

Exploring the Experiences and Retention Decisions of African-American Male College Students

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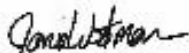
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study captured the stories of African-American male students, who participated in the African-American Male Initiative (AAMI) program at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in the south, to better understand how racial climate effected their college experiences and retention decisions. The data collected from this PWI revealed a steady increase in the African-American student enrollment and retention rate. However, the Black male student population has experienced a dramatic decrease in retention. Critical race theory and Tinto's model for student departure provided theoretical framework for this study. In addition, a review of campus climate and the Black student college experience are included in the literature review.

An adaption of Seidman's (2019) three-interview series, or a semi-structured interview approach, was used to collect data from the participants. Using the research questions as a guide, the results of the study revealed that students enjoyed the opportunity to learn how to navigate through a diverse environment at a PWI and they learned to manage perceived racist behaviors by changing their perceptions. In addition, targeted programs for minorities, such as AAMI, proved to be a great network for support as students acclimated to college. Lastly, mindset was explored as an emerging theme. In addition to networks of support, mindset was shared as a reason that these students returned to this institution, and that the racial climate was not a factor. Evidence from the study provided a better understanding of the Black student experience at a PWI from the perspective of African-American male students. As a result, decision-makers may be better equipped to manage engagement and retention, especially for students of color.

Keywords: African-American college students, Black male students, racial climate, student engagement, retention

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the two people in the whole world who created their very own reality with the framework of unconditional love for me.

Team Williams Forever- Mark, Maggie and Monica...until we meet again.....

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In an era of income and wealth disparities for African-Americans, a college degree provides an opportunity for upward social mobility and economic security for African-American college students (Nichols & Schak, 2019). Predominantly White institutions (PWI) have increased their enrollment of more diverse students (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). However, African-American students have reported low levels of satisfaction, feelings of alienation, and unwanted stereotyping at PWI's (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), while many African-American students who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) reported high levels of engagement and achievement (Bir & Myrick, 2015). HBCU's have maintained higher retention rates than African-American students who attended PWI's (Beeks & Graves, 2017). Tinto (2012) referenced the lack of social support for students of color at PWI's and used Fleming's (1985) study on hostile climates to support the drain of emotional energy that these students constantly face and why they often leave PWI's to attend HBCU's (Fleming, 1985; Tinto, 1993). In 2012, Hurtado and Ruiz conducted a study to measure the effects of diversity and climate on multiple underrepresented groups, including Black students, on predominantly White college campuses. The results revealed that students experienced "more hospitable racial climates" on campuses with 21%-35% minority students (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). Critical race theorists Carter-Andrews and Truitt (2013) argued that even in such climates, racism is still prevalent and cannot be escaped or avoided. Though this may be true, Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) shared that the college

environment is ideal for students of all backgrounds to learn how to navigate and appreciate diversity.

The National Center for Education Services (NCES), the data collection and analysis arm of the United States Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), defined retention as the percentage of first-time undergraduate college students who return to the same institution the following fall (Institute of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IES], 2020). The average fall 2017 retention rate was 81% nationally, as last reported by NCES (IES, 2020). The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was established by NCES as a primary data source for collegiate data (IES, 2020). One southern comprehensive PWI, Campton State University (CSU), reported average student retention results to IPEDS of 70% over a 3-year period beginning fall 2017, and of that student population, African-American and White students had individual populations of 34.5% and 50.5%, respectively (IES, 2020). Although the overall retention rate was decreasing (see Appendix A), African-American students maintained a higher average rate of retention, 72%, during the same 3-year span (IES, 2020). The African-American student population at this PWI has actually increased by over 8% since 2010, while the White student population has decreased by over 6% during the same timeframe.

CSU experienced steady growth with the number of Black students that chose to attend the institution, and stay for subsequent years after their first year for a 3-year period beginning fall 2017. However, the average retention rate during that timeframe for African-American females, 75.5%, is disproportionate to that of African-American

males, 65.9% (IES, 2020). Harper (2012) revealed that Black males have experienced complexities from enrollment to graduation with few solutions from higher education decision makers. There is very little research on climate and retention disparities between African-American males and females at PWI's. The experiences of African-American male students at Campton State should be explored so that university personnel can gain insight into their academic and engagement experiences, which can result in better institutional strategic decisions.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the college experiences and retention decisions of African-American male students at a predominantly White institution in the south as they experience the racial climate of the campus. Nestled in a small southern town, Campton State is considered a predominantly White institution. Many African-American students have chosen to attend this institution, but retention for African-American males is steadily decreasing. It is not uncommon that many African-American students report low levels of satisfaction at a PWI (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Various factors can impact retention such as student behaviors, socioeconomic status, demographics, academic ability and performance, and institutional conditions (Millea et al., 2018). As a result, many institutions spend time and resources to strategically plan initiatives to engage and support students (Tinto, 1999; Turner & Tompson, 2014). Tinto (2017) recognized the importance of the student's voice in conversations about student engagement and retention. He agreed with Naylor's (2017) argument that the student's perspective of their college experience can differ from the university's perspective, and

institutions should form partnerships with students to learn how their experiences led to their chosen academic decisions.

African-American students have historically struggled at PWI's, citing feelings of isolation and high levels of dissatisfaction (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The racial climate of a campus often impacts the retention decisions of students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017). Hurtado et al. (1999) described campus racial climate as an academic society's perception, current beliefs, and judgements about race, ethnicity, and diversity. Campton State University has experienced an enrollment increase of African-American students over the last 10 years which attests to climate changes that may have happened over time. However, there is an immense disparity in retention between African-American females and males. This study will provide stories about student experiences from African-American male students to solicit the meanings students attached to those experiences in order to better understand how the university's climate effects their engagement and retention decisions. Experiences with diversity, engagement, and networks of support are a few of the topics discussed with students who volunteered to participate in this study. Those shared experiences align with Tinto's (2012) argument that institutions should solicit the perspectives of students when assessing how academic and social engagement impact retention.

Research Design

Researchers have engaged faculty, staff, and students in conversations about their perceptions on and experiences with institutional climate for racial/ethnic diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999). Various university initiatives are designed to increase student engagement (Tinto, 1999; Turner & Tompson, 2014), and targeted programming for

Black students often result in higher levels of retention (McClain & Perry, 2017). An example of such a program is the University System of Georgia's (USG) African-American Male Initiative (AAMI), which is funded on campuses across the state of Georgia to include Campton State (University System of Georgia [USG], 2020). In this qualitative study, the researcher delved into the stories of African-American male college students who have participated in the AAMI program at CSU to gain more insight on how campus climate at a PWI in the south impacted their college experience and their retention-based decisions. A basic interpretative study allows the researcher to explore their interest and what a situation or phenomenon means to a participant (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This type of research allows for a broader perspective to understand the views of the participants.

The following questions guided this study:

1. How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?
2. How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?
3. How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Conceptual Framework

Maxwell (2013) described the conceptual framework as something that is “constructed” based on your research, interest, and the existing literature. A social constructivist's desire is to understand lived experiences which could include a variety of meanings and complex views (Creswell, 2014). Merriam (2009) described

constructionism as the researcher's opportunity to understand "the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (p. 22). The meaning, in turn, is constructed and not discovered, with a primary goal of interpreting the uncovered meanings (Merriam, 2009). This research uncovered meanings of race and climate and how those constructs can impact an African-American male student's decision to stay in college.

As various activists and scholars engaged in dialogue to understand how race influenced experiences, critical race theory (CRT) was born out of this engagement and further considered the "relationship among, race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.3). Critical race theorists argued that there are societal factors that seek to normalize racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and not challenge the complexities of race and race-related constructs. In an effort to understand how racial climate impacts the African-American male experience at a PWI, CRT was one such theory that guided this research. CRT encourages the narration of personal stories about race and race-related experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, 2017). The qualitative research approach chosen for this study allowed for such an exploration of a Black student's perspective of their experiences.

Vincent Tinto published an article in 1975 with a theory of student retention and over the years, the theory was expanded, to include a theory of student departure (Tinto, 1993, 2012). Tinto's research revealed that universities must take interest in the student experience or enrollment decline could result as a consequence (Tinto, 1993). The factors that lead to a student's early departure from college can vary, but for minority students, how racial climate is experienced matters (Milem et al., 2005). In this research study, Black male students from a retention-based program, AAMI, were provided with

open-ended questions so that they could share their personal experiences with the climate of the campus and how those experiences influenced their decisions about their commitment to CSU. Student interactions with university faculty, staff, and other students could impact a student's decision to leave college (Tinto, 1993), and the data collected from the participants revealed how those interactions impact an African-American male's college experience.

Personal Identity and Positionality

I am both personally and professionally interested in this topic. As an African-American, used synonymously with Black, who attended a PWI and currently works for one, I am interested in understanding the current experiences of African-American college students and how students interpret those experiences. I do not remember understanding purposeful retention strategies as a 1990's minority college student at a predominantly White institution, but I do remember a lively campus full of rich collegiate experiences and memories for all. As an African-American business major from Georgia, I was drawn to the experience that Valdosta State University (VSU) afforded me to be involved and engaged. In addition to the experiential opportunities that I experienced, such as internships and a study abroad trip, my undergraduate time at VSU was filled with challenging coursework, sorority life, and student organizational involvement in the business school. Others participated in recreational sports, worked campus and community jobs, and even met and married life partners. I finished a degree in business in the fall of 1999 and out of 8,755 students, roughly 21% were Black at that time (IES, 2020). Although the institution served a diverse student body with different

needs and wants, the support to be engaged and design your own experience was noteworthy.

For many African-American college students, negative race-driven experiences happen more often than not during their collegiate journey. A search for literature about PWI's and the African-American college experience provided a variety of resources to explore why these students may leave PWI's. Such reasons include alienation, stereotyping, and isolation (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), in addition to racially motivated incidents and feeling unwelcomed to peer activities and events (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). In a qualitative study conducted by Lee (2016), 10 Black students who attended a PWI shared their lived experiences with the researcher. Experiences such as poor relationships with White faculty, surrounding community racism, and hostility were some of comments shared by the participants. As a result, many African-American students at PWI's report high levels of dissatisfaction (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) and are unlikely to stay (Beeks & Graves, 2017).

