that time on I was marked and the math teacher never cared
for me. No matter what I did. Even if I got a good grade on a test, she had it out for me. My mom had it out for her too. My grades were terrible in that class.

I pressed Kelvin to explain how the disconnection with the math teacher made him feel about his other classes in high school and how this class affected his high school experience. He quickly told me that he generally got along with most of his teachers in high school and that it had no effect on his high school experience aside from making him work harder to be successful in his classes. “I guess I did learn that even though I didn’t like that math teacher or they didn’t like me, I shouldn’t give up, but instead just suck it up, say yes sir or yes ma’am and do the work.”

**Pattern 2: Teacher involvement as catalyst for commitment.** Kelvin explained another instance in high school where he turned an initial bad experience into a positive one during his senior year of high school on the basketball team.

My junior year on the team, I talked back to the coaches and cut practice more than once. I was hanging around guys in my neighborhood and getting into trouble. My coach took me aside and told me he’d give me one more chance and if I screwed up, I was done. It woke me up. So after that I listened to the coach more, was much more respectful and worked hard at practice and you know I played a lot more that year and well my senior year I shined.

As we further unpacked his experience, it was apparent in Kelvin’s instance, as with many other participants, negative experiences occurred in high school and though they created discouragement each of the participants discussed how they found some form of motivation to change or redirect their attitudes and behaviors toward positive outcomes. Keon’s comment reiterates this idea when asked if he saw himself as college-bound when in high school. “Hell no. I never thought I would be going to college … not where I come from. Guys like me don’t go to college.” Keon recounted how many of his high school classmates have died on the streets of Chicago as result of gang violence and many others are now in prison. He also shared with his
peers that he had been suspended twice while at Morgan Park High School and then early in his senior year expelled for fighting. “I did a bunch of dumb things that I really regret now. I really was headed for big trouble … probably prison if I didn’t change.” Keon enrolled in an alternative high school after his expulsion and spoke about a teacher at the school who “really turned me around” and by the time he graduated entertained the thought of going to college. “Mr. Kent made me really think about having the right attitude about school and even work and that I had the right to be somebody and college was my only opportunity to do that.”

Each of the three TWA participants reflected on their high school experiences. Each recollected different instances where a teacher or coach influenced their decision to pursue higher education. All of the participants reflected on negative perceptions of high school until they connected with a teacher or school counselor that resulted in a sense of belonging or engagement with their educational pursuits. In my initial meeting with Michael King, a TWA instructor and mentor to many of the learning community students, I asked him what he thought about the pre-college influences or factors that triggered the decision for these African American young men to attend college.

King, referred by students as “MK”, met with me after class for our interview. He was dressed much like the students in TWA, sporting jeans and tee shirt, the tan sport coat and ID hanging from a lanyard around his neck was the only distinguishing aspects of his wardrobe that differentiated him from the students. I opened the conversation with MK by asking him about student engagement and how he defined it. He shared with me that he thought it was a “give-and-take” process and that for students to become engaged, they first must willing to give. I asked MK to elaborate on this two-fold model and he stated that in his experiences “Many black male students start their education at the margins so they naturally do not feel they have a place in the
educational enterprise. It is a barrier they erect and then develop an attitude either that they are a victim or everyone’s working to see them fail.” MK then discussed how from his perspective as both a college instructor and a product of the Chicago Public School system that students who are in TWA come from a high school environment where the opportunity to engage with faculty is rare. “It is a negative situation where most of these guys come from, so if they do get the opportunity to connect in a positive way with a teacher, coach or any kind of adult mentor, maybe the seed has been planted to start trusting in their own educational futures.”

Analysis. All the student participants shared the experience of attending high school prior to coming to Parkland College. Consistently across all students interviewed for the study, descriptions of high school or pre-college experiences seemed to represent how these young African American males developed their initial perceptions of education and in some respects these experiences prompted their eventual decision to participate in higher education. Most all the participants interviewed described educational and social obstacles that made up a large part of their pre-college education experience. Most of the literature consulted for this study focused on the experiences students encountered while in college. The research reviewed that informed most about the forces that students encounter while in high school that influenced their perceptions college is the literature on cognitive and non-cognitive factors that contribute to low rates of college enrollment for African American males. Perrakis, (2008) pointed to several quantitative studies that focused on the deficits African American male students exhibit in high school, especially in college preparatory classes such as reading, math and writing (Perrakis, 2008). These negative high school experiences also attribute to non-cognitive factors that impede college enrollment such as behavioral problems, struggles with social integration, poor self-concept and lack of motivation (Ellis, 2002; Cuyjet, 2006).
The literature on resistance behavior found in African American male high school students reveals how many environmental and cultures found in secondary schools place obstacles in the path of African American students. Noguera (2003) found that Black exhibit a resistance to formal education structures by avoiding the pitfalls and hardships that they encounter both inside and outside of the classroom and to safeguard themselves from negative outcomes they devise ways to protect and provide support to each other. In my study, almost all student participants shared their stories of struggle with school-work and their inability to fit in socially. They also shared how they used these experiences to trigger motivation and to develop a positive perception of their higher education pursuits. Landon’s comments about his experiences as a loner in high school, and the particular incident where he got into a fight with another student, help illuminate how academic and social struggles in high school motivate African American males to change their attitudes toward education.

Landon appeared at the age of 17 to be a high school dropout or in the starkest of terms, another statistic to add to the research showcased in this study on the plight of African American male students. Something happened to Landon just as it did to the other participants in the study. He found a connection to a positive influence. In Landon’s case it was his participation in the Novak Academy’s Man Up co-curricular group that focused on African American issues. He also found a mentor, forged a relationship, and took a trip to Atlanta, Georgia to a leadership seminar. For all the participants who talked about their pre-college experiences, they explained that once they became engaged or connected to a high school program or teacher they then developed a sense of belongingness to school and found motivation in their educational pursuits. Like Landon, Kelvin talked about his negative experiences in high school and pointed to a teacher in his freshman year that constantly singled him out in class for wrong answers and for
talking to his friends. He, like Landon, admitted the experience was negative and led to a poor grade in the class, but where Landon acted out with bad behavior and got expelled, Kelvin quickly learned that his poor performance had to be corrected. Kelvin relied on the self-discipline we was learning in high school basketball to motivate himself to overcome obstacles in his academics. Throughout our interviews, Kelvin relied a great deal on “self talk”, like when he told himself to “suck it up” and make the best of the situation in the math class where the teacher was singling him out for talking and poor performance, Harper (2009) and later Bush and Bush (2010) studied the role of athletic participation and the self-determination resulting from practice and competition developed in African American male college students.

Both of these participants reflected on the obstacles encountered in high school and how these perceptions however changed after they connected with a teacher, counselor or coach resulting in a new sense of belongingness or commitment to their educational pursuits. Neither Deil-Amen (2006) or Tinto (1987) offer insight on the pre-college experiences when they researched college students and designed models on the integration process of a college student, but the findings of this study clearly supports their ideas that students (college or pre-college) acquire a sense of belonging or gain confidence in their academic abilities when they actively engage with institutional structures or agents (co-curricular programs, coaches, counselors, etc.). Even though, the importance of the high school experience is not considered in the theories and models of integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987), they appear to be what African American male students draw from in order to construct early ideas about college and establish connections to institutional structures and agents. These findings help support the idea that underprepared African American male students “warm up” to their academics not only by receiving academic support, but by aligning themselves with mentors and other institutional agents who listen to
their concerns about school and help provide a foundation for success. Kelvin and Landon are examples of how high schools seized the opportunity to help re-direct students in a positive way through alternative school options, co-curricular leadership programs and student/faculty mentoring and helped to motivate students both to finish high school and continue their schooling at the community college level. While these types of institutional supports mentioned in the findings are occurring at the secondary level, it actually presents an opportunity for institutions like community colleges to collaborate with local high schools to replicate or partner to create programming where underprepared African American male students can identify mentors or register for co-/extra-curricular group membership at the community college while still in high school so no gaps occur in their connection with institutional agents or programs. This integrated network approach to the African American male transition to the community college could be seamless and should increase the students’ college readiness, resulting in improved persistence in the first year of college.

**Theme 2: Institutional challenges: Experiences of navigating college enrollment.**

Not all of the participants in this study had a high school experience like Landon and Kelvin. For them, there was no teacher or co-curricular program that acted as a catalyst for their decision to enter higher education. For many of the participants of the study, the decision to enroll in college was a decision made after they had graduated from high school. Many opted for higher education only after they failed to find a job after high school, experienced a life circumstance like the death of a family member or had a run in with the law. As a result, they entered Parkland College with little or now planning (academically and financially) for higher education, only harbored negative perceptions of education after failed high school tenures and considered undeveloped levels of confidence in their academic abilities and most of all lacked any self-identity as a
college student. Harper (2005) talks about lack of self-identity in African American male college students and attributes this underdeveloped sense of self as a member of a college community to many of the reasons listed above. His research however focused only on African American males students enrolled at four-year, residential college and universities. Harper (2006a) like Tinto (1975, 1987) attributes confidence-building factors and the development of a college identity in African American males to social activities that occur outside of the classroom such as joining a social club, establishing a network of friends through residential housing assignments, or simply having the time after class to gather with other students and faculty members with similar interests and backgrounds and developing a peer and even a faculty network where the eventual integration into college life occurs.

Pattern 1: Interaction with faculty and peers in a first-year learning community

affirms college enrollment. For most of the participants, college enrollment was affirmed after receiving support from faculty and peers of the Together We Achieve learning community. Participants’ stories revealed the willingness of TWA faculty to provide academic support and personal mentoring to assist TWA students in their academic endeavors. Faculty members designed small group discussions in the TWA classes, arranged off campus social events and made were available for formal and casual mentoring sessions.

I again stood outside of Room 244 in the Student Union Complex at Parkland College. All the students exited the class at around 11:45 AM and instructor, Mrs. Nickels left with them. Remaining in the classroom was a short black male student named Oscar, but all of his friends called him “Yo-Yo.” After a few brief introductions and a bit of awkward silence between student and researcher, I asked Yo-Yo a pointed question about persistence. I asked him why he
stays in school and if he had thought about quitting. He stood silent and then talked at length about courage and will power and then drew quiet again.

After a prolonged inhale, Yo-Yo insightfully began to talk about what and who motivates him to stay in school. “I rely on this community. I knew Keon before I came to Parkland, but know I know everybody. It’s about the group … teachers included. We challenge each other.”

Yo-Yo stopped mid thought and paused. “Without TWA, I am not sure I’d be back this semester … be in school period, but because of the group. I am here. Yeah, I didn’t pass math last semester, but I did pass English.” Yo-Yo went on to talk about his negative experiences with school and the bad times his family has endured in their West Chicago neighborhood and now the success he is having at Parkland College:

I want to do well for them (referring to his mother and sister’s back home), when I came down here I don’t think I thought that. I came to Parkland to have fun, not to learn anything. Well that has changed. My biggest supporter, besides my friends in TWA, is Mrs. Nickels. Every time she thinks I am down, she comes and cheers me up. I was homesick for the first month when I got here and really didn’t care about learning math or English. I mean I had it all in high school and really was mad that I had to take it all over again. But Nickels showed me that it was important to learn these subjects and that I was also an important part of the TWA learning community.

I asked Yo-Yo what he thought was different about the class structure or what was different about Gail Nickels from what he had experienced previously in high school.

In high school I really never had teachers willing to help me out. Teachers here look at you like you are their own kid. I needed that when I was missing my Mom. But it’s more than just being a Mom at school; Miss Nickels really wanted to help me learn and she cared about me doing well in my subjects … no one, I mean no one has really talked to me about my education and what I want to do when I am finished.” Yo-Yo found himself caught up in his response and took a minute to collect his thoughts. “Because of Miss Nickels helping me build my confidence, I now
speak out in my other classes and last week Mr. Chandler said in his ‘poly sci’ class after I responded to one of his questions, that I’d be a great lawyer one day … man!, no one has ever, ever said something like that to me.” I asked Yo-Yo how that made him feel. “That made me feel real good inside … real good. No man has ever told me that I was going to make it like that. I don’t have a dad, and when he said that I thought ‘wow’ this is what it feels like to have a father … someone who really wants me do well … for me.”