Retention is imperative to the college experience, and graduation becomes the culminating event for a job, in most cases, well done. As a current college administrator, it is my deepest desire that every student take advantage of the resources that the institution of their choice has to offer. From facilities to faculty, we are tasked with curating an experience where students are encouraged to engage in academic and social activities. Many institutions offer students the opportunity to engage in intellectual practices with world renowned faculty and many, of whom, have created experiential learning opportunities for students. Many campus facilities are designed to provide a top-notch experience for student engagement, and a typical student affairs staff remains up to date

on social trends for the 21st century college student. However, some students of color have experienced “a chronic state of belonging uncertainty” (Stephens et al., 2012, p.1191) on majority White campuses despite campus efforts to be inclusive and engaging for all.

Exploratory Studies

Although I am immersed in academic affairs, I often describe myself as an academic in a student affairs body. Because of my personal college experience, I believe that the college experience can transform the lives of students and allow them to enter into the world as a better version of themselves. Student engagement involves connecting in both academic and social activities (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012), and I have had the pleasure to lead and/or advise various student social and/or academic organizations and university initiatives geared towards student success.

William’s Story

While thinking about how I wanted to tackle the topic of engagement and retention, I decided to talk with one of my students from a campus program that I oversee, William (pseudonym), an African-American male student who also decided to stay an additional year to complete a master’s degree. During his time in undergrad, he joined multiple leadership organizations, a fraternity, participated in targeted programming for African-American males, and later served as a mentor to younger Black male students during his upper-classman years. He also joined academic societies and clubs, participated in a study abroad and an internship, and graduated early with a degree in accounting. During our conversation, I learned that William was not at all bothered by the constant campus discussion about student retention. In fact, he felt that as a satisfied

student, he had more of a chance to secure certain positions and opportunities due to his level of engagement. He felt mostly supported as an African-American student at the PWI where I work, especially due to his campus involvement in programs dedicated to mentoring Black male students, but he certainly had an awareness of disparities amongst African-American students as a whole. After my conversation with William, I decided that I wanted to invest time in learning more about the African-American student experience at PWI's, and how those experiences influenced their decision to return for consecutive years.

Ashley's Story

During my advanced qualitative research course, I interviewed an African-American female student from Campton, Ashley (pseudonym). I used the Seidman (2019) three-interview series to conduct the interview. In my first interview, I learned that Ashley's mother's family attended college, but her father's family did not. She was motivated by lifestyle differences between the families and she worked hard to apply herself academically. CSU was not her first choice. Ashley wanted to attend one of the other comprehensive institutions in her state's university system, but she did not perform well enough on the standardized test used for admissions and according to Sackett et al. (2004), racial inequities in standardized testing is a real issue that has been widely researched, especially in the field of psychology. However, the precollege activities provided by CSU, including orientation and move in day support, were impactful to her excitement about attending the college. I learned in the second and third interviews that Ashley had a good experience with most of the faculty, but overtime, she felt that some of the faculty were not as warm as others, and there were times that she felt intimidated to

ask questions or get help. When asked about race, she didn't feel like she experienced any disparities on campus during her first year, and there was a comfort level in the large number of African-American students attending the college. The campus provided a safe place for African-American students whereas the small southern town did not feel so welcoming.

She landed a campus job at the end of her first year for her sophomore year which further developed her campus engagement. However, while working on campus, she began to experience what she perceived to be racism. There were staff members who managed a large number of student workers who seemed to have an obvious bias against the Black students. As a result, many of those students felt uncomfortable and quit their jobs. Ashley even recalls driving to campus for work in tears as the situation became intense and unbearable for her. She found refuge in getting involved with a targeted program for Black students. She made new friends, and found a safe network of dedicated faculty and staff who really cared about the students, most of whom were African-American, and worked for the Diversity & Inclusion office on campus. She also noted, however, that there were a few of the office's employees who did not share the same sentiments, but that number was quite small. Ashley decided to apply for another campus job. She landed a position in one of the colleges and her network expanded. Although nearly all of the faculty and staff were White, she found the environment to be quite similar to the diversity office; a place of safety with caring people.

William and Ashley provided valuable insight to assist me with this study. Both William and Ashley's level of engagement from their experiences at PWI's led to their decision to stay. Learning more about their college experiences supported Tinto's (2012)

argument that the student's perspective is important as institutions evaluate engagement and retention. I chose Campton State University for my research because they have managed to attract, retain, and graduate African-American students at high institutional rates based on data shared with IES. However, the retention rate for Black males is 65.9% (IES, 2020) and this is a problem that needs solution-focused attention.

Definition of Terms

In this section, various terms are provided that relate to the engagement experiences of African-Americans students at predominately White institutions.

African-American/Black: The terms African-American and Black are both used to describe Americans of African descent (Ghee, 1990).

Campton State University: Pseudonym used to protect the identity of the institution used for this study. The college can also be referenced as Campton, Campton State, or CSU.

Graduation Rate: The percentage of students who graduate from the same institution where they started as first time, full-time undergraduate students within a 6-year period.

Mindset: Dweck's (1999) mindset research introduced some realities of a person's belief that intelligence and abilities were fixed and could not be changed whereas those who believed that one could grow through intelligence and influence experienced a growth mindset.

Retention: The percentage of first-time undergraduate college students who return to the same institution the following fall (IES, 2020).

Structural Diversity: The numerical expression of campus diversity to include various ethnic and racial populations (Hurtado et al., 1999).

Student Engagement: Academic connections and social affiliations that represent measures used to identify student engagement (Millea et al., 2018).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will begin with an explanation of the critical race theory and a model for student departure that will be explained as plausible theories to guide this qualitative research study. Next, racial climate will be introduced which will include concepts related to climate such as structural diversity and critical mass. Because CSU has experienced a significant retention decline in the Black male student population, literature about the black male college experience will be presented, including details about the African-American Male Initiative. Lastly, other literature that is relevant to student college experiences, such as mindset, sense of belonging, and student engagement activities, in particular Greek life, will also be explored in this review.

Theoretical Framework

The institutional data for Campton State revealed that African-American students were retained at a higher rate than all students combined. However, the rate of retention for African-American males was significantly lower than that of African-American females. Various factors affect a student's decision to return to their first-year institution for subsequent years. For students of color, the racial climate of the campus is a major factor (Milem et al., 2005). Other factors include pre-college experiences, the institutional setting, faculty/student and student/student interactions, the overall institution as an organization, and the student's determination as a whole (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In this study, the student experiences of African-American male

students from the AAMI program at Campton will be explored to gain a deeper understanding of how campus climate could impact retention.

Critical Race Theory

Various theories and models can be used to provide context for the Black student experience at a PWI. One such theory, critical race theory (CRT), is defined as “ a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.3). CRT considers many of the same issues as civil rights activists and scholars, but the differences are observed in the chosen step by step progression approach with civil rights, and the more liberal approach by CRT to question and analyze the foundation of equality and law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The principles of CRT include the thoughts that

- (1) racism is a normal part of society and is often difficult to acknowledge or challenge the racist behaviors of others
- (2) “interest convergence or material determinism” allows all segments of the White community to advance over people of color in any area
- (3) race is a product of “social construction” which includes social thought and relations that further connects to one’s personality, moral intelligence, and behavior, and not the surface-level diversity that observe and instantly categorize
- (4) minority groups face racialization by dominant groups; however, racial identity many overlap with other experiences and
- (5) minority writers and thought leaders should narrate the stories of their experiences where racism and the law may have intersected (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Education is considered one of the “spin off movements” of CRT as educational scholars use the theory to question and analyze the effects of racism in educational systems

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), but an intense study of the topic is necessary (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In fact, Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that racism must be exposed in education, followed by proposed solutions to build a framework for such a study.

Most African-American college students are underserved in public institutions, despite their enrollment numbers and their similar collegiate goals and aspirations, from peers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, according to national data (Nichols & Schak, 2019). Critical race theorists challenge the normalization of racism and use storytelling as an opportunity to explore the experiences of others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Delgado & Stefancic (2012) furthered this observation and suggested that with critical race theory (CRT), racism is endemic, deeply rooted in the Black experience, and is a very real social construct. As a historic driving force in higher education for African-American students, HBCU's have maintained higher retention rates than African-American students who attend PWI's (Beeks & Graves, 2017). Many Black students have agreed that the faculty/student relationships, accessible administrators, engagement with peers, and the overall climate make an HBCU more appealing than a PWI (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

The experiences of underrepresented groups on predominantly White college campuses have been studied by various researchers and through the use of stories by some (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), where an open dialogue allowed participants to express perspectives of individual experiences related to race. A qualitative study on the lived experiences of Black students at a PWI was conducted by Lee (2016). Common themes of racial microaggressions, poor relationships with White faculty and staff, hostility, and blatant racism in the community were found as a result of the study. The

consistent trials experienced because of race are exhausting and often lead to racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007), which can result in varying levels physical and mental anguish, as most fatigue does. Black students may feel that their sense of belonging, explained by Strayhorn (2012) as the feelings of respect, value, need, and acceptance by a defined group, is challenged by this type of college environment, which can lead to dissatisfaction and thoughts of not returning for additional years of study. In a different study conducted by Harper (2012), black males at several PWI's shared examples of stereotypically racial encounters that are consistent with the thoughts revealed by Lee (2016), Smith et al. (2007), and Strayhorn (2012). Academically, many of the participants were presumed to be not prepared academically and experienced hardships with peer attitudes on academic assignments and skepticism from faculty. Socially, peers assumed that the black males participated in college sports, listened to certain genres of music, and could dance. The study also revealed that Black males who were campus leaders and academically successful were not immune from such encounters.

Tinto's Student Departure Model

McNeely's 1930's research (Tinto, 1993) is considered one of the first studies on student retention, and in addition to William Spady's (1971) Student Attrition Theory and Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2007) Student Departure Theory, other retention theorists followed to include John Bean's (1980, Bean & Eaton, 2000) Psychological Theory of Retention, and Alexander Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory. There are a variety of other texts to support retention strategies. Such strategies include Pena and Swail's (2003) work to support the impact of student and faculty interactions, and O'Keeffe's (2013) contribution to reveal how mentoring improves student retention. Tinto's work in student

departure will be helpful to assist with the analysis of the research participant's experiences for this study.