Yo-Yo ended our conversation by explaining to me that he knew when he came to Parkland he probably would not be prepared for classes like other college students, but by taking classes with students like him in a learning community where the “teachers were willing to help us out and cared about our success” made it easier for him to “re-learn” subjects like English and math and the support system for the TWA students where they received tutoring and extra one-on-one time with advisors really helped him be successful in the fall semester. “I think developmental education is more that just studying sentences in English or solving problems in math or becoming a better reader. It is about helping students break their bad habits that they bring to college … like not knowing how to take notes or study for a test or just keeping up with the assignments. The Community (referring to TWA) is helping me get rid of these bad habits that always made me a poor student.”

Almost three quarters of the participants shared experiences of interactions with faculty both inside and outside of the classroom. These encounters between student and faculty member were connected to the TWA learning community and the positive affect that these interactions had on participants is a primary objective of the first-year learning community program. Barb Hightower, director of the TWA learning community explained the learning cohort design and intentional purpose of student and faculty interaction. She stated, “With TWA, the learning
environment is built around a shared sense of support and accountability.” When asked to explain further, the veteran faculty and administrator member explained that cohort learning is designed to provide value-added support to students so “they get a sense very early in their college experience that they have faculty who want to help them” and Hightower further commented on how classes in reading and math are designed to foster student and faculty interaction both inside the classroom and outside as well through mentoring, TWA planned events where faculty chaperone students and faculty who serve as advisor of extracurricular clubs like Brother-to-Brother.

All of the participants indicated that their interactions and or relationships with other TWA members were important and had a direct influence on their perception of college in the first year. These interactions/relationships ranged from hanging out in the student lounge to forming study groups and finding future roommates.

Seated in a corner table in Parkland College’s Student Union, I arrived at the interview about five minutes early. It was nearly the beginning of the fall semester and the new student union had just been unveiled to the students so long lines wrapped through the wide hall ways as students continued to buy books and supplies from the new bookstore. A wall of students surrounded my table, each student flanked with a backpack, a sack or tray of food and most with a cell phone perched in their outstretched hand. As the huddle of students broke to nearby regions of the Student Union, Marcus stood in front of my table. Wearing a white Orlando Magic hoodie, baggie black denim jeans - which exposed a plaid pair of boxer briefs - and stiff billed Philadelphia Phillies’ baseball cap lay comfortably on his well-groomed and cropped black hair, the 18-year-old freshmen leaned toward me and asked softly “Are you Randy?” We shook hands, I thanked him for coming to the meeting and we engaged in a lengthy conversation – in spite of
the constant roar of students. First, we talked about the new student union and how much of change it had made on the student interaction at the college.

We then talked about Parkland, the students and the TWA learning community. “It’s a lot different than my neighborhood.” He added that it was a big adjustment for him when he arrived on campus. He mentioned how clean the buildings were and how everything “was taken care of nice.” I asked Marcus about his classes and TWA. He said he liked hanging out with his friends in the Learning Community, but was not sure why he had to be in class with all young black male students.

“I mean it’s cool and all, never had nothing like this in high school. Nobody cared, teachers or students. Kind of sad, you know.” I asked Marcus to explain further why he felt TWA was a “cool” place, what about the learning community made him feel that way? He rocked back in his chair and said:

You know TWA is place where we can help each other out, like last semester when we were all hurting in MK’s math class so we started getting together in D120 (Academic Success Center) and then after that we just studied together all the time. I think we all passed Math 070. Brothers helping brothers.

Where Marcus’s story talked about interaction through studying together, Larry expounded on Marcus’s experience and shared what he felt was a sense of community and belongingness he received from the peer relationships forged in TWA learning cohort.

I feel culturally connected to the TWA program because it has been made for us. It is designed to relate to our own experiences and give value to them. I like that a lot about TWA. Yeah, we are young black dudes and we are not here to make trouble like everybody thinks we are. We are here to learn just like the rest of students. Our experiences are valuable and help us to learn this stuff (referring the college courses). It is a beautiful thing. If you want my honest opinion … I wish more brothers in the program and outside of it could see what kind of opportunity this is for them. Parkland wants to better our situation. You got to have courage if you want to stay in school. It is hard work …hardest thing I’ve ever done, but man it is worth it. I’m not going back to the streets. No way. TWA has shown me that.
Larry was once a troubled member of the TWA Community in the fall semester who in a way had to be rescued from the streets of Chicago by his fellow TWA classmates now a semester later is looked upon my a majority of the group as their leader. He uses his “voice” to eloquently describe the virtues of college learning, and how a shared commitment from both the student and the faculty can result in student growth—both academically and emotionally.

A common view that surfaced through the observations and interviews with TWA students was that a shared commitment or engagement helped keep TWA intact and was the central ingredient in how successful the learning community format was for improving academic levels of these black male students. The primary goal of TWA when it was designed in the words of Dr. Hightower was “to serve as a bridge to college coursework” but in constructing this metaphorical bridge to “success” the TWA steering committee and faculty and even the senior administration began to see an outcome that was somewhat unexpected. This being a group of academically at-risk black students who for the first times in their lives had become engaged in their school work, were passionate about their studies and felt connected to a positive environment that had a powerful influence not only on the members of the TWA learning community but also on other black male students at the college. Hightower concluded “the level of engagement these students achieved with other TWA students and especially the TWA faculty was an early goal, but to see it in action and how these non-cognitive factors truly can change a student’s total perception of college is very rewarding.”

MK commented on this new level of motivation and purpose for the TWA students. He talked about how African American male students can use the TWA learning community to form an engagement to their education or a sense of belongingness. From his perspective this engagement comes when his TWA students give their time to mentor other students or organize
a student event or to participate in a class discussion or stay after class and help another student with their homework. “TWA eliminates the margins; students in the learning community work together, help each and learn quickly to reach out to their teachers. I see the light bulb go off in so many of my students when they get engaged. It is pretty powerful.”

**Pattern 2: Remediation “warms up” African American male students.** African American male community college students encounter a myriad of issues in their first year of college that impede and/or influence their ability to persist to the second year of college study. As a criterion for acceptance into the TWA learning community, first-year African American male students at Parkland College have to demonstrate academic under preparedness by placing into two or more developmental or remedial through the Parkland College placement exams. Even though the TWA learning community identifies deficits in student participants as an admission prerequisite, Strayhorn (2012) characterizes remediation as a “policy or common practice in higher education that marginalizes certain student populations” or reinforces the focus on their “inabilities rather than abilities” (Harper & Griffin, 2011), TWA participants in this study described stories of overcoming the academic barriers that came along with their unpreparedness coming into the first year of college and actually becoming more motivated to succeed as a result of matriculating through the developmental education sequences embedded in their TWA learning cohort. For Kelvin his initial dismay of being mandated to retake mathematics and English courses that he thought he had mastered in high school turned to a newfound internal drive or motivation to succeed in college courses after he completed both levels of remediation through the TWA learning community. Sharing the moment when he realized he was unprepared for college study, he commented:
When I first got here and started my Math 070 (developmental math) class, I was pretty disappointed. I had had all this stuff before in high school. It took me about a month before I really started trying. Some other guys in TWA thought the same way, but we started studying together. It was cool. I passed the class no problem.

The remediation that was built into the TWA learning community curriculum consisted of Reading, Writing and Math. All of these subjects were taught as separate courses and students enrolled in the three pre-college courses in the two semesters of TWA. While talking to three members of TWA Cohort 3 during the focus group session a particular incident in the developmental writing course triggered a unique response in the three students. In the interview, I was asking the students to think about a specific instance when a faculty member influenced them during their tenure in the TWA. The three young men all responded with the same example. Keon started the conversation by stating that he felt that the TWA faculty truly cared about the students in the community and always went “the extra mile if any of us had a problem.” Keon then stopped after applauding the TWA faculty and grew quiet and then began the story about one TWA faculty who had not been as helpful to the African American male students in cohort 3. “There is one teacher who was not being real with us … I think her was lying to us.” I pressed Keon further to explain these allegations and he continued by explaining that a development writing instructor had assigned a writing assignment to the students in the first few week of the pre-college writing course for the TWA cohort. “Well he was cool with us in class and while we were writing essay. He flat out told us we were doing good with the paper, so you know, we all felt real good about ourselves, ain’t that right LaTroy, Kelvin?” LaTroy continued to recount the classroom experience by explaining that the instructor sent emails to all the other TWA instructors telling them how poor we were doing in his class and that we needed extra help in the Writing Lab. “Guy was not being real and that made us made. None of us
thought about quitting instead we went to MK (Michael King) and told him what was going on. We fixed it ourselves. Wasn’t right and we all knew and MK confronted Mr. Harper and you know it worked. Mr. Harper is real cool with us now.” Kelvin finished the story by telling the group that the three TWA members all finished the Developmental Writing sequence with A’s and B’s and that the instructor had greatly improved. “You know it was the first time for me and maybe LaTroy and Keon too that we stood up for our own learning … I mean were told the teacher our opinion and he listened. It was a turning point for me, I dunno about the others, but gave me the confidence I needed.”

This notion of TWA students “warming up” after achieving success in pre-college courses is also witnessed in the following observation I made in the Parkland College academic support center about two months into the 2014 fall semester.

Marcus lumbered into the brightly decorated Center for Academic Success at Parkland College. He was about five minutes late. Before he entered the windowless computer lab, he stopped by the receptionist’s desk chatted quickly about her new hairstyle and scooped up a handful of left over Halloween candy. As he packed the chocolate bars and licorice sticks in the pockets of his oversized “hoodie,” Quinn spotted his friend and fellow classmate and leapt to his feet. Through the hugs and high-fives, Gail Nickels never stopped talking. She smiled at Marcus as he found his usual seat at the front of the room and handed him a pack of markers.

Diagrams of sentences littered the dry erase board. Without direction, Marcus followed Quinn to the board and quickly dissected a sentence from his workbook. As he finished the neatly detailed forked diagram, he whispered to Marcus, both with their backs to the class, “I think you forgot the predicate adjective … here put it on this line …” As the two young men returned to their seats, Gail (the English Instructor) told the group of 17 young Black men that
Mr. Albert. (the developmental math instructor) would coming to the classroom in about 20 minutes so if they wanted to finish any homework they “had better get to it.” A burst of chatter erupted, reached a crescendo and then silence blanketed the room. The students turned to their textbooks and computer screens and began to prepare for Mr. Albert.

For Parkland College this new learning initiative has been successful with over 70% of TWA students returning to a spring semester – largely result of mentoring, one-on-one counseling sessions in Parkland College’s Center for Academic Success, and many in class planned activities by TWA faculty that emphasized the need for learning community student members to learn how to manage their time, their personal lives, organize their daily homework and study for exams. Many of these skills that TWA faculty brought the TWA classrooms were learned as result of extensive training at the Parkland College Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The structure and content of the curriculum for the TWA learning community allowed for not only team teaching of subjects like English and Political Science, but also intensified instruction in requisite subject areas like mathematics.

In an interview with Barb Hightower, the question of remediation and subsequent success for the TWA students in college-level courses arose. Previous evidence showed from the student’s perspective, that students in TWA were highly motivated to succeed in major-specific and general education courses after they matriculated through the developmental education sequence. The motivation and drive was high enough that many of the participants began to create educational plans that included transfer to a four-year university with the goal of receiving a baccalaureate degree. Hightower offered a differing perspective of this matriculation into college-level courses from TWA remediation sequences. She commented:
There is no doubt that the learning environment in TWA helps students be successful in developmental education. Students are pushed, supported and most of all held accountable. However, we are finding that TWA students are looking for that continuous academic support when they leave the learning community and many times they do not find it or fail to apply the study skills and time management skills given to them in the learning community.

When asked to unpack these conclusions about TWA students once they were removed from the academic support afforded by the learning cohort and as they entered their second year of study, Hightower explained that the level of proficiency that TWA students were exhibiting though appropriate for passing though the remediation sequences at the college still lacked a level of proficiency that reflected a deeper level of independent, intellectual inquiry. “It is a negative consequence of the learning community model. We embed these students in an academic support system that almost ensures passage of the development cognate courses, but they are having trouble performing college-level work without constant support.”