Students are involved in a range of experiences before and after leaving college. Tinto's model of longitudinal departure provides connection to "events which occur within the institution following entry and/or which immediately precede entrance to it" and not "individual behavior after departure" (Tinto, 1993, p.112). The model focuses on the student's decision to leave and not so much academic or other university dismissals (Tinto, 1993). As student experiences are explored in this study, campus interactions with faculty, staff, and other students become an important component of the discussion. Tinto referenced such interactions in the departure model to explore and explain how those interactions could lead to a student's decision to leave (Tinto, 1993). In addition, Tinto (1993) recommended that institutions review the effect of institutional policies as some could negatively impact a student's experience and result in early departure.

Tinto (1993) created the longitudinal model of institutional departure to describe the student departure process. As one begins to examine a student's decision to leave prior to completing a degree, their pre-entry attributes, family background, skills, and prior education, are explored and used as determinants of goal commitments when entering college. Next, the departure theory recognizes both formal and informal experiences that occur within academic and social systems. Academic performance and extracurricular activities are considered formal activities experienced by students. However, the interactions experienced with faculty, staff, and other students are informal but a necessity to the overall experience. Those informal interactions may influence the more formal collegiate systems which ultimately defines a student's ability to integrate

academically and socially. Integration can also be seen as membership, and oftentimes students who feel connected have lesser feelings of isolation. A campus can be comprised of multiple academic and social communities. Tinto (1993) also noted that effective social integration and support from the college community for students of color is often found in smaller communities such as Greek life, clubs, and other organizations. Goal commitments are revisited after institutional experiences and academic and social integration activities have occurred. Lastly, external forces such as work commitments, family obligations, financial resources, etc. can impact a student's experience. Overall, the model referenced several attributes, both internal and external, can lead to a student's ultimate decision to leave college, or depart, before completing a degree.

Tinto (2012) argued that a climate of support, belonging, general well-being, and the value of involvement that one senses is attached to their collegiate setting, and often shapes a student's decision to stay or leave. Fleming (1985) and Tinto (1993) also recognized that such a climate may be difficult for Black students to find at larger white institutions. Increased retention for African-American students can be influenced by targeted campus initiatives for minorities (McClain & Perry, 2017), such as the University System of Georgia's African-American Male Initiative. Tinto (2012) argued that theorists lack the insight to tell practitioners how to enhance social and academic engagement at their institution to impact retention, and unfortunately, lists of disconnected and uncoordinated actions are created which result in little to no effect on retention. From this research project, firsthand insight about engagement and its impact on retention from students who are participating in a campus initiative geared towards retaining students of color, AAMI, were discovered.

How Climate Change Affects Diversity

HBCU's and other minority serving institutions were designed to provide educational opportunities and enhance the intellectual capacities of underrepresented populations. Historically, many PWI's have struggled with access and inclusion for students of color (Thelin, 1985). The historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* 1954 decision applied to higher education (Hurtado et al., 1999) which required more PWI's to adjust their racial climates. According to their website, Campton State admitted their first African-American student, a female, in 1963 who also graduated in a timely manner. Soon after, the Black Student Alliance was formed followed by integrated sporting teams, and historically black sororities and fraternities (IES, 2020.). Peterson et al. (1978) revealed that it is an institution's responsibility to accommodate diverse students through education, minority-specific programs, and the psychological climate of campus relationships. As the number of students of color enrolled continues to increase at PWI's (Snyder & Dillow, 2015), a campus's response to such is key to defining climate.

The norms and beliefs of an organization's culture affects the climate (Hurtado et al., 1999). Increasing the number of students, faculty and staff of a certain ethnicity, or structural diversity, is an important first step in changing campus climate as it relates to diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999). The concept of "critical mass" has been referenced by researchers who believe that retention numbers of students of color can increase if there is a larger community of like individuals on the campus of a PWI (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2012), which is closely related to structural diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999).

In 2012, Hurtado and Ruiz surveyed 4,037 underrepresented minority college students on 31 campuses nationally. Institutions were selected for the study based on diversity and retention data retrieved from IPEDS. A survey, the research instrument used, was administered to minority students at the 31 participating institutions. The responses of 490 Black students were used as part of the results. The study showed that many college campuses were not aware of the level of issues experienced by minority students who are underrepresented on their campuses. The African-American students revealed that not only do they experience racial incidents, such as harassment, they were more likely than their peers to report racially motivated occurrences to campus authorities. More than half of the Black students shared feelings of exclusion from campus events and activities which can ultimately lead to feelings of dissatisfaction (Beeks & Graves, 2017). However, the Black students who attended more diverse campuses did not experience the same levels of exclusion or harassment. The level of significance of some racial incidents, such as verbal comments, declined on campuses that had a student population of 21%-35% of underrepresented minorities. Campton State has managed to attract and retain African-American students who currently make up 34.5% of the school's population. The concepts of structural diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999) and critical mass (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2012) could be factors that led to less negative race-related experiences for the Black students from Hurtado and Ruiz's (2012) study who attended PWI's with more diversity in the student population. With an African-American student population of 34.5% (IES, 2020), the numerical representation of those students at CSU supports Hurtado et al.'s (1999) structural diversity concept. Though the increase in the number of African-American

students at CSU is noteworthy, the decline in retention of the number of African-American males is troubling. Hurtado et al. (1999) noted that in addition to diversity in numbers, there are other elements that influence climate and diversity that must be addressed.

The climate for diversity for an institution “can be conceptualized as a product of various elements that include the historical, structural, perceptual, and behavioral dimensions of the college environment” (Hurtado, 1994, p.22). Hurtado et al. (1999) further defined the elements that influenced the climate for racial diversity at an institution under the context of two broader constructs: government/policy and sociohistorical. Institutional historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, or the support for desegregation and government programs such as financial aid at an institution, and psychological climate, or the perceptions and attitudes about race, discrimination, and prejudices, are components of the government/policy construct. Components of the sociohistorical construct include structural diversity, or diversity students, faculty, and staff and the numerical representation thereof, and the behavioral dimension, or interaction amongst races and campus involvement. All of these dimensions are interconnected and do not operate as separate, discrete dynamics such as an institution’s historic response to segregation can impact current enrollments. However, the model provides an opportunity for an institution to review current patterns and beliefs and invest real efforts into climate change. As institution’s review racial climate, they must be willing to assess how their current climate ultimately affects students and how the relationships between various governmental/policies and sociocultural contexts can be changed or improved for the betterment of the student experience (Hurtado et al., 1999).

The College Experience of Black Males Matter

It is important to note that the Black college experience is not experienced by all Blacks equally (Lee, 2018). There is a clear difference in the experiences per gender as a disproportionate number of Black females were retained in comparison to Black males at Campton State. When comparing African-American female and male college students, African-American males have reported a number of academic and social differences to include less time writing papers and completing other assignments, fewer notes recorded during class time, lower grades, less participation in campus life, and a low number of leadership positions (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2004; Harper 2012). According to Harper (2012), the complex issues experienced by black males in the areas of enrollment, engagement, achievement, and graduation need attention in higher education. Due to the lack of proper handling by decision makers and/or those who are concerned, solutions to the complex issues faced have been few the outcomes experienced by black males have remained unchanged (Harper, 2012).

Harper (2012) presented a report that captured the experiences of 219 high-achieving black males from colleges, both HBCU's and PWI's, across the US. The purpose of the report was to reframe the dialogue around college achievement and black males. This effort was, in part, pursued as a counterbalance to research that exposed low performing black males, and presented black males who were high-achievers despite campus and other circumstances. The interviews revealed six areas of key findings: choosing colleges, getting in, transitioning, and paying for college, student engagement, and responding productively to racism. Many of the participants cited good networks of support, from parents to pre-college programs, to assist in their journey of choosing,

getting in, and transitioning to college. Surprisingly, high school guidance counselors were revealed to have been more harmful due to lack of support and belief in their ability to attain admission into certain schools. Most of the males interviewed for this study were able to attain good financial resources for college. However, many of the participants shared that they knew of other black males who dropped out of college or transferred to less expensive institutions due to the inability to pay for college. However, peer mentoring programs were cited as being extremely successful for college transitioning and retention, especially when the mentors were Black male upperclassmen and student leaders. In addition to peer mentoring, most of the participants attributed their success in college to their level of engagement in experiential activities such as internships, study abroad trips, and summer research programs. Conversely, the participants attributed the disengagement of other Black males on their campus as a major contributor to low academic performance and high levels of retention. Lastly, managing their responses to racist comments and attitudes presented itself as a key finding for the participants to who attended PWI's. Due to campus engagement activities geared towards Black students, the participants learned that instead of responding in a negative way, use the opportunity to educate and question the misconception and challenge the comment in a way that allows thoughtful dialogue.

The African-American Male Initiative

Tinto (1993) supported the fact that there are a variety of retention programs that are successful, even though variances in operation, structure and focus may exist. However, their similarities provide students with rich experiences that positively impact retention (Tinto, 1993). Those similarities are considered by Tinto (1993) as the secret to

retention success and as “the principles of effective retention,” they are described as an institution’s commitment to put a student’s health and happiness before any other institutional priority or goal, a commitment to serve all students educationally and not just a selected few, and a commitment to develop and support effective communities that benefit all students both socially and educationally. Programming and initiatives that include students of color are one of the factors that may increase retention amongst African-American students (McClain & Perry, 2017), and the University System of Georgia’s (USG) African-American Male Initiative (AAMI) is such an example. This community of students began in 2001 with the mission to integrate academic and social tools that would lead to positive mindsets towards retention, progression, and graduation for African-American males (USG, 2020). Since its inception, the USG has experienced an 84.4% increase in enrollment of African-American male college students, and a 137.94% increase in African-American male college graduates as of the 2017-2018 academic year (USG, 2020).