**Pattern 3: Career Aspirations and point of reference issues.** The participants in this study talked extensively about their career aspirations. Not only did they share stories and experiences of how they decided to enroll in the community college; but also rather, they spoke candidly about the majors and programs of study they had selected. The participants shared their insights and perceptions of the career fields they had chosen and the type of work they would perform upon graduating from Parkland and a transfer four-year institution. A review of the information shared by the participants resulted in the development of a theme focused on career aspirations and career awareness.

When asked about career plans after college, in both the individual interviews and the focus group, nearly all the participants had identified a career outcome that would result from their college study. In Kelvin’s case, the career goal he had selected was driven not only by his academics but also by his athletic performance.
My goal is to play in the NBA. I have played basketball most of my life. So I am looking for an athletic scholarship. If I do well, I’m going try for the NBA. If I don’t make it, then I can fall back on my broadcast communications degree and then go to work at TNT, you know like Charles Barkley.

With this response, I asked Kelvin what he thought it took to reach this career goal – both academically and athletically. He shuffled his feet and they dangled from the training room table and explained that he knew it would be a challenge to get an athletic scholarship but was determined to fulfill his goal. “Last year I didn’t do so well, I flunked a communication class, but this year I’m doing better. I’m even working at the radio station as disc jockey.”

For LaTroy, the goal of becoming a police detective after graduating from Parkland in the criminal justice associates program is equally lofty and somewhat unrealistic as Kelvin’s aspirations of being a professional basketball player or a sportscaster. In the case of LaTroy, he is in his third year at Parkland and has underperformed in his general education courses so much so that he has repeated several of his required courses in the criminal justice program. His GPA hovers at the 2.0 mark. In the focus group session, LaTroy provides an in-depth description of the work that a police detective will perform, yet when asked if he will need to obtain a bachelor’s degree after completing the associate’s degree, he admits that he doesn’t know and doesn’t know who to ask in order to get that information. Asked further if he had considered enrolling in the applied criminal justice program where the general education courses are far fewer in number and the classes focus more on the technical aspects of police work, LaTroy honestly admits that he did not even know that Parkland had “career” or “applied” programs of study and that “doesn’t everybody go to a university after Parkland.”

Herman Day shared a similar story that illustrated TWA students’ lack of knowledge of the programs of study and curriculum needed to pursue career goal. Day recollected on a
particular student who was enrolled in the TWA learning community in the fall 2014 semester and as part of the first few weeks of the learning community Day organizes discussion groups focused on college success topics and in one particular college success session, he asked the students “what is your major?” Day remembers one student stood out in the discussion so much so that he approached the student after class to ask him a few questions about his response the major question?

He told me his major was Vet Tech, so I asked him about the classes he was enrolled in or planning to enroll in the spring semester. He had no clue what I was talking about. I asked if he had talked to any other of the faculty in Vet Tech or a counselor and he responded that he hadn’t. All he knew about Vet Tech was that he would be able to work with animals, but after that he had no knowledge of what technician did or what types of skills he would need.

Day admitted that he told the student that Vet Tech was a selective admissions program at Parkland and if he was serious about pursuing the applied degree program, he should consider making an appointment with an advisor to develop an educational plan and a schedule of courses to take in order to gain admission. Students like the one from this story, according to Day are fairly common in the TWA learning community. He added that he felt more confident in advising students about their career aspirations after the TWA steering committee integrated the Success in College course into the curriculum about two years ago.

It might be that they are overwhelmed in their first year or honestly don’t have any knowledge about what degrees lead to what jobs, but I do think many of the TWA students need the Success class as soon as they come to campus in order to get a better grasp on realistic career options. We have these students in a controlled cohort environment; they should know what classes lead to what degree and what skills will transfer to which types of jobs. It is a must.

In my conversations with Michael King (MK) about the career aspirations and sometimes unrealistic quality of these aspirations, the focus shifted away from a lack of career readiness that Herman Day referred and disconnect in the learning community curriculum in terms of career
planning; instead, MK explained that many of the students in TWA were raised in an environment where professions and career aspirations in general were distorted because many of their parents, relatives and even role models did not go to college and do not know what a studying one college major versus another will result in a particular job which requires a specific set of skills. This lack of knowledge about careers is born out of an environment that has no post-secondary education point of reference, and according to MK, results in African American male students selecting majors or programs of study not thinking about a future career, but selecting these degree pathways because they are “sound like what a typical college student majors in.”

I pressed MK to explain further why TWA students have distorted perception of the outcomes of college majors and programs of study:

In a way it is generational thing. I think the TWA students are no different than any other first year college student. They have unrealistic expectations on a career. I call it a microwave mentality. They want something quick and they want it their way. Regardless … if they know how to get it. So they mold their dreams and aspirations toward that goal.

I then followed up by asking MK if he ever corrected a student in the learning community if they shared with him these “dreams” of a career after they leave Parkland. His response highlighted the need to encourage rather than discourage or warm up rather than cool out the aspirations of these TWA students.

Best thing I can do with the TWA cohorts is accept and encourage their career aspirations. Everyone has dreams, why not these kids and why not help them to develop different strategies to achieve these dreams. I tell them to keep their career goals, but make a couple different ones. Some can be fantasy, but some have to be grounded in reality. I came from exactly the same streets these young men came from. Dreams are what get you off the street … the bad neighborhood. For them playing in the NBA or being a police detective is the only thing that kept them focused. They don’t yet know how to actually get there, but there here in school and for them the dream is alive.

For MK, dreaming big is an important part of TWA, even if the dreams are somewhat unrealistic. He admits that increased awareness of careers early on in the TWA curriculum will
help refocus many of the young men and give them an honest and straightforward inquiry and discovery of what their major and educational will yield in terms of jobs, future college study and potential earning power. However, MK stressed that this process may take some time to develop and students in TWA would still “dream big” because their aspirations are what has helped shape their self-concept and gave them the motivation to attend college, thus moving them from the margins in high school where any college or career goals was questioned, to classrooms and peer groups where these aspirations although lofty are now attainable with hard work and dedication.

**Analysis.** Across all of the student participants and even the faculty participants interviewed in this study, the value of institutional support in the social and academic integration of African American males into the community college was the quality of the learning community environment most referred to in the interviews.

Broadly, *Together We Achieve* faculty appeared to represent the institutional agents that student participants forged relationships with early in their first year learning community experience. These early relationships paid the biggest dividends in terms of confidence building and self-identify formation as a college student for students like Oscar (“Yo-Yo”). In my interviews with Yo-Yo, he talked at length about his lack of confidence as a college student and how in high school teachers all but ignored him because of his academic shortcomings. He commented that “no high school teacher ever talked to me about my school work or what I wanted to do after high school.” Yo-Yo, like all of the TWA student participants in this study, came to Parkland academically underprepared and as a result enrolled in remedial or developmental courses.
The TWA learning community has a curricular structure where students enroll into at least two developmental education courses (English, math or reading), at least one general education course (e.g. political science), and one college-planning course (Success in College). For Yo-Yo, the connection made to a TWA faculty member came in the developmental English class. He formed a relationship mostly inside of the classroom with Mrs. Nickels and she took time to work with him on his writing deficiencies but also counseled him on how to acclimate to college life through time management, study skills and extra-curricular membership. He called Nickles his “school mom” and confided in her about his troubles and concerns about being a college student. For other student participants of the study the connection with faculty or staff created a sense of belongingness to college. For Larry it was the weekly meeting with his TWA advisor in the Center for Academic Success that helped him to “fit into Parkland” and not feel like everyone was “judging me because I was Black and from Chicago and in Developmental Education.” Like Larry, Marcus and LaTroy talked about how Mr. King used the developmental math class in TWA as a “safe place” where they could improve in math, but also find their voice and place on campus where they could talk about “what it means to be a successful African American college man.” These stories echo the research of Deil-Amen (2006, 2011) and her work on the social and academic integration of community college students. Unlike students who can connect with faculty (institutional agents) both inside and outside the classroom at residential colleges and universities through extended office hours and faculty-sponsored clubs, community college students typically do not have the opportunity to forge relationships with faculty and create student/mentor networks outside of the classroom because two-year colleges typically use more part-time faculty who teach and leave campus or full-time faculty who teach multiple courses and can only meet for brief periods of time in scheduled, yet limited, office hours.
Where Flowers (2006) studied the effects of creating welcoming college classroom environments on the persistence levels of African American male students, Deil-Amenn (2006) narrowed her research on specific institutional factors that occur inside the classroom (i.e., small group discussion and in-class student/student mentoring) that spurs integration or “warming up” for community college students; however, her research does not address African American male students and how institutional agents (faculty) inside the classroom influence persistence.

Institutions, like Parkland College, as evidenced in this study have designed an alternative classroom environment or learning community where all the students are African American men and faculty are trained to not only instruct, but to intrusively counsel and interact with these men in such a way that they feel valued and as the director the TWA learning community stated “get a sense early on in their college experience that they have faculty who want to help them” and erect a learning structure where there is a shared sense of learning, discovery of self and accountability for success.

An institutional structure that appeared to trigger motivation and increase persistence in the African American men in this study was in fact the program that in many respects diverts college student aspirations and results in attrition. The institutional structure was the required remedial curriculum that students enroll in at Parkland College when they score below college level on assessments of basic knowledge in requisite subject area such reading math and English. This pattern of evidence that emerged to support the theme was particularly interesting in that unlike the approximately 50% of students at Parkland who fail remedial courses in their first semester, the TWA students in this study used the courses as they were taught in the learning community almost as a catalyst for improving their foundational skills and using these skills to excel in college-level courses. Yo-Yo talked about his interactions with Mrs. Nickels and how
her support in the remedial class English made him a better student. His comments when asked about what he thought of being in remedial courses at Parkland, resulted in contrary notions. He felt empowered and expressed that his early success in the remedial writing class made him feel like a college student, rather than “stupid” or “behind others”. Yo-Yo does attribute his attitude change to the teacher (Mrs. Nickels) and her supportive classroom, but the data collected from the interviews with Yo-Yo reveal significant evidence that the African American males in the TWA learning community view remediation not as a barrier to the college success but as a “proving ground” where study and academic support in pre-college courses in reading, writing, and math actually warms them up to college and provides a foundation for success that they have never had in their educational experiences.

For other TWA participants in the study being in remedial education meant shared responsibility and accountability for their learning. Students like Marcus, who initially doubted the credibility of the all African American male learning community, talked about how studying together on a difficult subject like math brought the TWA group together and created a sense of accountability not only for their own progress in the course but the opportunity to help other TWA members who were struggling with the subject. He referred to this accountability as “brothers helping brothers” succeed not only in these challenging remedial courses, but also creating a community where success was contagious and together as a group of African American male students they were going make sure everyone learned concepts, completed homework, attended class and tried to earn the respect of teachers and peers through their positive actions inside and outside of the classroom.

Green (2006) and later Harper and Davis (2011) wrote about the characterization or stereotype of African American males as hopeless, academic failures and pointed to institutional
structures, policies and practices in higher education that erect barriers for African American male students. They found that developmental education is one of these structural barriers and the failure rates of African American male students attempting to traverse through the maze of basic pre-college coursework perpetuated this stereotype. Nearly all of the TWA participants interviewed in this study offered a contrary opinion. They point to either a faculty member or a group of peers that direct them toward success in these courses. The deficit research on African American male college students, says remediation in college can “cool” or divert student motivation or aspiration to continue on with their college studies. This notion of cooling out simply doesn’t apply to the TWA students interviewed; in fact, Deil-Amen (2006) offers the best suggestion as to why they use remediation as catalyst for persistence. She contends that students, very much like the students in this study, who come to college with a weak sense of commitment to their studies or lack confidence in their academic abilities, look to faculty and peers for encouragement and support. If they cannot find it, they typically drop out or are “cooled-out” of higher education. But if they do find these important connections, they have a greater chance of “warming up” and finding the needed confidence and acceptance to persist.