Before the AAMI program began, researchers from the USG found that there were extensive gaps in degree attainment between African-American men and other student populations (USG, 2020). Positive mindset was integrated into the core of the mission and four initiatives were created to customize the experience of African-American college males (USG, 2020). With academic enrichment, pre-college skill building activities in reading, writing, and math are provided with continuous guidance throughout the academic year. Both internal and external student support services are available to assist the students as they transition into college. Next, mentorship is provided to reinforce the importance of retention, progression, and graduation, while

adding valued support to students through personal and academic challenges. Finally, the model integrates leadership development to assist in essential skills needed to be successful both personally and professionally. Programs like AAMI confirm Tinto's (1993) retention effectiveness strategy by its commitment to putting a student's welfare first, providing an opportunity for all students to be educated by any means necessary, and supporting communities that are built to provide direct support to students. In order to implement effective retention programs, resources and incentives must be available for faculty and staff to implement the program and to train to effectively execute the plan (Tinto 1993). Although there is a plethora of implementation strategies for successful programming, an institution's resource support is imperative.

With AAMI, many of the USG institutions present proposals to the USG outlining support personnel that will be needed to effectively service the program to include directors and other support staff. Institutional proposals allow faculty and staff to develop a plan of action for long-term programming success which aligns with Tinto's (1993) principles of effective implementation for retention programs. One proposal example was provided by the University of West Georgia (UWG) as an initial proposal and the institution continues to provide subsequent updates to support the AAMI integrated program model components (Hester, 2018). Some of the features of their proposal included mandatory study halls for increased academic enrichment, student support services such as customized academic advising, professional mentoring, and a focused leadership development lecture series (Hester, 2018). Other effective principles to effectively implement retention programs include allowing faculty and staff who are responsible for the program to have real ownership of the process and arranging for high

levels of coordination with all campus entities to ensure a systemic response to retention (Tinto, 1993). In UWG's proposal and subsequent updates, such strategies were included. Faculty and staff from the campus AAMI program were able to create and design a first-year interdisciplinary course for cohorts of AAMI students (Hester, 2018) which supported Tinto's (1993) suggestion that retention efforts should be frontloaded in a student's first-year experience. This provided an opportunity for program leaders to have a share of ownership in the program and a consistent opportunity to impact students upon arrival at the university. Due to the campus response and support of AAMI, other opportunities have been provided over the years to include volunteer mentorship, an opportunity for participating students to travel abroad, and community partnership and service activities (Hester, 2018). Finally, successful program implementation must include assessment and the space to propose improvements (Tinto, 1993). UWG uses enrollment, GPA, and retention and graduation rates as performance indicators to assess for success and improvement strategies, and the data revealed that AAMI participants have higher GPA's and higher retention rates than non-participating Black males (Hester, 2018). Student retention is at the heart of the AAMI model. The components of the model, academic enrichment, student support, mentoring, and leadership development (USG, 2020), directly align with Hurtado et al.'s (1999) constructs and McClain & Perry (2017) factors to develop a safe climate for students of color to learn and grow. In addition, Strayhorn's (2012) research confirmed that black males cited involvement as a key to successfully acclimate to a college campus.

The Side Effects of the College Experience for African-American Students

Although racial climate is a major factor of the college experience for a student of color (Milem et al., 2005), other factors can also impact their student experiences. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) thoughts that factors such as pre-college experiences, the institutional setting, faculty/student and student/student interactions, the overall institution as an organization, and the student's determination as a whole impacts a student's experience, are quite relevant to the larger topics of mindset, belongingness, and engagement. In this section, a review of those topics will be examined as factors that can be affected by campus climate and ultimately impact an African-American student's college experience.

The Importance of Mindset

The opportunity to attend college creates a promising pathway for upward social mobility and economic security despite wealth and income disparities for African-Americans (Nichols & Schak, 2019). Those disparities have often resulted in unwanted disadvantages. The desire to overcome those disadvantages drives many to believe that intelligence can make a difference in performance to offset disadvantages due to race, gender, or circumstances (Nichols & Schak, 2019; Rattan et al., 2015). Mindset is an emerging topic for retention researchers. A student's decision to leave may be based on obstacles out of their control (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015) and also aligns with external forces noted in Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. However, a student's mindset and ability to persist can greatly affect their decision to stay (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Dweck's (1999) mindset research introduced some realities of a person's belief that intelligence and abilities were fixed and could not be changed

whereas those who believed that one could grow through intelligence and influence experienced a growth mindset. The concept of growth mindset and its relation to resilience is a newer concept in academia that can provide a perspective of why some students experience academic success (Barclay et al., 2018). However, mindset could be considered as a pre-entry attribute from Tinto's (1993) departure model. A student's perspective of their abilities in their academic setting is a mindset concern (Barclay et al., 2018; Rattan et al., 2015). Students with a growth mindset can increase their ability to learn and achieve, and their ability to show resilience when faced with difficult situations (Barclay et al., 2018). College students face a multitude of decisions. A student with a growth mindset has the innate ability to transition from various decisions and continue to move forward if faced with personal or academic setbacks and or disruptions. Students with a fixed mindset avoid such transitions and are less resilient during challenges and setbacks (Barclay et al., 2018; Rattan et al., 2015).

Barclay et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study to assess mindset in freshmen college students. Psychologically speaking, resilience, as a behavior of growth mindset, may lead a student to return to college for their second year of study. In this study, 327 freshmen students were categorized as at-risk non-scholars and honor scholar students to collect quantitative data. The non-scholars entered college with low a GPA, low SAT/ACT scores, and many needing some type of early academic support, whereas the scholars were high achieving students with high a GPA and high SAT/ACT scores. The survey, completed by 270 of the students, used both the HCAP-21 (High Capacity Model of Resilience and Well Being) and the HPI (Hope Personality Inventory) to predict college success using the traits of resilience and well-being as well as average

achievement, respectively. The survey, used as a research instrument, was given at the beginning (Time 1) and end (Time 2) of their first semester with the analysis of variance, or ANOVA, used to measure any significant changes. Significant differences in growth mindset on the HCAP-21 and HPI scale were found from Time 1 to Time 2. Scholars showed more resilience and growth over non-scholars in traits such as ambition, learning success, and commitment. In addition, the data revealed that non-scholars attempted and earned less credit hours than scholars. It is not surprising that scholars would show significant growth mindset changes over non-scholar students after one semester of college. Understanding childhood beliefs about college from participants will shed light on their mindset prior to beginning their academic programs.

Tinto (2017) recognized that university personnel and theorists view retention differently than college students. For many students, especially the underserved populations, retention means persistence, and persistence leads to self-efficacy (Tinto, 2017) which in its purest form is how people determine their ability to succeed in a situation or perform a task to the point of success (Bandura, 1977). Dweck (1999, 2006) argued that persistence and the desire to persevere is a component of a growth mindset which eventually leads to successful outcomes. The data from CSU indicated that although this southern institution is experiencing enrollment and retention increases in the African-American student population as a whole, the rate of retention and enrollment numbers are declining for African-American male students. Mindset could be one of the factors of influence for variances in academic achievement within socioeconomic groups and achievement can be impacted by a shift in behaviors which could be influenced by mindset (Barclay et al., 2018; Claro et al., 2016). My study revealed that an African-

American male college student's mindset influenced their experience with the climate of the campus which, in turn, impacted their college experiences and retention decisions.

Sense of Belonging and the African-American College Experience

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests that after lower-order needs, physiological and safety, are met, people are motivated by higher order needs which begins with belongingness, followed by esteem and self-actualization (Williams, 2019). In school environments, the need to belong is defined as one's feelings of acceptance, respect, support and inclusion, which will have a significant effect on a student's ability to be engaged (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Hausmann et al. (2007) defined belonging as "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p.804), which often leads to valuable educational outcomes as a membership perk (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). However, minority students have often been cited as feeling as if their sense of belonging has been met with consistent uncertainty (Stephens et al., 2012).

Vaccaro & Newman (2016) used a grounded theory method to determine how sense of belonging was experienced by minority and majority students. The researchers interviewed 51 students at a PWI who either identified as privileged, categorized as White, Christian, middle/upper class, or minority, categorized as people who identified as members of historically oppressed groups. Three themes were used to shape the study: environment, involvement, and relationships, and the data collected revealed sharp differences between how the categorized groups related to each theme. The privileged students felt that the college environment was comfortable and they enjoyed being involved in campus extracurricular activities and viewed them as fun and that their actions mattered through their involvement. Lastly, they enjoyed task-related

relationships which were familiar and friendly and allowed them to ask for help with the expectation that assistance would be achieved. The minority students from the study often felt lonely due to the lack of diversity in the college environment. They also shared feelings of being uncomfortable, and they often sought out campus involvement activities that were designed for their identity group as a way to connect have authentic experiences. Lastly, these students found that they needed more from relationships than just familiarity, friendliness, and task support: they wanted relationships where they could be their authentic selves.

How Student Engagement Transforms Lives

Astin (1984) created a theory that involved various pedagogical student development theories. The student involvement theory, as cited by Astin (1984, p. 528), “refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience.” Broadly speaking, the college experience can include class preparation activities, participation in clubs and organizations, and useful interactions with faculty, staff and students (Astin, 1984). Students who are motivated to be involved are more likely to increase their educational opportunities and personal development (Astin, 1984). When students are involved, they are engaged in their college experience which then affords an opportunity for life transformation to occur.

College retention can be evaluated by institutional factors, such as programs, specifically designed to improve student retention, academic preparation, and financial considerations (Millea et al., 2018). Student engagement, which includes academic connections and social affiliations, is critical in the first year and often influences retention (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012). Institutional priorities that involve programming for

students will typically involve resources for strategic planning and time to construct initiatives (Tinto, 1999; Turner & Thompson, 2014). As retention is measured by the percentage of first-time undergraduate college students who return to the same institution the following fall (IES, 2020), universities must find specific retention practices that are engaging and satisfactory to their student body (Millea et al., 2018). Student engagement activities for freshmen have also shown to have a direct impact on student retention (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Freshmen support systems are useful to engage new students and provide opportunities for students to transition from high school to college through initiatives that support socialization and educational persistence (Jafee, 2007; Turner & Thompson, 2014). According to their website, Campton engages in various retention-based strategies to include orientation, academic advising, first-year seminars, learning communities, Greek Life and other clubs and groups geared towards social and academic success.

CSU provides the AAMI program for Black male students. According to their website (USG, 2020), students also have the opportunity to engage in several academic and social clubs and organizations, Greek life, academic honor societies, intramural sporting activities, serve in various leadership roles to include the Student Government Association, and opt in to experiential opportunities offered through academic units. In Harper's (2012) study, the black males interviewed identified several outcomes of campus engagement at PWI's that had been previously cited in prior research to include embracing their identity at PWI's and engaging in activism (Harper & Quayle, 2007), learning how to respond productively to racist comments and/or attitudes (Harper, 2009),

and navigating through and communicating in underrepresented professional settings (Harper, 2006).