Nowhere in the literature on African American male college students, and in particular the research of this student population in the community college, is there evidence that career choice or career aspiration is linked to academic motivation, social integration or increased persistence. Early researchers such as Brint and Karabel (1989) and Doughtery (1994) champion the notion that the very framework of the community college curriculum and pathways of study, especially in the career and technical education (CTE) fields, actually diverts or “cools out” the less academically prepared students, like the traditionally underprepared African American male student population. The findings of this study do not necessary reveal that the student
participants have selected occupational career tracks over baccalaureate/transfer, rather the findings indicate the students have self-identified with a career before they enter the community college, and it is this self-realization that they can aspire to be a police detective, computer software business owner, professional athlete, or broadcast journalist is what in fact motivates them to excel in their academics and strive to persist and complete a degree. This self-identity with a career and how it motivates the student participants in this study is most evident in talking with Landon, Kelvin and LaTroy.

For Landon, the self-realization of a pursuing a career came before he entered Parkland College. He was a student-mentor in the alternative high school *Man-Up* program and after several interactions with students and his own mentor, Mr. Rose on a trip to Atlanta, Georgia for a leadership conference, did he begin to actualize himself as a computer software technician, with the hopes of becoming a small business owner.

For some of the student participants, their career aspiration was rooted deeply in their identity as a college student. In Kelvin’s case, the career goal he had selected was driven not only by his academic goals, but also by his identity as a basketball player. He commented in several of our interviews that he had always seen himself as a basketball player and as his skills improved in high school and his reputation in his neighborhood grew as he succeeded on the basketball court, he began to actualize a career as a professional basketball player. His matter-of-fact response when what type of career he wanted reveals Kelvin self-identification with a career in the NBA. “My goal is to play in the NBA. I have played basketball most of my life. So I am looking for an athletic scholarship. If I do well, I’m going try for the NBA.”

For LaTroy, the goal of becoming a police detective after graduating from Parkland in the criminal justice associates program is equally lofty and somewhat unrealistic as Kelvin’s
aspirations of being a professional basketball player or a sportscaster. In the case of LaTroy, he is in his third year at Parkland and has underperformed in his general education courses so much so that he has repeated several of his required courses in the criminal justice program. His GPA hovers at the 2.0 mark. In the focus group session, LaTroy provided an in-depth description of the work that a police detective will perform, yet when asked if he will need to obtain a bachelor’s degree after completing the associate’s degree, he admits that he didn’t know and doesn’t know who to ask in order to get that information. Asked further if he had considered enrolling in the applied criminal justice program where the general education courses are far fewer in number and the classes focus more on the technical aspects of police work, LaTroy honestly admits that he didn’t even know that Parkland had “career” or “applied” programs of study and thought that “doesn’t everybody go to a university after Parkland.”

The faculty and staff of the Together We Achieve learning community have mixed explanations about the career aspirations of the learning community students. Herman Day, a TWA Reading instructor, contends that the students start college without a clearly developed educational plan and as a result they have limited knowledge about career pathways, curriculum choices and basically lack “baseline knowledge as what it takes to be career ready.” Barb Hightower, TWA director, agrees in part with Day and notes that the TWA learning community needs to incorporate a career assessment and planning section into their orientation class in the first semester, in order to “shed some reality onto some of these career goals” that many of the TWA students bring with them when they enter Parkland College.

The comments by Day and Hightower are consistent with what the literature purports on student self-assessment of skill. The need for a career assessment for these African American male community college students mirrors what Tinto (1993) described in his Student Retention
model, in that, through self-assessment of skills student begin to realize their weaknesses (from a self-assessment perspective) and then can decide for themselves if their career goals (intentions) and commitments (selection of a career pathway or college major) can realistically continue, knowing now what courses need to be taken and degrees earned in order to enter into that profession. Very little research exists in the higher education on African American males, and nothing is present from a community college perspective, on career aspirations of this student population. Sedlacek (1996) identified realistic self-appraisal as a non-cognitive variable than influences African American college men to develop the ability to successfully navigate through the higher education system, coping with factors such as racism, on the pathway to successful completion of degrees and programs of study, but this research did not discuss self-appraisal of career choices.

The findings resulting from interviews I conducted with Michael King, a TWA math instructor and faculty sponsor of the Brother-to-Brother group at Parkland, offered a different perspective on how the African American young men in the learning community select the careers that they do and why their dreams, though on the surface appear unrealistic, are vitally important to the eventual success of these students.

In my conversations with Michael King (MK) about the career aspirations and sometimes unrealistic quality of these aspirations, the focus shifted away from a lack of career readiness that Herman Day referred or a disconnect in the learning community curriculum in terms of career planning; instead, MK explained that many of the students in TWA were raised in an environment where professions and career aspirations in general were distorted because many of their parents, relatives and even role models did not go to college and therefore these students lacked a “reference point” as to what a college major represented and especially what that major
meant in securing a particular job with a required set of skills. From MK perspective, the TWA students’ lack of knowledge about careers is born out of an environment that has no post-secondary education point of reference, and according to MK, results in African American male students selecting majors or programs of study, not thinking about a future career, but selecting these degree pathways because they “sound like what typical college students major in.”

The notion of lofty goals or dreams is somewhat explained in the research of Harper (2004) when he studied the “cool pose” African American men take when they enter college. Harper (2004) contends that African American male masculinity plays a larger role in how they identify themselves as college students and even if they lack knowledge about the higher education system as whole or even a college major, they are going to veil themselves in a “mask” of knowledge and present themselves to others as having knowledge of subjects, careers and college readiness, when in fact they lack this knowledge and are in reality lacking requisite knowledge or skill on how to be successful students.

But contrary to this research, MK points out an important factor that the cool pose or black masculinity literature fails to recognize and that is that lofty or seemingly unrealistic dreams are what plant the seed of motivation or from the research of Strayhorn (2012) instills “grit” in these African American male student to persist and when they pass a remedial math course or connect with a college faculty member on both a personal and academic level for the first time in their educational life, their dreams becomes more of a reality in their own minds. This notion of establishing “academic credibility” or as Strayhorn (2012) refers to it as grit or self-motivation. The findings of this study agree that the African American student participants found a form of self-determination after they found success in remedial course work. Also by considering the work of Deil-Amen (2006) and Tinto (1987) on social and academic integration
inside the classroom, the findings of this study also indicate that at the apex of this self-realization as a competent college student, is the students’ warming up to their own aspirations and the decision to persist in college, no matter the barrier or challenge. Michael King’s comments punctuate this analysis of career aspiration amongst the TWA students when he talked about the dreams of these African American men and how they were born on the streets, the basketball courts and stoops of the neighborhoods were they came from.

For MK, dreaming big is an important part of TWA, even if the dreams are somewhat unrealistic. He admits that increased awareness of careers early on in the TWA curriculum will help refocus many of the young men and give them an honest and straightforward inquiry and discovery of what their major and educational will yield in terms of jobs, future college study and potential earning power. However, MK stressed that this process may take some time to develop and students in TWA would still “dream big” because their aspirations are what has helped shape their self-concept and gave them the motivation to attend college, thus moving them from the margins in high school where any college or career goals was questioned, to classrooms and peer groups where these aspirations although lofty are now attainable with hard work and dedication

Theme 3: Personal and social supports and barriers to college enrollment. All of the student participants of this study were members of the Parkland College Brother-to-Brother (B2B) Club. Originated at Parkland about 10 years ago, the club meets weekly to discuss academic, social and personal topics related to the African American male community college student. The club has approximately 30 members and Michael King serves as the club’s advisor. All the participants interviewed both in the one-on-one interviews and the focus session largely expressed positive feelings toward the club. With this attitude, their choice to join B2B was
multifaceted and can be understood as what their perception of what membership would provide
them and what they could bring to the club. Participants detail through their individual and
shared experiences of B2B membership how this active dichotomy of club participation
influenced their persistence in college.

**Pattern 1: Peer group association triggers persistence.** The Brother–to-Brother (B2B)
African-American student group has been listed in the Parkland College directory of board of
trustees-approved student clubs since 1998, but had never conducted an official meeting or had a
faculty-mentor in its 14-year history. In February of the 2012 semester, 13 of the 17 members of
the TWA met for the first time and by April had elected a slate of officers and began posting its
meeting minutes and proposed Fall 2012 activities on “student board” in the Union. In a brief
interview with Michael King, the club advisor and Math instructor for TWA, I asked him what
was behind the rebirth of B2B?” Seated on stool in the student café, MK grinned and said, “It
took a while, but the TWA men found their voice … their place here at Parkland and B2B is a
reflection of that. Five years ago … heck 2 years ago, the black men I was working with were so
far removed from college life here. They could be told that ‘they were wanted … valued’ but not
until TWA did we [Parkland] show them.” MK went on to articulate that TWA is beginning to
influence non-TWA black men on campus and not in sense that TWA is like an affiliation or a
gang, but in a much more positive way. MK said he uses B2B to help educate non-TWA black
men about how to get involved at Parkland, how to get engaged with classroom activities and
outside activities like the theater and the radio station. “Of my 28 guys in B2B, 10 of them want
to work in radio or television and we use the B2B meeting to talk about our career paths and
what kind of classes and internships we need to get a job … for this group of students, these
kinds of discussions were once unheard of.”
I met with Kelvin for the final time after his Brother-to-Brother meeting. The leaves were starting to fall all over the sidewalks on the Parkland College campus as we walked from the meeting room to the gymnasium. He had another treatment with the trainer on his sore ankle and we talked a bit as we walked and then stopped and sat on a couch outside the locker room to continue our conversation. I told Kelvin I was curious to know what it meant to be an African American male at Parkland. His response caught me of guard. “We get a bad rap. We really do. Most us, especially me, just want to be seen as a regular student. B2B and TWA have helped me to find that identity. I’m proud to be a black man here at Parkland.”

Kelvin showed a great deal of self-awareness in sharing that the B2B club provided him an opportunity or platform to “step up”, and show other young black men on campus (involved in TWA and not) to be accountable for their studies and more importantly their actions.

If you don’t step up for yourself, you can’t step up and help other brothers who need it. Too many brothers on campus can’t or don’t know how to step up.

I asked Kelvin what types of actions he has taken to step up and help other black young men on campus. He responded:

I’m always trying to bring someone new to B2B, like last week I brought one of my basketball teammates. I try and tell them that coming is good for them. I tell them that we are a community and together we help the “Black cause” on campus. You know, do positive things to get recognized not stupid things, like getting into trouble or flunking out. I tell anybody who comes with me that if you want something done you know change how people think about us, you do it through your actions.

I pressed Kelvin further about his activity with the B2B club, and asked him if he sees himself as a role model.

I dunno I never really thought about it that way, but I do want to show the guys in B2B and TWA that black students at Parkland can be successful … you know we can get good grades, we can help others and do good things around campus. I try and tell my friends we don’t have feel sorry for ourselves or always feel like someone is out to get us. If I am a positive influence then so be it. I feel good about that. I never really had anybody standing up for me when I was in high school, so if I can stand up for another brother, I’ll
do it if it can make a positive impact on his life. I’m making a change in myself, by making a change in someone else.

For Barb Hightower, the B2B club and the TWA learning community act as vehicles for change at Parkland. Through the classroom and the organized club setting, mentoring or “positive modeling” occurs and when the group commits to positive behaviors and sets high standards for academic achievement, the members rally around this shared vision or common cause. African men are invited as guest speakers from the University of Illinois and local businesses in the Champaign-Urbana area to share their higher education experiences and provide insight and advice on how young black men can be successful and alter negative perception of African American male community college students. For Kelvin, want the common cause that TWA and B2B share to be a springboard for change at Parkland.

To me it means that Black male students are asking to be treated equally, you know, get a fair chance here at Parkland. What I get out of B2B and what I try and tell my friends who are brothers, is that he have the power to change the perceptions others have of us on campus. You look at the news, especially what is happening right now in St. Louis. It is negative. Everybody thinks that it is just another black kid getting shot by police. It’s all negative, regardless who is right or wrong in this situation. The kid is dead, that is pretty bad in itself. But you know where is the story about a Black kid doing good things, helping save animals or organizing a fundraiser or simply graduating from college. You never see that. So the perception of Black kids is really bad and I’m tired of everybody seeing us as victims. Sometimes B2B has speakers that drill this victim attitude and I don’t like that. Our cause needs to highlight the positives we bring to campus and not how bad we got it and how we constantly have to rise above our problems.