The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) is a collaborative of the nine historically Black Greek organizations (McClure, 2006). Many African-American students join Greek organizations in their collegiate years to find fellowship amongst their peers. Membership in Black Greek organizations allows one to feel instantly connected to a larger community of African-Americans both on and off campus (McClure, 2006), and Murguia et al. (1991) referred to a connection as such as “ethnic enclaves” which often serves as a resource for Black students to navigate through campus life more effectively. During the 2020 United States presidential campaign, many news outlets commented on the power of Black Greek organizations with the election of President Joseph Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris, who herself holds membership in a Black Greek sorority (Smith, 2021).

In 2006, McClure conducted a study to understand the experiences of 20 African-American males, ages 20-25, who were members of one Black Greek organization at a PWI. The campus used for the study was integrated in the 1960’s, but has historically struggled with minority student enrollment. The findings of the study revealed that the students felt more connected to black history as a result of membership in the fraternity. The affiliation to historic Black leaders who were also members of the fraternity made members feel a sense of pride and responsibility to their community. In addition to a connection to black history, participants felt more connected to their college campus. The fraternity provided a safe network for Black males to feel more engaged with the campus. Many participants were raised in environments that were very different than

their current campus environment. Tinto (1993) revealed that same-race organizations provide a unique opportunity to meet the needs of African-American students in environments where discrepancies can be perceived which leads to less instances of student campus departures. Lastly, the connection to and in society were revealed to have been experienced positively by the participants. Networking with fraternity alumni for mentoring and job opportunities allowed the participants to build relationships and networks that could carry them into their next phases of life after college. Such a societal connection may not have occurred for the participants without the assistance of the fraternity.

Students of color have the ability to engage in other minority serving organizations on college campuses in addition to sororities and fraternities. These “ethnic enclaves” Murguia et al. (1991) can be comprised of both social and academic experiences for Black students. The National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) provides resources and education to Black students and professionals who are primarily interested in careers in accounting and finance (National Association of Black Accountants, n.d.). Campton State has a newly formed chapter of NABA as result of increased demand to provide more career connectivity for their African-American students. NABA and NPHC are examples of targeted experiences for African-American students. For Black students at PWI’s, the need to join same-race groups for support is much greater (Murguia et al., 1991). Tinto (1993) noted that although both Black and White students benefit from student involvement activities, a study by Pascarella (1985a, 1985b) revealed that social connection and integration for Black students was typically more formal compared to White students who typically connected more informally.

According to Tillar (1974), White students at PWI's enjoy social opportunities that are readily available to them while Black students are drawn to more organized social groups that target Black students. Harper's (2012) study further confirmed that Black males in particular have mostly positive experiences with campus engagement activities geared towards Black students.

Conclusion

The financial stability of an institution relies on retained students (Barclay et al., 2018), therefore, sustaining full-time enrollment is imperative to the vitality of an institution of higher education. Tinto gained notoriety with his student attrition research that began with a theory of student retention published in a 1975 article, and expanded in 1993. Retention rates of African-American students at a PWI are highly influenced by the racial campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1999). McClain & Perry (2017) shared that there are a variety of factors that encourage retention for African-American students that include inclusion, programming initiatives that support students of colors, cultural spaces, and formal expressions of historic experiences of students of color. Conversations about race are critical at a college campus. Hurtado & Ruiz (2012) shared that diversity on a college campus provides an ideal environment for students to learn how to treat people who are different than them and build a better ability to be aware of and appreciate those differences.

Critical race theory coupled with Tinto's student departure model provide the framework for my study. As PWI's continue to diversify their student population (Snyder & Dillow, 2015), this study provided stories from African-American students from a PWI to understand how climate at a PWI impacted their student experiences and

decisions. Because student engagement was cited as a key element of the African-American male experience (Strayhorn, 2012), and leads to higher rates of retention (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2012), participants from the AAMI program at CSU were engaged in conversations about the retention factors mentioned from McClain & Perry's (2017) research and how the climate of a campus influenced those factors. In addition to climate, other factors that influence campus experiences were shared to include mindset, sense of belonging, and other student engagement activities.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The following topics will be discussed in the methods section: research design, research goals and questions, setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, validity, and research ethics. The section will begin with introducing the research design followed by the research goals and questions. The research questions will guide this study which will examine the experiences of Black males at PWI's. Next, the setting, Campton State University, is described with information on the participants selection process to follow. Interview techniques adapted from Seidman's (2019) three-interview series, a semi-structured interview design (Merriam, 2009), and coding techniques will be explained in detail in the data collection and analysis sections, respectively. Next, various validity strategies will be introduced that include any bias from the researcher. Lastly, research ethics are explored with the conclusion of the methods section.

Research Design

A basic interpretative study allows the researcher to explore their interest and what a situation or phenomenon means to a participant (Merriam & Grenier, 2019) while using sensemaking to understand their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This type of research allows for a broader perspective to understand the views of participants. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers using this type of study would have an interest in "(1) how people interpret their experiences (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p.23). The complexities involved with the essence or structure of an experience typically involves

heightened emotions and feelings of the phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In this qualitative study, the stories of African-American male students were explored to gain more insight about how campus climate impacted their college experience and their decision-making as students.

Qualitative research allows the researcher to capture the participant's experiences in their words and one may also relate to any shared experiences. The African-American Male Initiative students chosen for this research represented a cross section of African-American male students at the research site to offset any conflict or bias by the researcher who is also employed by a university. Some of the core characteristics of qualitative research were easily identified in this study such as natural setting, researcher's role, participant's meanings, emergent design, and holistic account (Creswell, 2014).

Research Goals and Questions

Personal research goals are rooted in a researcher's desire and curiosity about a topic (Maxwell, 2013). I was interested in learning more about African-American college students, particularly males engaged in campus initiatives, and how climate impacted their experiences and decisions. I believe that the college experience can transform lives so if campus climate becomes a hindrance to that transformation, real solutions should be explored. A qualitative research design allowed me to explore personal stories, rather than leaning to my own interpretation of survey results. Practical and intellectual goals serve a different purpose than personal goals (Maxwell, 2013). Practical goals allow the researcher to accomplish something and meet a need, while intellectual goals focus on gaining an understanding and further insight into something (Maxwell, 2013). This study was based on understanding how climate impacted the

college experiences and decisions of African-American male students involved in retention programming, such as AAMI, with the hopes that the mechanics of their experiences could be used to improve the experiences of students of color. The research questions are as follows:

1. How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?
2. How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?
3. How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Setting

The research for this study was conducted at Campton State University, a medium-sized PWI in the south which has managed to maintain steady growth and retention of African-American students, although overall retention for Black males has been trending downwards. The experiences shared by this subgroup of the institution provided insight on influences that led students who are not as likely to return to a PWI (Beeks & Graves, 2017), to their decision to continue their studies at Campton. The university, and its fall 2019 undergraduate and graduate student population of 13,238 students, is nestled in a small southern town located about 45 miles from a major southern city. The fall 2019 student population at the university was composed of 10,411 undergraduate and 2,827 graduate students, who were 66.4% female, 33.6% male, 50.8% White, 35.4% African-American, and 13.8% of other ethnicities, with a large percentage of students coming from three area counties (IES, 2020). One road in the town provides

a main entrance into the university. From there, one can see many of the institution's historic buildings and its newest state of the art business school.

As one of four comprehensive institutions in its university system, the institution prides itself on its educational diversity which includes seven colleges and one school (Arts and Humanities, Honors College, Social Sciences, Education, Science and Mathematics, School of Nursing, College of Business, and the University College) that offer 86 fields of study from undergraduate to graduate programs, to include doctoral programs (IES, 2020). In addition to Academic Affairs, there are five other divisions: Office of the President, Business & Finance, Advancement, Student Affairs & Enrollment Management, and Information Technology & Service. Using data submitted to IPEDS from 2018-2019, enrollment reached 13,733 in the fall of 2018. Fall 2019 brought a historic enrollment decline of almost 500 students (IES, 2020). NCES reported that this institution's rate of retention was less than the national average and was steadily decreasing (IES, 2020). The data also revealed that despite an increase in the African-American student population, Black males at CSU experienced a significant decrease in returning students. Historically, African-American students are typically dissatisfied at PWI's (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) which commonly leads to lower levels of retention for those students (Beeks & Graves, 2017). By interviewing African-American male students, the researcher was able to identify various experiences that led to retention-based decisions at this PWI.

Participants

Purposeful selection procedures were used to recruit participants for this study. This idea of purposeful selection allowed the researcher to identify participants for the

study rather than random samples from larger groups of people (Creswell, 2014). Researchers are able to select participants who are deemed as experts of the experience (Maxwell, 2013). In order to derive meaning from the phenomenon, Patton (2002) argued that a researcher must conduct interviews with people who have direct experience in the “phenomenon of interest” rather than secondhand recollections of that experience. Participants of this study must have been interested in developing a productive relationship with the researcher (Maxwell, 2013). They must also have been willing to spend time in the interviews and thoroughly answer the questions asked.

After the confirmation of IRB approval (See Appendix B), students were notified about the study by an email from the AAMI director and given the option to participate (See Appendix C). The criteria used to choose participants were that of homogeneous samples, as described by Patton (2002), as they represented a subgroup of university students who shared their college experience as African-American male students who were former or current participants of the African-American Male Initiative. The following selection criteria was used to recruit participants: 1) must be a current student at Campton State; 2) must have participated in the AAMI program at the institution; 3) must self-identify as African-American; 4) must be willing to participate in one to three separate interviews; 5) must be willing to share their college experience and not the experience of others; and 6) must be willing to share experiences related to the research. A Qualtrics form was used in the message about the research study to present the criteria and request that interested students respond within 2 weeks of receipt of the message. Because of the researcher’s role in academia, participants who were not familiar with the

researcher's methods or had any direct supervisory connection to the researcher were chosen (Seidman, 2019).

Data Collection

Participants involved in this research project were a part of interviews conducted virtually, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Google hangouts application that is available to all campus faculty, staff, and students (See Appendix D). In order to capture the best information for this study, participants were asked to tell stories by reconstructing their experiences and not simply remembering them (Seidman, 2019). Consent forms were provided prior to the interviews and students had an opportunity to ask questions for their understanding. If it were not for the COVID-19 pandemic, where in person conversations posed a potential health threat to non-vaccinated people, there were several places suitable for interviews on the campus. In addition to academic college buildings, the library is a campus location where it is common to find students working with other students or studying alone. There are meeting spaces around the library at CSU conducive to conducting interviews, including a coffee shop. Participants were asked to turn their cameras on during the virtual interviews, so that the researcher could make field notes of the interviewee's observed behaviors (Creswell, 2014).

The interviewer has a responsibility to provide a quality interview so that useful information can be attained that is meaningful and clear from the perspective of the participant (Patton, 2002). As a qualitative study, the experiences of the participants must be revealed from the researcher's point of view and is considered subjective (Seidman, 2019). Interview techniques adapted from Seidman's (2019) three-interview series, which includes a participant's expectations, details of their experience, and

reflection on that experience, is one approach that was used to explore the experiences of the participants. The semi-structured interview allowed for more flexibility with the questions asked, and the researcher had more control to guide the interview process and format based on feedback provided by the participant (Merriam, 2009). The research questions served as the foundation of the interview. Sample interview questions are included in Appendix E and each interview lasted for 60 to 90 minutes. After all interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed all recorded audio and/or visual materials deemed useful for the project (Creswell, 2014). Usefulness was determined by the participant's ability to interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attach meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009) as related to the topics introduced in the interview. Next, all data was transcribed from all qualitative documents and all audio and/or video, and the electronic transcripts were saved. Vivid descriptions enabled the researcher to reconstruct participants' experiences to make meaning of those experiences, and protocol was used to guide the conversation to eliminate information that may not have been useful for the research. Data collection continued until a point of data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

Maxwell (2013) suggested that researchers should start analyzing data after each interview to prevent data overload. Hand coding or computer software, such as MAXQDA, could be used to begin the tedious process of finding common themes in the data collected, and the researcher chose to hand code the data. General topics of interest were organized from the data after careful review and reflection of the transcribed interviews. Creswell (2014) suggested three code categories: topics that readers would

expect to find, surprising codes that the researcher did not anticipate, and codes that are unusual. Codebooks (Creswell, 2014) can also be used to introduce predetermined codes. Maxwell (2013) described this process as categorizing and suggested that after researchers have organized the data into categories, substantive categories should be created to describe how participants conceive and believe their experiences, and theoretical categories will allow for more general and abstract framing of the participant's experiences. Lastly, the researcher captured the essence of the data by making an interpretation of the research and identify lessons learned (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The lessons could be personal or from the comparison of literature or theories (Creswell, 2014). Those interpretations of the coded data led to current and potential future discussions about climate, retention, and the African-American male student experience at a PWI.

Validity

Collecting and analyzing qualitative data called for the researcher to further investigate the validity of the data received. Various validity strategies such as triangulation, member checking, researcher's bias, contradictory evidence, or peer debriefing could have been used to validate the accuracy of the data and offset questions about authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility (Creswell, 2014). The researcher used different methods of triangulation for trustworthiness. Students from all academic levels were recruited to gain different perspectives on the student experience. Using the data collected through interviews corroborated the experiences needed for a basic interpretive study. However, member checking was used as an additional research method to confirm accuracy after the findings and common themes

had been discovered (Creswell, 2014). With member checking, the participants were provided with their interview transcripts to check for accuracy and alert the researcher if changes needed to be made. Follow up interviews from the participants were also requested to confirm the accuracy of the data received from the common research themes.

Creswell (2014) shared that the researcher's bias deserves clarity in sharing "how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background" (p.202). In my role as a college administrator, I am privy to the real conversations of how enrollment changes affect institutions. Part of my bias to the research is the genuine concern for an institution's ability to retain students, especially students of color, and not just the interest in the student's experiences. The research study allowed me to learn of plausible solutions that could be used to maintain and increase enrollment at institutions and enhance the student experience. As I collected the data, I knew that there was a possibility that I would connect real faculty, staff, and/or departments to the experiences shared, and I could not have a bias towards the participant's experience with those entities. Also, it was imperative that I refrained from linking my perspective of my college experience to those of the participants.

Contradictory evidence or negative information can be shared as part of the research study as a validity strategy (Creswell, 2014). Tinto (2012) shared that it is useful to understand how academic and social engagement can be enhanced at an institution from a student's perception. However, a student's perception is just that: a student's perception. It could be useful to present information that introduces flaws in a student's perception.

Research Ethics

College student experiences and how they transform an experience into consciousness and make sense of it (Patton, 2002) are the basics of this qualitative study as college experiences are shared from African-American male students at a medium-sized institution in the south. Because students were interviewed as part of a human research study, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this proposal was confirmed before participants were contacted for research (Seidman, 2019). Student participation in this research was completely voluntary. Informed consent documents were imperative for participants involved in the research interviews to complete (Seidman, 2019). Confidentiality of their names and all identifying information were observed by the researcher with the use of code so that readers would not be able to identify the student (Seidman, 2019). Steps were provided by the researcher to the participant to show the transparency and security protocols provided for data collection. Those steps included how the participant was accessed, interview setting, the use of pseudonyms, how data was transcribed, and how the data was stored (Seidman, 2019). Seidman (2019) suggested that first, researchers should present basic information to participants to include what they are asking of participants, how long the interviews will last, and the identification of the interviewer. The researcher presented all of the suggested information to include the 1 to 3 interview request that could have lasted for up to 90 minutes each.

If sharing experiences with the researcher as the interviewer caused any level of discomfort, referral resources were recommended to the participants (Seidman, 2019). The researcher provided the name and contact information for the campus counseling

center to assist students if needed after the interview. In addition, participants were notified that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time, they could review and withhold interview material to include audio or video recordings and transcripts, and they had a right to request identity confidentiality (Seidman, 2019). However, if a student revealed information in the interview that required mandated reporting, the researcher could have decided to stop the interview and report the information (Seidman, 2019). This research will be presented as dissertation work for Valdosta State University and eventually to the institution used for the study for review for possible recommendations. In addition, retention recommendations could be created as a result of the research. This information was shared as part of the informed consent documents.

Conclusion

This dissertation's main focus is on impact of campus climate on the experiences and decisions, such as retention, of African-American male college students. A qualitative research approach was used to delve into this topic with six participants from Campton State University's African-American Male Initiative. Through data collection techniques, such as an adaptation of Seidman's three-interview series (Seidman, 2019), this basic interpretative research allowed the researcher to understand the participants' experiences through the use of sensemaking (Merriam, 2009). The results of the data collected will be revealed in chapter 4.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the college experiences and retention decisions of African-American male students at a predominantly White institution in the south as they experience the racial climate of the campus. The results of the data collected will be discussed in this chapter. First, a review of the research design and research questions will be shared. Next, the data collection process and analysis will be provided and profiles of the participants will be outlined as part of the study. The results of the data collected will be presented through conversations about race, campus programming, climate, and retention. Lastly, emerging themes will be revealed from the research study that include mindset, diversity, peer mentorship, and simultaneous incubation.

Researchers have engaged faculty, staff, and students in conversations about their perceptions on and experiences with institutional climate for racial/ethnic diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999). Various university initiatives are designed to increase student engagement (Tinto, 1999; Turner & Tompson, 2014), and targeted programming for Black students often result in higher levels of retention (McClain & Perry, 2017). An example of such a program is the University System of Georgia's (USG) African-American Male Initiative (AAMI), which is funded on campuses across the state of Georgia to include Campton State (USG, 2020). In this qualitative study, the researcher delved into the stories of six African-American male college students who have participated in the AAMI program at CSU to gain more insight on how campus climate at a PWI in the south impacted their college experience and their retention-based decisions.

Research Design and Questions

A basic interpretative study was used to allow for a broader perspective to understand the views of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Sensemaking provided an opportunity for the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2009). This qualitative research study allowed the researcher to understand how the participants interpreted their experiences, constructed their worlds, and provided meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The following questions guided this study:

1. How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?
2. How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?
3. How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Critical race theory and Tinto's student retention model provide the framework needed to gauge the college experiences of the participants.

Data Collection

The program director of CSU's AAMI program sent out the information about the study during the spring semester of 2021. In the questionnaire, included in the research flyer, students confirmed that they identified as an African-American male, participated in the AAMI program at CSU, and were current students at CSU. Seven students agreed to participate in the study, but only six actually completed the interview process. The first round of interviews was scheduled for 90 minutes and divided into three sections to understand racial identity and the college experience, programming and networks of

support, and racial climate’s effect on retention. Participants in this research study were asked very direct race-related questions to gain insight on their perspectives and experiences. Follow up interviews were scheduled for member checking and requesting clarification and/or new information.

Data Analysis

All data was transcribed from the audio recordings and hand coding was used to identify themes (see Table 1). Observations from the researcher were also used in this process. Through an intense process, the raw data provided the researcher with enough information to formulate themes based on the purpose statement and research questions. After a thorough review, codes were created to make sense of the data and allow the researcher to begin the process of analyzing the results.

Table 1

Codes Used to Understand the Data

Code	Description
RA	Race
P	Programming
NS	Networks of Support
RE	Retention
RC	Racial Climate
M	Mindset
D	Diversity

Profiles of the Participants

Six African-American male students from the AAMI program participated in the interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were held virtually using google meets. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. The participants were asked a range of questions to understand their experiences with identity,

campus programming, networks of support, climate, and retention. Table 2 provides brief profiles of the participants to include their age and major at the time of the interview. The narratives that follow provide background information to include family history, their academic experience prior to college, how they choose CSU, and the influence of race with their college choice.

Table 2

Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Classification	Major
Kelvin	20	Sophomore	Speech Pathology
Tyler	21	Junior	Economics
Nathan	22	Senior	Management Information Systems
Trevor	21	Junior	Sports Management
David	24	Freshman	Philosophy
Michael	20	Junior	Nursing

Kelvin

Kelvin is originally from Jackson, Mississippi. He moved to the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia when he was 15 years old with his mother, father, and two younger siblings to reside in a larger community for better long-term job opportunities. His mother attended college and is currently a nurse, but his father did not. He has other relatives (aunts, uncles, etc.) who attended college, also. When asked about his academic experience prior to college, he shared,

I think I've always been kind of good in school, in terms of everything from elementary to high school, and I always have been pretty good, book-smart, and I guess street-smart as well. But I think for the most part I've always been able to do really good in a classroom. I think it's just kind of translating to now.