At the end of the day, I want to just be a Parkland student, not a Black Parkland Student.

**Pattern 2:** Financial obligations influence African American male students’ persistence. Not until I conducted the focus group did I realize that many of the TWA participants were faced with significant financial obstacles while attending college. The five young men interviewed during the group discussion all indicated that they were paying out of
district tuition and that the financial aid and Pell grants they received on a semester basis did not nearly cover their total tuition bill not to mention their rent and other living expenses.

One student in particular stood out in terms of his struggles to manage his academic schedule and his part-time job. When asked about financial challenges while being a Parkland College student, the 23-year-old Keon, who escaped the hardship of the streets of south Chicago to pursue his goal of becoming a veterinarian, spoke up “I work almost every day. I work at Wal-Mart … night shift. They don’t care that I am a student; they just care about me showing up and doing the job. Lately, I’ve been so tried after working six or seven nights straight all I want to do is sleep. So my homework doesn’t get done and my grade in English is pretty bad right now. Something has to change, but I gotta make rent and need to buy food. MK is on my case to cut my hours.”

Although Kelvin is not working as many hours as his TWA cohort 3 classmate, his athletic obligations and his family’s pressure for him to earn a scholarship in order to continue his studies at the university level has impacted his academic pursuits. “Yeah, I do feel overwhelmed at times. I need to do good on the court and in the classroom. Bottom line is that I don’t want my Momma to have pay for any more tuition, so I have to stay focused. I rely on two groups – my teammates and my TWA classmates. Having their support pushes me to work hard.”

From a faculty perspective the financial obligations that many of the TWA participants bear directly influences their academic success in college. However, after interviewing two TWA faculty members on the issue of finances and TWA students the responses differed greatly on how the obstacle should be addressed by the students and the college. Herman Day, a first year Reading instructor and faculty member of TWA cohort 4, acknowledged that many TWA
students worked part-time while attending school. Instead of recognizing the need to work for these students as a barrier to their educational pursuits, he exclaimed:

“Hey, it is part of being a college student. It comes with the territory. Our students (and parents) need to know when they come to Parkland, especially from out-of-district, it comes with expenses.” As our conversation continued, Day shared that many of his students use their work schedules as an excuse not to turn in homework or come to class. “Working until 4 AM is not an excuse for why a homework assignment is not turned in. You are a college student. Period.”

Where Herman Day acknowledged that TWA students worked long hours yet had little sympathy for how the juggling of work and school by these students influenced their subsequent success in TWA courses. Michael King maintained a differing viewpoint on the issue of the work life of the TWA students in his classes. For MK, many TWA students came to Parkland without having full knowledge of the cost of their education. “They pay out of district tuition and that puts a strain on their living expenses.” He continued by saying that many of his students qualify for financial aid and Pell grants but even with aid tuition bills and rent payments cannot be paid. “I have some students that will call me and tell me that they don’t know how they can eat from day to day. It is that drastic for some of the TWA students.” I asked MK to explain further how students in TWA manage to balance work and school. He then stated:

Many of my students have to place their education on the back burner, when it comes to paying the bills. You have to remember that this population of students has come from a socio-economic environment where the neighborhood took care of these young men and if they had needs, someone helped to provide. Now that they are in college, many of these basic needs go unfilled.

MK concluded our discussion by saying that the college needed to investigate scholarships or tuition waivers for the African American male students. He also commented how the college has done a great service by creating the food pantry so many of his students can go
someplace on campus when they have nothing to eat and have access to some essential food and sanitary items to make it through the week or month. He concluded, “These young men learn quick how to work in order to survive. It is a valuable lesson and I think it makes them appreciate what they are doing here at the college and in the learning community.”

**Pattern 3: Connectedness to family motivates persistence.** The final pattern of evidence that emerged from the third theme focused on the families and the bond that exists between the TWA students and their families as these young African American students traverse through the first years of their post-secondary education journey. For two participants, the mother served as the sole symbol of motivation for them as they entered college. For Landon, he expressed not only his willingness to please her in his pursuit to be successful in college, but talked about his pride in his mother for enrolling in college at the same time he had enrolled.

“We are doing this together. My mother is trying to finish her bachelor’s degree at Eastern and we agreed we would help each other out. So if she gets down on her studies I am there to pick her up and she is doing that from me.” Landon then shared in our last meeting before Thanksgiving Break that he is again feeling overwhelmed and is at risk of failing his math course. When I asked him how he was feeling, he did remain positive despite some of his academic setbacks and he attributed his attitude to his mother.

She is an amazing person. We have a lot of bad times lately, but nothing gets her down … I kind of draw from her positive energy. I have anxiety issues, and she knows me probably better than I know myself, so she can get me on track. I’ll be okay. I got this, but I need a kick in the butt once in a while.

Where Landon and his mother have formed a team approach to college and help each other deal with challenges to their academics, Marcus uses the pressure to complete college as a motivator to one day deliver his family from their dire conditions. “My family is kind of messed
up … drugs will do that. But I’m here for my momma, period. I got out of Chicago. She got me out and I have to come through for her. I will, I have to.”

The final participant who identified a family connection as a motivator for his desire to complete college is Kelvin. Although his family life is stable and has two sets of active parents (father and step-mother; mother and step-father), he draws on the influences his older brother left on him as a child to better himself and his goal of completing college. Kelvin provided one of them ore in depth description of how he felt about his family and how they influenced his academic life.

Growing up seeing my brother’s lifestyle really changed how I wanted to live my life. He didn’t care – about himself or other people. He sold drugs. He was a pimp. I saw too much, heard too much as a kid and I didn’t want what he had. He tried to change, even got his GED, but it was too late for him. Someone shot him one day for who he was or who he was trying to escape from. Sad. I miss him; you know I loved him in spite of how he lived. So even though he is gone, the thought of him motivates me. I want to be the best I can be. So when I get down on my studies or my play, I think about him and that gives me what I need to get it done.

Whether drawing from positive reinforcement or tragedy when discussing the family’s contributions to academic pursuits, all of the TWA participants of this study felt that family played the most important role in motivating them to continue on with their college studies. For Landon, he grew strength and a desire to succeed in his first-year classes at Parkland from his mother because she sharing his college experience with him. In Marcus’ case, he had something to prove to his family and letting them down through bad grades or dropping out reinforced his resolve to be a successful college student. “I think about quitting all the time, but I can’t, too many people back home are counting on me.” For Kelvin, the tragic loss of his brother marks one of the darkest experiences in his young life, yet it motivates him to be a positive role model, share his story and success with others, and “make a difference in life.”
**Analysis.** All of the participants in the study shared that the sense of belongingness or connection to college life at Parkland occurred both inside and outside of the classroom. The study revealed that interaction with faculty inside of the classroom proved to be a significant institutional factor in influencing their desire to remain in school. However, outside of the classroom, certain social and personal supports or factors also influenced their persistence. The two primary supports outside of the classroom surfaced for the student participants in the study as affiliation with the Brother-to-Brother Club (B2B) and the dual commitment of family and school.

All of the student participants of this study were members of the Parkland College Brother-to-Brother (B2B) Club. Originated at Parkland about 10 years ago, the club meets weekly to discuss academic, social and personal topics related to the African American male community college student. The club has approximately 30 members and Michael King serves as the club’s advisor. All the participants interviewed both in the one-on-one interviews and the focus session largely expressed positive feelings toward the club. With this attitude, their choice to join B2B was multifaceted and can be understood as what their perception of what membership would provide them and what they could bring to the club. Of all the participants, Kelvin described best how B2B membership helped to bring African American men together at Parkland to champion a common cause. It is this affiliation to a common cause that triggered motivation in him to become not only a better student, but a role model and voice for action to other African American men on campus. Kelvin’s comments on seeing himself as a role model also gives voice to how African Americans men have matured beyond the learning community and feel integrated into college life.
Kelvin’s transformation into a confident student who mentors other African American males at Parkland is consistent with the literature on African American persistence. Strayhorn (2012) would contend that Kelvin has earned some college “grit” as a result of his experiences in the TWA and B2B, not to mention his athletic successes, all of which have led to his sense of belongingness into college life outside of the classroom at Parkland College. This acquisition of grit or confidence through peer group association is the non-cognitive variable that Deil-Amen (2006, 2011) would argue is what has triggered social integration for Kelvin in such a large degree that he see now sees himself as an institutional agent (role model or mentor) that can “warm up” other African American students to their academic and social goals and aspirations.

Another support or personal factor that instills not only confidence in African American students at Parkland College but also a sense of purpose or commitment is the connection to family that these students maintain. Aside from the influence faculty have had on the student participants and their desire to persist in their educational pursuits, the influence has on developing a commitment to their education is very significant in the findings of this study.

For two participants, the mother served as the sole symbol of motivation for them as they entered college. For Landon, he expressed not only his willingness to please her in his pursuit to be successful in college, but talked about his pride in his mother for enrolling in college at the same time he had enrolled, and that by doing college together is the support he needs in order to have the motivation to stay in college despite some of his academic setbacks.

Where Landon and his mother formed a team approach to college and help each other deal with challenges to their academics, Marcus used the pressure to complete college as a motivator to one day deliver his family from their dire conditions in the south side of Chicago.
He mentioned on more than one occasion in the interviews that he had to come through for his family in order for him as well as his family to have any find of future.

The final participant who identified a family connection as a motivator for his desire to complete college was Kelvin. Although he shared that his family life was stable and he had had two sets of active parents (father and step-mother; mother and step-father), he drew the most connection and motivation from his older brother. Kelvin provided in depth descriptions of how he felt about his family and how they influenced his academic life, but it was his brother’s gang activity, life as pimp and drug dealer that fortified the motivation in Kelvin to not only leave home, but to pursue basketball and a college degree. His death in a gang style shoot out is what ultimately lead Kelvin to go to college. His own words best articulate this motivation and commitment to college study. “So when I get down on my studies or my play, I think about him and that gives me what I need to get it done.”

Family support and its influence on persistence of college students is apparent in the higher education literature. However, little attention is given to this non-cognitive variable in the research on African American college males, especially in community colleges. For this study, the student experiences were rich in detail about how their families were focal and intimately woven into their daily college life. So much so that the students participating in the study talked about the development of an internal resolve or deeper level commitment to their education as a result of their family support that almost prohibited them from stopping out or leaving college altogether. This connection to family as a motivating force is evident in the individual student experience. Whether it is drawing from positive reinforcement or tragedy when discussing the family’s contributions to their academic pursuits, all of the TWA participants of this study felt that family played the most important role in motivating them to continue on with their college
studies. Marcus in a way sums up the valuable support families provide to African American male students at Parkland College. “I think about quitting all the time, but I can’t … too many people back home are counting on me.”

Where support through peer groups, social clubs and family motivated the student participants in this study to continue on with their education at Parkland College, one barrier on both a social and personal level appeared to influence persistence. This barrier or challenge was financial obligation or responsibility. For some of the participants, their need to work and go to school was a financial obligation to help support family members at home with daily expenses and reoccurring bills. Others shared experiences of financial burden as a result of trying to be a college student. In both cases, the over half of the students in this study were working a part-time job while enrolling full-time as a student at Parkland.

The higher education literature points explicitly to the lack of financial resources as a barrier many African American males encounter and must overcome in order to persist in college. (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006b; Cook & Cordova, 2006). A dilemma many African American males face as they enter community colleges is that aside from navigating courses, many of which are pre-college or developmental, they are also burdened with balancing work and family obligations. The findings of this study parallel the research of Gardenhire, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010) where student interviews revealed that financial burdens and having to balance school and work schedules was the leading issue or risk factor that threatened engagement, persistence in school and their goal of completing a degree.

One student in particular stood out in terms of his struggles to manage his academic schedule and his part-time job. When asked about financial challenges while being a Parkland College student, the 23-year-old Keon, who escaped the hardship of the streets of south Chicago
to pursue his goal of becoming a veterinarian, spoke about having to work the night shift at Wal-Mart and how his workload effected his ability to study on a consistent basis, resulting in missed assignments and poor grades. But like most of the participants of the study, the thought of quitting school was far worse than cutting back on hours at work because it meant letting the TWA group down.

From a faculty perspective the financial obligations that many of the TWA participants bear directly influences their academic success in college. However, after interviewing two TWA faculty members on the issue of finances and TWA students the responses differed greatly on how the obstacle should be addressed by the students and the college. Herman Day, the first year Reading instructor and faculty member of TWA cohort 4, acknowledged that many TWA students worked part-time while attending school. Instead of recognizing the need to work for these students as a barrier to their educational pursuits, he asserted that working to pay for school is all a part of being a college student and financial hardship did not target on African American students but all college students, especially in community college.

Where Day acknowledged that TWA students worked long hours yet he had little sympathy for how the juggling of work and school by these students influenced their subsequent success in TWA courses. Michael King maintained a different perspective on the work life of the TWA students in his classes. For MK, many TWA students came to Parkland without having full knowledge of the cost of their education and though many of his students do qualify for financial aid and Pell grants they still can pay for daily expenses. He echoes his concern for his student ability to persist in college when they are faced with incredible financial burden: “I have some students that will call me and tell me that they don’t know how they can eat from day to day. It is that drastic for some of the TWA students.”
MK’s assessment of the current reality many of the TWA student’s face in terms of financial obligation and burden is a societal factor that rarely is considered when high rates of attrition and low rates of success and degree completion are discussed in the literature on African American males. Experiences shared by many of the participants described how they entered college unprepared for the academic rigor but also equally unprepared on how to perform at a job, negotiate work, school and social schedules and moreover how to manage money. This barrier proved to challenging to some of the TWA participants and over contributes to 40% attrition rate of the learning community students since its inception five years ago, but for the students interviewed in this the resolve to persist and finish their community college studies remains stronger.

Chapter Summary

The emergent themes highlighted in this chapter capture the voice of the African American males’ experience at Parkland College. Observing student participants in social groups, co-curricular activities, inside their classroom and then talking with them both individually and in-group sessions through a social and academic integration lens suggests that participation in an all-male African American learning community provides a foundation for persistence that has not been researched or studied before. Through discussing aspects of their pre-college and first-year college experiences, participants described how different factors and forces in their educational past and present have warmed them up to college and motivated them to stay in school and strive toward success. Before they entered higher education, participants found this warming up mechanism in positive role models and mentors and even used negative experiences in high school to generate a type of grit or internal resolve to overcome barriers and establish college-going goals. While in college, the participants again turned to institutional
agents, like faculty and counselors, to support their transition to college. The ways African American males in community colleges negotiated these institutional agents and structures proved significant for this study in that persistence models described by Tinto (1975, 1987) and Deil-Amen (2006) failed to consider the value of remediation for African American male students and how success in pre-college courses provides a springboard for these students in the overall formation of social and academic integration which results in persistence.

The next chapter describes a conceptual model for understanding why African American males persist in community colleges while directly addressing the questions that framed and guided this study. The remaining sections the chapter will detail the implications for practice and policy, describe the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study is about how African American male students in a large, suburban community college can persist to a second year of study after participating in a learning community. Specifically, this study explores how lived and shared experiences of African American males in a first-year learning community shape their social and academic integration into college life. The voices of students are captured throughout this yearlong study and the experiences revealed describe the factors and forces that shape their desire to persist and succeed at Parkland College. The first chapter introduced the issue of low persistence and success rates of African American males in higher education, especially in community colleges. The original conceptual framework based on the literature in higher education was presented in Chapter 2. The research design and specific methodology employed in the study balanced out Chapter 3. Contained in Chapter 4 is the description of the setting and participants along with the summarized themes and patterns of evidence that emerged from the informational responses and commentary of the participants.

This chapter is organized in three distinct sections. These sections are crafted in such a way to offer clarity and synthesis for the overall research study. The first section includes a detailed discussion of the study’s findings, with clear connections made to the study’s conceptual framework and theoretical foundations. This commentary will transition into the second section of the chapter, where the findings will evoke a deeper analysis of the implications of the study, resulting in the development of important strategies that are likely to improve the persistence and success of African American male community college students. In addressing the implications of the research, the ideas and opinions shared by the African American men of this study are
worthy of emulation and replication by other community colleges. Finally, I will offer recommendations to secondary teachers, college faculty and administrators, as well as policymakers, about key factors and forces that both influence and support African American male community college students as well as erect barriers to their persistence in higher education. The value of this study for faculty, administrators and policymakers is that it draws from the student voice and rich quality of the individual and shared experiences of the African American male students participating in this study. The student voice is often times lost in how institutions, like community colleges, develop programs and shape policy. The qualitative findings of this case study provide a powerful and useful tool for practitioners to use when creating programs, services and policies that can improve persistence of African American male community college students.

Summary of Findings

**Question One: How can pre-college educational experiences influence higher education enrollment for African American males?**

Concerned with the high attrition rates of African American male college students, the primary inquiry sought to examine the ways institutional factors and social forces influence persistence in the first year of college among African American male students attending community colleges. As outlined in the conceptual framework, this study investigated connections between persistence of African American men in their first year of study at a community college and participation in a learning community specifically designed for underprepared African American men. The inquiry implies that first year of participation in higher education is particularly challenging for African American males in community colleges, perhaps varying based on individual experiences with education.
The findings reveal that pre-college experiences have considerable influence on higher education enrollment for the participants of the study. Poor academic progress, lack of family support and the absence of positive role models permeates the lives and transcends into the early educational experiences of these African American men. In particular, the reactions from students about their experiences in high school and even elementary school offer an interesting insight into early challenges and obstacles education placed in their pathway to college enrollment. Disengagement, bad behavior and lack of academic stamina were results of negative interactions with peers and teachers in high school for the participants of the study, but alternative feeling of belongingness, academic success and post-secondary education planning were expressed by participants when they connected with peers or found support or connection to a teacher, coach or counselor. The feelings expressed by participants when they connected with teachers and peers support the influence social and academic integration has on students who previously viewed school with resistance. Even before entering college, African American male students can assess the value of their educational experiences and Tinto’s Departure Model suggests the weaker the link or connection between personal intentions and commitment, the stronger the likelihood he will “turn off” his aspirations for post-secondary education (Tinto, 1987). For African American males in high school, the impact of faculty role models through a departure model framework greatly influences the strength of the link between personal commitment and intentions to enroll in higher education.

The results of this study confirm previous research examining the relationship between Tinto’s (1975) Integration Model and persistence in African American male students in higher education, finding that when colleges create environments where students begin to acquire and self-actualize commitments to their education they engage with others on both academic and
social levels thus creating a sense of belonging to their educational surroundings (Bush and Bush, 2010; Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara, 2007). For many of the study’s student participants pre-college experiences were difficult and their commitment to not only completing the secondary level of education was low, not to mention, their aspirations to attend college after high school even lower. Where the literature suggests that social and academic integration are key factors in students persisting in higher education, they appear to be even more salient before students enter higher education. For many of the participants, the negative experiences in high school far outpaced the positive and mentors and role models were not easily accessible. The literature on African American males however only focus on how this student population connects with faculty and peers on the academic and social level while in college thus resulting in persistence, the literature on resistance behavior of African American male high school students does mention that many obstacles – both academically and socially – result in negative perceptions of education for these students but does not make the connection that these obstacles and barriers inside or outside these high school classrooms can actually motivate engagement with African American male students and trigger them to seek out connectivity with faculty or peer role models.

It appears that the students of this study found opportunity to engage with their education, connect with role models inside and outside of the classroom, and develop an internal motivation to attend college after experiencing challenges and barriers in their educational pathway prior to college enrollment. The findings suggest that even after participants experienced these challenges and obstacles they mustered the resolve to seek out support and positive reinforcement from faculty and peers and then strove toward the goal of participating in higher education. Instead of allowing a negative high school experience to “cool out” their aspirations
of attending college, they used the experience as a type of “academic or social learning experience” that fostered new levels of confidence in their own abilities thus resulting in high levels of intention connected with high levels of commitment to their goal of attending higher education thus reducing their desire to quit school.

Question 2: In the first year of college, how do institutional factors influence the persistence of African American male community college students?

Findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that the advocacy of practitioners and “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazaar, 1997, 2001) facilitate the social and academic integration of minority students, especially at community colleges. Student stories told of struggle, sacrifice and purposeful commitment – from the young man with the learning disability who fought anxiety and continued doubts of ability to the student-athlete who harbored guilt from his brother’s death but found determination on the basketball court and in the classroom to be a role model for others, to the former gang member who shunned remediation but found unexpected support from his soft spoken writing professor – reinforced the need to understand the experiences of marginalized students who both attend two-year colleges and participate in institutional learning environments that have yet to be considered in prior persistence models (Guiffria, 2006; Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999).

Remarkably, distinct patterns emerged across this student population in how they managed their feelings of disappointment and distrust with formal education and upon receiving support from institutional agents and structures replaced these feelings with those of contentment and belonging in college, and more specifically within in learning community environment. The African American male participants of this study revealed that these social and academic integrative moments occurred through interaction with faculty both inside and outside of the
learning community classroom. They also revealed that the feelings of being a “real” college student occurred after they successfully traversed through pre-college or remedial coursework.

In terms of faculty interaction, this study supports the previous research that found that social and academic integration occurs among African American men in community colleges when increased levels of faculty support and connection are apparent both inside and outside of class (Bush & Bush, 2010). Given the cohort learning design of the TWA learning community, this faculty-student interaction was nuanced and served multiple functions. Though in-classroom (or community) interactions were dominant mechanisms of social and academic integration, thus confirming and extending Tinto’s (1997) claim that the classroom is the primary site for integration of community college students, this study also supports Deil-Amen (2006) in that faculty are instrumental institutional agents in warming students up to academic commitment and encouraging them to engage outside of the classroom in co-curricular activities that result in a sense of belonging in college.

These findings also support Deil-Amen (2011) and her critique of Tinto’s Integration Model (1975, 1987) that content institutional support or the work of institutional agents or structures that facilitate success in minority students at two-year colleges trumps the individual behaviors of students to assimilate to college life (Bensimon, 2007). This study, like Deil-Amen (2011) foregrounds the possibility that these agents or structures of the community college play a pivotal role in giving social capital and other benefits to African American male students to enable their persistence. Where previous research found that institutional structures (e.g. academic programs and policies) such as developmental education erected barriers in the pathway to persistence for African American men (Green, 2006; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012), this study found that remediation as an institutional structure in the community
college, and especially within the context of a cohort learning community, actually warmed students up to their commitment to college and fortified their intentions to stay in school. Where Deil-Amen (2011) and earlier Green (2006) contend that developmental education for academically under prepared minority students is a barrier that must be overcome in order for social and academic integration to occur, this study proves that it is the institutional structure itself that motivates African American males to persist, in that they find success in their academics for the first time in their educational tenure and use the completion of pre-college course work as a trigger for persistence in other courses and also an indicator that they now belong in college.

Question 3: How can social and personal factors trigger the decision of African American male students to enroll in a second year of community college study?