He described himself as a teacher's pet and one of the better students in the classroom who could get the work done and typically remained focused if there's a natural interest in the material. Kelvin is organized and uses a daily agenda to schedule his day. The researcher observed his timeliness, organized background, and professional demeanor while participating in the interview. He was often recognized throughout grade school as a good student and received public recognitions. Kelvin believed that he could succeed academically in college and revealed that,

I've always been kind of good in the classroom before college, and I always felt that when I got there, as long as I am doing something that I'm interested in, I wouldn't have a problem with actually doing the work itself, and I think that's kind of shown so far. So, yeah, I think that's been just a big thing for me, as long as I'm interested in it, and I feel as though it's something I could see myself doing in the future, you know, I'll always be interested in the work no matter how it might be.

The interest in a career in speech pathology is what led Kelvin to Campton State. He learned about the career field from a high school career assignment. He began to research more information about the career field and found that CSU offered the program and the institution was close to home. Those were the two things that mattered to him at the time when choosing a college. When asked how race may have influenced his college decision, he shared,

I don't think race really mattered for me at all. I feel as though, even though, of course, I think it's best for me...or it's a good thing for me to be around people of

my race and be able to see them more often than not, I don't think it really would've mattered to me as much, as long as I stay strong within myself.

Tyler

Tyler is originally from Miami, Florida. He moved to a southern Georgia town with his mother and twin brother, who currently attends an HBCU, in the 10th grade due to a job change for his mother. He was really excited about this opportunity to share his story and chose to chat with the researcher outside of what looked like a building on the college campus. His mother and grandmother attended college, and he vaguely remembered a few cousins who attended college but later dropped out.

In terms of his preparation for college, Tyler shared that he began early on to develop a mindset to work hard, realizing that college would be challenging. He shared, "So as far as like preparing myself, I just said be open minded. Be myself and don't try to be somebody I can't be or I know I'm not. Really just be the hard worker that I know I am because, like I said, nothing doesn't come easy and then you get what you put in college. That's the mindset I had. I was like I know anything that I want or anything that I want to achieve I know I've got to put in the work behind it."

Tyler credits a strong support system, especially his mother, with giving him the confidence needed to have a strong belief in his ability to succeed academically. His mother enforced a "focus to succeed" mentality and "finish what you've started."

Tyler's mother took the twins on a college tour around the state of Georgia when they were in the 11th grade. According to Tyler, the weather was really bad for most of the trip, but when they arrived at Campton State, the weather cleared up and Tyler took

that as a positive sign. When asked how and if race influenced his college decision, he shared that it didn't influence his college decision because of his belief that he could "adapt to any situation." He also shared that even though he and his brother chose different types of institutions, what's more important to note is that they are both "thriving" in their environments. They often discuss likes and dislikes about their experiences, but those conversations are mostly based on academics, resources, etc., and not race and PWI's vs. HBCU's.

Nathan

Nathan is originally from South Carolina and then moved to Ohio around age 7, and back to South Carolina when he was a young teen due to parental job changes. His family then moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area when he was 14 years old. Nathan described his family as a "dream American family" with married parents and an older brother and sister. Nathan's parents and paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother received college degrees. He revealed that for most of his childhood, he never thought about race or even identified one way or another until his high school years where political discussions with others increased his awareness of the world's cultural divide. During the interview, Nathan used a virtual background, but seemed to be very comfortable in his space. The pitch of his voice was really low, therefore at times, the researcher had a difficult time understanding his responses. Nevertheless, Nathan leaned in and shared his experiences.

When asked about college preparation, Nathan shared that he worked through time management skills in high school to prepare himself to tackle college level work. He also shared,

I believed that I would succeed, even like in high school and all that, like, I've never been the smartest kid, but I've been a good student and all that stuff... All I wanted was to pass my classes, [although sometimes] not understanding what you're learning, but [with just getting] the basic stuff.... I believed I would succeed.

Nathan talked about why he chose Campton State University. He stopped by his counselor's office and learned that there were a variety of collegiate options for the state of Georgia. He was encouraged to choose five colleges and commented that "between these five, I'll take something." Some of the campuses were too large for his comfort or too far away from home for his preference. Nathan shared about his campus tour at Campton that "they spoke to me the most" and with another campus in the state that he toured he shared that "I loved its campus, but they were too big for me and I'd be like just one person in a sea of people." He liked "the campus feel" and the atmosphere of CSU which led to his college choice. When asked about the influence of race with his decision to attend CSU, Nathan shared,

It didn't really influence me at all because in high school, I was aware of that like when people saw me as Black, but I still didn't fully realize what all that meant. So, when it came to picking a college, I was like, well, they're all basically the same, [and] you get the same degree in all of them.

Trevor

Trevor arrived to his interview early. He was professional, both in appearance and demeanor, and appeared to be sitting at a desk during the conversation. Trevor was born and raised in a predominantly White town about 60 miles from CSU. His

immediate family consists of his mother, step-father, and a younger brother and younger sister. His mother and maternal grandparents attended college. Trevor excelled in sports and shared the following about his high school years,

I was playing basketball, football, and baseball lettering in 3 years in each of those sports. Along with that, I had high expectations going through college especially since my mother was valedictorian of her class. As a young African-American male that looked up to his mother, it was great going into college and being able to get that type of help coming up.

As for preparing for college, Trevor revealed that he began to take college courses through a dual enrollment program in the 11th grade. He shared that he constantly challenged himself by taking advanced and honors classes and felt prepared going to college. At age 16, Trevor played in a baseball tournament at Campton State. He and his grandfather rode around the campus and Trevor enjoyed the visit. He could see himself going to this college and the campus “felt like a family community...it felt like they were there with open arms” and it was close to his hometown. When asked about the influence of race and his college decision, he shared that he considered attending an HBCU, but felt like going to a PWI would give him “the real experience of being around other races.” He went on to share that,

I wanted to have a real diversity of students of all races and be able to get the real-life experience especially working with peers. That is how you get new ideas. It is like there is so much stuff you can get from different perspectives and from different cultures and races.

David

David grew up in Chicago, Illinois and moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area shortly after graduating from high school with his family. His father still lives in Chicago. He applied to several state colleges in Georgia, but realized that it would become more affordable after he became a permanent resident. Instead, he attended a private two-year college for a short time that, unfortunately, lost their accreditation and was forced to close. This experience affected David immensely, both personally and financially. He took 5 years off from school to figure out next steps, but was determined to find his way back to higher education and “beat the statistics.” He shared,

I decided to pursue higher education because I definitely wanted to represent like the African-American men of a higher position, more higher rate, more power, more freedom, and most importantly, just so I can be able to go back to my community and do the same thing with the opportunities that have been presented to me, [and] create a better environment for sure.

David has five sisters and is the oldest child and only boy. He appeared to be outside of the family home during the interview and felt comfortable and eager to share. David also has two aunts that attended college. He began CSU at the age of 23, without a lot of guidance from his family and without a lot of high school academic preparation. David revealed that many of the males in his life were in jail and had taken alternate life paths and the support for a college education was minimal. He shared,

I’m trying to make sure that my impact matters and that I’m doing something different. I took a completely different route from all the other men in my life, so on this journey, like now I’m really excited, but at the same time it's just like a lot

of pressure at the same time. I do have a lot of faith in myself and [that's] the reason why I'm here.

During his 5 year gap, David worked multiple jobs, including driving for Lyft. One day, he dropped a student off at CSU and his interest for attending college was reignited. He shared,

So, from that day after I dropped her off, the thought of the institution just would not leave my mind. It was just like stuck with me that day and continued until I finally just made the decision like, okay, yeah, I want to go. I want to go start pursuing my education, because I already applied here [and] got accepted...just for me dropping her off, it was like a confirmation to me, so it's just like, okay, maybe this is where I should be. So, like I said, I decided to go ahead and take the initiative, go ahead and reapply, and everything went well after that.

When asked about race and the decision to attend CSU, David shared that he didn't realize that it was a predominantly White institution during the application process, but instead, was focused on the types of programs of interest to him. In addition, he was pleasantly surprised in the diversity of the campus and that provided a good experience for him.

Michael

Michael had to cancel his interview at the last minute due to death in his family. A few days later, he reached out to the researcher and asked about availability that day. He had just gotten off of work from an overnight shift at a hospital and wanted to share his story if time was available. He was extremely professional and interviewed in a quiet inside space. Michael was born and raised in a Georgia city that is about 100 miles from

Campton State. His mother was a single parent of three children, and Michael is the youngest. His mother attended college and an aunt attended a community college. His father was not in his life and Michael even shared that he gives his Mom and older sister Father's Day gifts every year. Michael's older brother attended an HBCU and is currently in medical school, and his sister is in nursing school. Michael, too, decided to pursue nursing.

Michael attended public school, switched over to private school in the 9th grade, and then returned to public school for his last year of high school. He followed his brother to private school and revealed that the switch from private back to public was given as an option that he decided to take after his brother graduated from private school. He shared the following about this private school experience,

A lot of private schools have a lot of racism. You can tell even from the teachers. But as far as education which is what I was there for, it was great. My education growing up was just great. Even outside of school, my mom, she would help. She would get us tutors if she couldn't help. I had an uncle in the medical field. He would help us just study and pursue what we wanted to pursue because he knew that we wanted to do something in the medical field. So, he would just bring home stuff from his job and talk about some of his job [experiences] and just kind of help us understand more of what's happening out there. So, I feel like my education at a young age and coming up was actually pretty good.

He also shared that he had to change his study habits after beginning the nursing program. He recognized that just memorizing concepts and reviewing notes was not

enough. Instead, Michael learned to utilize study guides and understand the “how” and dig a little deeper in the details.