Most noteworthy in terms of the social factors that influenced persistence, student participants mentioned the continuous contact they had with other members of the TWA learning community as a contributing factor in their desire to stay in school. The review literature concurs that African American males tend to persist in greater numbers when they connect with peers who share their experiences, values and aspirations (Palmer & Young, 2009; Perrakis, 2008; Ross, 1998; Wood, 2010, Wood & Turner, 2011). The TWA learning community and the Brother-to-Brother co-curricular club were the most noted points of contact for the student participants and this continuous contact provided meaningful integrative moments and contributed to a sense of connection in their shared experiences and challenges. This contact resonated at a deeper level for some. In the instance of Kelvin, the value of peer relationships resulted into the development of support groups and clubs that emerged not out of the formal structures of the learning community, but rather from student’s increased commitment to the
“African American male cause” on campus with an intention of the group members to help others find success in college. This finding is similar to what Tinto (1997) and later Deil-Amen (2011) found in that formalized learning communities create supportive peer groups that prove instrumental in helping marginalized students integrate into college life. However, unlike Deil-Amen’s study that purported commuting students who attend two-year colleges can accomplish integration through “friendly” casual and limited interactions between students, the present study found that in African American males longer term peer associations and friendships were needed in order for students to create a sense of comfort, trust, belonging and social capital in college. Even after the learning community ended for most of the student participants in the second year of their studies, the connection they forged with peers was the social factor they identified most with when they discussed persistence. Common experience with tackling the challenges of academic and social barriers is what TWA members commonly referred to as what triggered their decision to return to school for a second year after the learning community ended. Similar to their connections to peers, the African American men in this study frequently noted that family involvement was an essential factor in promoting their persistence toward college success. The influence of family as a positive reinforcement for African American males is supported in the review literature (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Wood & Turner, 2011); however, the literature on integration as well as African Americans in higher education fails to report about the motivation generated by the negative aspects of home life on these male students. This present study found that violence, financial instability and negative family influences affected participants not in an adverse manner (Harvey & Anderson 2003), but rather warmed their commitment to college by using the prospects of returning to these negative environments as an impetus to persist toward success. For many of
the participants quitting college was simply not an option, because failure would equate into both personal disappointment and also the stark reality of a returning to place where violence and failure are commonplace.

In contrast, when considering the barriers to persistence, financial obligations and balancing work and school were discussed as sometimes creating obstacles for student participants as they attempted to navigate the first year of college and also negotiate the new personal realities of paying for rent, books and living expenses. The African American men in this study frequently noted that time management was important but difficult to master given that many of the students had never had to work prior to coming to Parkland College. Asked what personal factor would be leading contributors to their dropping out of college, the participants identified lack of finances as the leading cause, far outpacing their unpreparedness for college level study. The review literature concurs that the leading cause for attrition in African American males is financial hardship (Gardenhire, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010; Harper & Harris III, 2013). For those students who had persisted to a second year of college, and noted in their first year that they had struggled through financial challenges, attributed their persistence to self-sufficiency. Explained further, these students reduced the burden their lack of money had on their academic goals, by securing employment and then appropriately balancing work schedules with class and study; and moreover, the student participants attributed their development of self-sufficiency in seeking out support for their financial burdens by asking for information about financial aid, scholarships, work study programs and other institutional supports for students with limited financial resources.
Implications and Recommendations

From this study, implications emerge and inform three distinct groups. First, implications of this study inform African American males about the factors that influence their persistence in higher education, and among these factors are those that erect barriers to persistence. The next type of implication informs institutional practice and policy at community colleges, which also inform family strategies and community support. The final type of implication that surfaces is that additional research is needed to understand more about African American male community college students and how and why they persist. This future research can inform educators, both at the secondary and post-secondary level as well as families and support communities about the dynamic challenges and unique experience of African American male community college students. Future research will also be essential is the development of new policies that spur the development of new ideas and programs in community colleges that support and engage not only African American males, but all college students. Aside from the implications that inform and influence these three distinct groups, the exploratory design of the case study allowed the researcher the flexibility to look beyond the implications of the unique data collected and identify gaps in the study of the TWA learning community and the lived experiences of the student participants and establish a framework for further inquiry on the higher education phenomena that presents itself in the TWA learning community case. The recommendations section will underscore this preliminary framework for future research on African American male community college students.

Implications for African American male students. The findings uncover several factors that promote persistence in the student participants of this study: Pre-college Experiences, Secondary Teacher involvement, College Faculty Mentoring, Peer Groups, and Family
Influence. Students need to clearly identify the factors that promote persistence and those factors that erect barriers. Findings also show that students can achieve persistence when they identify mentors (in high school and college), use cohort learning environments to increase basic college skill acquisition, align themselves with peer groups that champion common causes, and establish faculty connections within the institution. Moreover, students must balance their academic pursuits with both their social interests and their obligation to work. Persistence from the first year of to the second year study was evident in the students of this study when these four factors were working together. The findings of the study reveal that the primary factor, which erected the biggest barrier to persistence for the African American males, was the need to work to either pay for college expenses or meet family financial obligations. In considering this implication, students learn quickly the need for self-sufficiency. Those students who do not work while in school must identify institutional student services and community support systems that can result in valuable resources to support persistence. Being wise stewards of financial aid and grant funds is essential in achieving positive outcomes in self-sufficiency. African American males who must work in order to be self-sufficient college students must learn time management skills and make it a priority to schedule work at times that do not conflict with classes or study.

**Implications for institutional practice and policy.** Community colleges play an important role in supporting the persistence of African American males. Through the design and implementation of innovative classroom environments where teaching strategies embrace not only learning styles but also the unique experiences of African American males. This study examined the learning community and the findings indicate that this institutional program can be a learning environment where factors such as faculty-student interaction, peer group development and remedial coursework delivery can result in positive student outcomes and
increased persistence in African American male student groups. From a broad institutional perspective, community college faculty play a critical role in designing learning community curriculum and classroom practices that can address the most mentioned barrier or challenge to African American male persistence: success in developmental education courses. In terms of courses, faculty can develop courses that integrate the basic skills needed in reading and English with college level course assignments in general education courses such as political science, history and speech communication. Since students enrolled in learning community enroll in the same classes at the same time during a semester, the blending of curriculum can lend itself to not only basic skills attainment but also increased confidence in college level courses resulting in more prepared student as they exit the controlled environment of a learning community. As the findings of this study reveal, African American men enter Parkland College with negative perceptions of education, and in some instances, failed attempts at higher education. Institutions like Parkland must make it a goal to establish as many learning community programs as possible to help students, like African American men, develop positive attitudes about learning and gain confidence in their abilities in general and their educational goals in particular (O’Gara et al, 2009; Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). Community college can establish new policies where they embed innovative classroom environments (e.g. learning communities) into their first-year experience programming so students are exposed early to academic, personal and social support systems. This streamlining of programs and resources will result in African American males receiving college orientation, access to academic support (e.g. tutoring services) and services (e.g. intrusive counseling and educational planning) along with opportunity to participate in cohort learning during their first year of college (Pandolpho, 2009; Zeidenberg et al, 2007; Napoli & Wortman, 1998).
For this study, interaction with faculty both inside and outside of the learning community surfaced as an institutional factor that promotes persistence in the TWA African American men. This finding is not only supported by the current research on African American men in community colleges that posits faculty interaction as the highest predictor of persistence in African American men (Bush & Bush, 2010) but can also inform community colleges on the importance of establishing new practices in the areas of faculty-student mentoring and faculty professional development programming.

**Faculty-student mentoring programs.** Education data sources, like the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that retention rates for African American men are the lowest of any student population in higher education (2012). Cuyjet (2006) cites research that attributes these low rates of persistence for African American males to college campuses *not* possessing “warm, nurturing, and supportive environments to enhance an institution’s ability to recruit, retain, and graduate minority students” (p. 50). The research of Wood and Turner (2011) and Wood (2010) posit that mentoring programs where faculty help African American male community college students adjust to college by providing “safe and welcoming” environments where student mentees receive tutoring, academic advising, and personal counseling from faculty positively impacts African American male students in achieving short and long term goals as they relate to their education. Cuyjet (2006) adds that faculty can serve as mentors to African American men in class as well as outside of class by creating a safe place for expression of personal experiences, facilitating discussions where students understand the importance of difference and tolerance and finally by allowing time in class for African American men to explore and examine “Black manhood” issues (p. 32).
Community colleges can replicate the programs and practices suggested in these aforementioned studies by arranging faculty-student mentoring between African American males and African American male faculty. Though not always possible due to staffing constraints, African American male faculty do share common gender, cultural, ethnic and racial experiences that assist in developing a trusting and nurturing environment (Cuyjet, 2006). Research by Laanan (2001) found that African American males were less concerned with having an African American faculty member than they were with having a faculty member who was accessible, could be trusted and understood their social and educational barriers and was willing to offer advice on how to overcome obstacles and reach educational goals.

**Faculty training policies.** For many community colleges across the nation, faculty have not had any instructional experiences in working with minority students, especially African American males. Aside from administrators committing resources to the recruiting and hiring of more African American male faculty members, community colleges can develop new policies and standards on the types and amount of training and professional development programming that is provided to both African American and non-African American faculty with skills and pedagogy for establishing and maintaining healthy and successful relationships with students.

The establishment of policy on faculty training, especially for underprepared student populations, like African American community college men is supported in the current higher education research. Wood and Turner (2011) studied community colleges who develop training for faculty on how to work with African American male students and found that the basic elements that instructors learn in these trainings about building successful and nurturing relationships with these male students is to maintain an approachable, friendly attitude in class, routinely check with African American men on their academic progress, listen to their concerns
both inside and outside of class to establish a sense of trust and belongingness for the student, and finally encourage the students to succeed (p. 147).

Modifications to the learning community model. A final implication that can inform policy at Parkland College is the need to investigate the value of expanding the learning community to a second year. Many of the participants of the study shared the feeling of “abandonment” by the institution as they returned for a second year of study at Parkland College. The academic supports that were intrinsic to the TWA learning community such as counseling, courses taught to entire cohort, faculty mentoring and tutoring services are lessened in the second year of study and these TWA participants enroll in courses that mirror non-learning community students on campus. Even though resources may not allow for formal learning communities to exist for African American males at Parkland in a second year, perhaps a common course can be created that each member takes at the same time in the second year, allowing for a continuation of the cohort thus promoting the positive attributes of peer learning, student-student mentoring and most importantly social and academic integration.

Implications for families. As identified within the specific question “How can social and personal factors trigger the decision of African American males to enroll in a second year of community college study?” families are a vital and integral part of the lives of African American males. Findings such as family influence and student connectedness to family members proved to be the primary promoters of persistence in the students in the case study. Families of African American male community college students should strive to maintain strong ties and connections in order to support their academic pursuits. The participants shared consistently that parents who showed concern with academic progress, provided encouragement though frequent phone calls, emails and text messages and actively helped with finances resulted in greater desire to persist in
the first year of study at Parkland College. These implications inform families to make their student’s college experience a priority and to provide guidance in the areas of time management, career and programs of study planning, peer associations and physical health. Community colleges could develop programs for parents on how to support African American men in these areas, equipping them with skills and knowledge about college and campus life, student rules and policies on behavior and civility as well as how to support the financial responsibilities of attending college and how students must manage their social, academic and work lives in order to persist and complete programs of study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Given that this case study occurred on a single community college campus and participants were limited to one learning community, there is a need for replication of the study to confirm the finding and investigate additional themes. Ongoing research into the factors that influence persistence in African American male community college students also needs to occur, with a focus on the second year of enrollment in order to uncover if additional themes. This study privileged the student voice and placed the students’ experience at the center of the investigation. Through in-depth personal, one-on-one interviews, I was able to ask direct questions to students about their perceptions, feelings and opinions of their educational experiences, especially those experiences connected to the Together We Achieve first-year learning community. As a result, the significant findings can only be generalizable to the African American males of this study. Ongoing research in this area could lead to the development of a survey instrument that could quantify the impact the institutional, social and personal factors have on the persistence of African American men in community colleges.
Research needs to also be done in how other institutional structures, aside from learning communities, affect persistence. Harper (2005) identifies participation in collegiate athletics as a factor that influences persistence in this student group. Perhaps case study research investigating student participation in sports where the student voices or perspectives are captured would uncover new themes on the issue of persistence and African American male community college students. Building on the subjective aspect of the integration process of African American men in community colleges, student experience research is warranted and could prove useful in understanding whether or not interaction outside of the classroom may be as important as in classroom interaction. This study briefly touched on the outside activities of the student participants but perhaps a subjective study on co-curricular participation and the role faculty play in co-curricular activity development and the interaction that occurs with students and faculty outside of the classroom could provide new evidence on how African American male community college students connect to their institution, develop confidence about their college study and motivate their decisions to stay.

A final recommendation is to encourage research on the influence elementary, junior high, and high school experiences have on the persistence of African American males in community colleges. At the primary and secondary levels of education, teachers, counselors and administrators can shape student perceptions of their own educational futures and can act as the first positive role model for African American men. A study of how students develop a “college-going” identity at each grade level would inform practice and strategy on how teachers design curriculum as it relates to African American males and their eventual college enrollment and persistence.
Concluding Remarks

This chapter included a discussion of the study’s findings, implications, recommendations for future research and limitations drawn from the findings presented in Chapter 4. The discussion of the findings found in this chapter identified the key factors and forces that promote persistence by synthesizing student experiences with the study’s conceptual framework and the literature on student persistence models as they relate African American community college male students. From the discussion and analysis of the findings, the study identified three primary implications for developing potential personal institutional and family strategies and practices that respond to the perceived needs of African American males as they enter community college education. Recommendations have also been made on how to expand knowledge about experiences of African American male community college students.

In concluding this study, the failure of African American male student to persist in college, and more specifically in community colleges, remains a real and confounding problem in higher education. Understanding the experiences and expanding the knowledge about African American male persistence in college is relevant and exists in today’s literature (Kim, 2011, Cook and Cordova, 2006, Harper, 2006a). This study attempts to contribute this base of knowledge about African American male college students by examining the experiences of African American male community college students and allowing their voices to explain the decision to persist. Overall, the findings of this study support previous research that suggests non-cognitive factors greatly influence persistence for African American male students (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009). The study revealed that African American male students are greatly influenced by family and peers and even more so by faculty.
The desire to persist in school is a direct result of this influence and the accounts by students in the study illustrate the importance of balancing work and school, interacting with faculty inside and outside of the classroom and engaging with peers through co-curricular activities and networking.

By investigating the learning community, this study added new insights into persistence of African American male community college students. The cohort design and community and trust building aspects of the learning community design when investigated through the lens social and academic integration models (Tinto, 1987) and more specifically the concept of warming up purported by Deil-Amen (2006) contributed greatly to a new understanding of the African American male experience at Parkland College. Even though this was a single study at one community college, the rich stories and experiences shared by the students illustrated the importance of academic support combined with positive family connections when students face challenges and barriers in their first year of college.
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APPENDIX A

UIUC IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Vice Chancellor for Research
Institutional Review Board
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820

April 2, 2014

Lorenzo Baber
Ed Organization and Leadership

RE: Impact of participation on persistence and perception of first-year African American male community college students
    IRB Protocol Number: 14568

EXPIRATION DATE: 04/01/2017

Dear Dr. Baber:

Thank you for submitting the completed IRB application form for your project entitled Impact of participation on persistence and perception of first-year African American male community college students. Your project was assigned Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol Number 14568 and reviewed. It has been determined that the research activities described in this application meet the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101 (b)(2).

This determination of exemption only applies to the research study as submitted. Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and exemption determination or approval before the modifications are initiated.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subject s research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our website at http://www.irb.illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Van Tine, MS
Assistant Human Subjects Research Specialist, Institutional Review Board

c: Randall Fletcher

telephone (217)333-2670 • fax (217)333-0405 • email IRB@illinois.edu
APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE RECRUITMENT FLYER TO PARTICIPANTS

Your Voice should to be Heard!!

Have you been (or are currently) a member of the
Together We Achieve Learning Community
@ Parkland College?

If so, please take part in a study of African American Male community college students and earn a Parkland College Bookstore gift card.

What is required?
Simply agree to talk with me about your experiences.
You can earn even more by referring any other TWA members!

For more information contact:
Randy Fletcher at fletcher.rm@gmail.com

Your responses to the interview questions will have no effect on any course grade, academic assessment or performance in any current or future classes at Parkland College.
APPENDIX C

EXAMPLE RECRUITMENT FLYER FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Parkland College
Together We Achieve
Interactive Focus Group

A doctoral student from the University of Illinois at Urbana –Champaign would like to invite you to participate in a discussion about Four first-year experiences at Parkland College and participation in the TWA learning Community

Please take advantage of this unique opportunity to share your insight and Experiences as a male student enrolled in Together We Achieve

Participant’s personal information will remain strictly confidential and the documentation and data collected during the focus group and individual interview activities will remain confidential.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older.

For more information please contact:
Randy Fletcher
217-649-1340
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Randy Fletcher, a doctoral candidate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, department of Education Policy and Organizational Leadership. I hope to learn how participation in the Together We Achieve (TWA) learning community has had an impact on your persistence in college and your perception of college life at Parkland College. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your participation in the TWA learning community.

If you decide to participate, I will contact you directly by email for our interview session. The interviews will take place at Parkland College either in designated classroom or conference room. The interviews will be audiotaped. Prior to the interview session, I will distribute consent forms and the interview protocol which includes the questions I will address in the interview. Duration of interviews will be 30-60 minutes. If you are willing to respond to follow up questions, these brief interviews will occur within one week of the initial interview—either face-to-face or via phone. All interviews will take place in September-October of 2014.

Data will be collected through the personal interview methods. Minimal risk will result from sharing your personal experiences as a member of the TWA learning community. Confidentiality will be focused upon throughout the research. After I collect the interview data via audio recording, I will personally transcribe and code the interviews and then develop an identity key that links your identity with a unique code number. For your security, code keys, audio tapes and transcriptions will be stored separately. After the research study is completed, the code key and audio tapes will be destroyed and I will be the only person to have access to the audio interview files. I will store audiotapes, coded transcripts, signed consent forms and written interviews at my home in a secure location where I only have access to the data.

The benefits of participating in the study are many. First and foremost, you will be able to share your personal experiences of being a student at Parkland College. Your experiences will directly impact how services and support are delivered to students at the college. Moreover, the data you provide will influence how curriculum and how the College addresses key issues of persistence and success of all student populations, especially African American males. Finally, your participation will influence others to participate and share their personal lived experiences as members of the TWA learning community.

For participating I would like to give you a gift card at the end of the third interview as compensation for agreeing to be a part of the research study

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Parkland College. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact 217-649-1340, rfletcher@parkland.edu or 5012 Longfield Road, Bloomington, IL 61705. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims.

Signature __________________________________________________________

Date __________________________

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APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

First Interview Questions (students)
30 Minutes

Background
1. Tell me about yourself? Tell me about your family? (older or younger siblings)

High School/Pre-College
1. Tell me about your memories of school (elementary/high school)?
   a. What about these experiences did you enjoy?
   b. How can you relate any of these experiences to your present experience in college?

2. Tell me about one of your negative experiences in school (elementary/high school)?
   a. What about your experience did you dislike?
   b. How can you relate this experience to your present experience in college?

3. As an African American male, how would you describe the experience you have had in school prior to coming to Parkland College, especially consider high school and elementary school?
   a. How would you describe the classroom activities, how did you feel about them?
   b. What about extra-curricular activities, what are your feelings about them?
   c. Tell me about the teachers you had in grade and high school, what made them stand out, good and bad?
   d. How did teachers, counselors, coaches affect your desire, your motivation to remain in school?
Second Interview Questions (students)
One Hour

Parkland College from African American male perspective

4. At what point did you consider pursuing college?
   a. Where did this occur?
   b. When?
   c. What led to this decision?
   d. Who was influential in helping you pursue college (family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc?)

5. Tell me what it means from your perspective as an African American male to pursue a degree at a community college (generally speaking)?
   a. How do fit into this picture?
   b. Are you acquainted with anyone who fits into this picture? If so, how do you think they feel about their pursuing a degree?
   c. Is there a community college stigma, perception that has been a barrier in pursuit of higher education?

6. Talk about the social aspects of school, what you do with your friends in-between classes, after school.
   a. Do you think you will remain friends with these men after the first year?
   b. Do you ever mix studying with your social life? Examples?

7. How do your friends feel about you attending school?
   a. How does this support make you feel?

8. How do your family and friends think about you attending Parkland College?
   a. What affect does their support have on you?
   b. What motivates you?

9. Do you have any males in your life that have experienced pursuing a college education?
   a. If so, what advice did they give you?

10. Thinking about African American males you know with a college degree, in what ways did they shape your perception of higher education?

11. Why is attending Parkland College important to you?
    a. What made you decide to attend Parkland College?
    b. How would feel about earning a college degree from Parkland College?
TWA Learning Community

12. When you attend classes each day, what aspects of school, social life make you want to attend class?

13. What about the first-year experience program: Together We Achieve? Does it play a role in your motivation to attend classes?
   a. What about the TWA experience is a positive factor in your enrollment at Parkland?
   b. Negative factor in your enrollment at Parkland?

14. Do you participate in class? What motivates you to participate? Discourages you to participate?
   a. If so, in what ways?
   b. If not, explain what motivates you?

15. How do feel about your friends in the learning community?
   a. How do your TWA classmates/friends motivate you?
   b. Are your feelings for your TWA friends the same as other friends you have at Parkland?

16. Do you feel like your confidence level has changed since you enrolled in TWA?

Faculty/Mentors

17. Tell me about your instructors. Are they approachable … in class, and after class?
   a. How do you feel about your instructors, your TWA instructors?
   b. Recall an experience you have with a faculty member in your first year, good/bad?

18. What affect do they have on your motivation to persist in college?

19. Do you think they view your success differently than non-TWA students, all other students?
20. What are some of the most difficult obstacles or barriers to your continued enrollment at Parkland College?
   a. Why?
   b. What are you doing presently to overcome these obstacles/barriers?

21. What are some of the most important aspects of your college experience that you need to overcome these obstacles/barriers?

22. How would you like to be remembered by your friends in TWA, Parkland College? Why?

23. Would most African American males at Parkland College choose to join TWA, a social club? Why?

24. From your experiences, what would you tell a young person at your high school right now?
   a. How would you tell them to prepare for college?

25. From your experiences, what would you tell African American teachers at your school right now?
   a. How could you influence them to prepare students for college?

26. From your experiences, what would you tell non-African American teachers at school right now?
   a. How could you influence them to prepare students for college?

27. If possible, what would change about your grade school and high school experience to better prepare you for what you now about college?

28. Where do you see yourself going with your college education?
Appendix F

Focus Group Moderator's Guide

“Together We Achieve” — Focus Group interviews.

| Moderator introduction, welcome, purpose (2-3 minutes) | Hello. My name is Randy Fletcher. I’d like to first start off by thanking each of you for taking time to come today. We’ll be here for about 45mins- 50mins.

The reason we are here today is to assist the “Together We Achieve” program by discussing with you what your experiences have been like in the program. The results of this talk will be used for my dissertation research at the University of Illinois on the impact participation in a learning community has on persistence and perception of college for African American male students. |
| --- | --- |

| Ground Rules (2minutes) | To allow our conversation to flow more freely, I’d like to go over some ground-rules.

1. Please talk one at a time and avoid side conversations
2. Everyone doesn’t have to answer every single question, but I’d like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.
3. This will be an open discussion…feel free to comment on each other’s remarks (respectfully).
4. There are no “wrong answers,” just different experiences and observations. Say what is true for you, even if you’re only one who feels that way.
5. Just let us know if you need a break. The bathrooms are {location}.
6. For purposes of analysis and accurate reporting, our conversation will be tape recorded. In addition, we will have a person typing your responses. Are there any questions before we start? |

<p>| Specific questions (25 minutes) | 1. Share some of your experiences, positive and negative, being a member of the program? |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Do you think your experiences are different from those who are not in the program? If so, in what ways?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What activities and events did you find useful and interesting?</td>
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<td>3. What kind of challenges, if any did you face during the semester?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. What steps did you take to overcome those challenges?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What source of support did you rely on in helping you as a student?</td>
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<td>5. How have you interacted with faculty?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Have you ever interacted with a teacher before this program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. What are some of the issues you discussed with faculty members?</td>
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<td>6. What has triggered your desire to stay in school, or leave school after this semester?</td>
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<td>7. What do you think about your peers? Have they helped you out with your studies, added to your experience in TWA?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debriefing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mention some of the main points learned from the interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “I have no further questions. Do you have anything more you want to say, or ask about, before we finish the interview?”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Closing (2 minutes)</td>
<td>“Thanks for coming today and talking about the issues. Your comments have given us lots of different things to consider in regards to “out of district students”. We thank you for your time.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>