When asked about choosing Campton, Michael shared that he was a high school basketball player and utilized the guidance of his coaches and mother with selecting colleges to apply for. One day, he noticed the acceptance letter from CSU. He shared,

It was more detailed. To me it was more welcoming, and I was like, okay, that’s where I’m going, and I think of it because they sent a paper copy of the acceptance letter as well. A lot of schools just send emails out.

When asked how, if it all, did race influence his college decision, he replied “It didn’t at all.”

Research Results

The critical race theory (CRT), is defined as “ a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.3). Some of the principles of CRT include the normalization of racism and how one’s racial identity could potentially overlap with other experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Effects of racism in educational systems leads to an important discussion amongst CRT scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For students of color, racial climate in a collegiate setting could affect retention (Milem, et al., 2005). Tinto (2012) revealed that a student’s decision to stay or leave is often a result of student’s sense of a climate of support, belonging, general well-being, and involvement on a college campus. In addition, Tinto (1993) supported an early thought by Fleming (1985) that such a climate may be difficult for Black students to find at larger White institutions. Guided by the research topic and questions, the data that resulted

from the research provided healthy discussions about identity, race, campus programming, climate, and retention.

A Contemporary View on Race

The participant profiles revealed that race was not a factor for any of the students when choosing CSU as the college of their choice. However, as more conversations about race unfolded, the students not only show how racial identity could potentially overlap with other experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), they also provided thoughts through their experiences on the CRT principle that race is a product of “social construction” which includes social thought and relations that further connects to one’s personality, moral intelligence, and behavior, and not the surface-level diversity that one could observe and instantly categorize (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Mindset played a role in this more contemporary view on race and how the participant’s chose to navigate through potential racist behaviors. Many of the student’s responses to racism or potential racist attitudes were offset by their ability to change their own perspectives. However, CRT theorists may argue that the students could have normalized racism instead of working through transforming their relationship with racism. Kelvin and Trevor shared perspectives on dealing with racism and students on their college campus. Kelvin shared,

I feel like in a way, certain people might act certain ways because, either they don’t know better, or they may not realize that they’re doing it. So, whenever it comes to like some type of situation where, say if you look at it from a different perspective, you might think, oh, this might be racially motivated, I think it's just more of like, you know, people don’t really realize that what they’re doing might be racially motivated. I kind of give people the benefit of the doubt in a way, but

I never really like to look so much on the negative. I guess I just more see it as, yeah, maybe that person just might not know necessarily or might not be aware of some of the stuff that he or she might be doing that might look bad on their part.

Trevor shared very similar thoughts as Kelvin and said,

I try to be able to talk it out, because I am a person that wants to understand why you feel that way and what makes you think that way... You never know how people are raised. Where you are raised kind of shifts the way your behaviors are. I always want to be the type of person to wants to understand and talk it out. I never want things to escalate to the next level, because that just is not a good sight. It is not a good scene, especially at the university. I always try to respond by talking things out and being able to have a real conversation as adults. As adults you have to be able to have those hard and challenging conversations, especially to get to the next step, just get to an understanding, or compromise.

Trevor also expressed that conversations about differences on campus allowed college students an opportunity to grow and develop which echoed Hurtado and Ruiz's (2012) thought that the college environment is ideal for students of all backgrounds to learn how to navigate and appreciate diversity. Trevor described himself as "proactive" and it was important to him to offset stereotypes that may be assumed due to his race and gender. Dealing with racism can be "disappointing" and "it hurts" according to Trevor. He also shared that,

You do so much. I would not just say to belong, but you do so much to beat the stereotype. Beat the odds basically. You want to not prove yourself, but you just

want an understanding that I am just like you. There is nothing different between us besides the color of our skin.

Trevor also noted that if students take advantage of the opportunity to grow in diverse environments, those same skills can be used in “adulthood” to create solutions that can “make everything better for everyone.” Michael credited his mindset on how he deals with racism and commented that,

I’ve been with people where someone has said something or done a certain act, and they get offended or they get uncomfortable by it. But me personally, I can’t say that I’ve been in an uncomfortable position because I’m proud of who I am. I don’t care what you say to me. I don’t care about none of that. If you say what you say, you do what you do, then in my eyes, it ain’t got nothing to do with me because my head’s still going this way. So, I can’t say that I’ve been in an uncomfortable position, but it’s probably because of my mindset.

Dealing with Racially Motivated Interactions

Black males from a previous study conducted by Harper (2012) shared examples of stereotypical racial interactions that were consistent with research by Lee (2016), Smith et al. (2007), and Strayhorn (2012). These types of experiences at PWI’s have been studied by CRT researchers through stories and other tools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Many of the participants in this study have experienced such encounters at Campton State or they can recount the stories of others who have had such experiences. Tyler, David, and Trevor shared stories about incidents that happened to others campus. Tyler shared,

For the most part, like I said, I really haven't really experienced anything like that. I do know I had friends who did and they'll tell me stories like, oh, we was chillin' outside the dorms and whatever and the police just came and started harassing us and stuff like that. So, I know it is happening around campus... In AAMI, the shocking thing to me was like, even though I didn't experience that it was like more than one person who experienced that. So, it's not just this one person, it's common to be happening.

Tyler also revealed how he felt during a protest about the 2020 George Floyd police related homicide in Minneapolis, Minnesota and said,

...and then, not only that, I remember last year when everything was going on [with George Floyd] and we started marching, and I know students used to pay attention to how police officers used to react to us or how their body language was and it was like they don't care.

Tyler also revealed concern about not becoming too comfortable on campus and often wondered if he would face harassment or intense racially motivated interactions as some of his friends have. Similar to Tyler, David had not experienced such interactions firsthand, but heard stories from campus friends who had. David also wanted to advocate for students who experienced racism or discrimination and shared,

I didn't look at it just as their problem, I looked at it as my problem as well, as a collective, as we are all together, as we are supposed to be together. So, [I took the initiative to] reach out to professors...I reached out to organizations who deal with more of these things as well. So, I started applying for positions that will have me in a position where I could actually bring them [victims] in, where they

could speak their truth, speak their story... I want them to know that they are heard...like what they're saying is not going in one ear, out the other.

Nathan experienced something that could have been perceived as a racist, but was honest in sharing that sometimes he is unsure if someone's reaction to him is truly racially motivated. He shared,

I don't know if it was the individual part or the African-American male part and I don't know how the interaction would be different if I were White, Hispanic, or any other race. I always say I don't know when it comes to that...actually, there are two times where I was walking down the hall in the dorm, and a girl was going to the elevator after walking out of her room, and screamed and almost tazed me in one case and another time I was sprayed with mace...

Nathan said that he doesn't know if students are scared that someone is there or "scared because this tall, Black guy is there." Trevor shared a situation that caused him to reflect on whether or not his race and gender caused a campus employee to behave in a certain way. He shared,

I can remember a time at the school, it is really kind of a funny story to me, when I went to the library, and I asked for a stapler just to use because I had to turn in something for class. When I asked for the stapler, the lady looked at me. Then she turned away. I was like, "Ma'am may I please use the stapler?" She gave it to me. I was like, "Thank you." She was like, "Yeah." Then I used it and I was like, "Thank you, have a nice day." She was like, "Yeah"... I was looking out the corner of my eye at how she was looking at me, like, as if I did something. It made me feel kind of like...I was just asking for a stapler! I don't think I did

nothing with ill intention. I think that's the time when, that was my freshman year in college, I felt like at that point in time, after that, I knew what to expect and how to deal with things after that.

Racial battle fatigue is a concept that has been described as the mental anguish and exhaustion experienced by racially motivated trials (Smith, et. al, 2007). As students begin to navigate through perceived racist behavior, some may begin to change their mindset instead of exposing themselves to feelings of disappointment. Michael revealed that he tends to "shy away" from uncomfortable situations that could be perceived as racist. In one example, he shared,

I've had times where I'm studying [in the library] or something and I'm just alone and it'll be me by myself, and then it'll also be a group of White people studying, and a police officer walks up to me and tells me that I can't be here, and I need to leave because the building's going to close. I mean, I don't say anything because in my eyes, it's just, I mean, it is what it is. He said I need to leave, I need to leave. I'm studying but I've been there for hours anyway.

The research participants don't necessarily choose race as the first reason for various behaviors experienced by them from people of other races. However, most are very clear that racism exists but perhaps mindset can provide the strength needed to overcome. Some CRT researchers may categorize this as normalizing racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), but the students in the study could argue that this is their contemporary view on race.

Programming with a Purpose

Programming and initiatives that include students of color are one of the factors that may increase retention amongst African-American students (McClain & Perry, 2017). The University System of Georgia's (USG) African-American Male Initiative (AAMI) began in 2001 with the mission to integrate academic and social tools that would lead to positive mindsets towards retention, progression, and graduation for African-American males (USG, 2020). Typical programming includes academic enrichment activities, leadership development, experiential learning opportunities, and mentorship. For many institutions, the AAMI program runs as a first-year program with optional programming for subsequent years. The success of the program is dependent on faculty and staff who are tasked with the daily operations of the program. All of the participants in this research study were a part of AAMI at Campton State and shared their AAMI experiences and personal thoughts about the program.

Kelvin

Kelvin recalled receiving an email about the program prior to the fall of his first year. He thought that the program sounded “interesting” and he assumed that the program would provide an opportunity for him to connect with others. After responding to the email, Kelvin received a phone call from the director of the AAMI program whom he described as “an amazing guy” and “the most phenomenal person” he ever met who was very interested in African-American students. Kelvin talked about the experience of meeting new people and shared,

I met guys that, of course, had the same classes as me, and so we would always end up working on some of the same coursework, and you know, after that,

maybe we might go to the gym together or we might grab something to eat together, something along those lines, something to where we have some type of a bond and some type of a connection, that way, it could make the friendship even stronger. AAMI definitely helped in that.

Kelvin also commented on opportunities to grow professionally in AAMI. He shared that in his first year, they were able to participate in professional interviews and meet various speakers who shared their professional experiences with the students. Kelvin was very appreciative of the opportunity to meet Black professional men who made themselves available to the students. Many were alumni of CSU and the AAMI program, or faculty and staff that worked on campus.

Kelvin referenced the importance of programs like AAMI so that students who have similarities, such as race and gender, are able to share ideas and experiences. He went on to share that after the first-year experience was over, he was very interested in becoming a mentor to incoming AAMI students. He shared,

I really like the fact that I can talk to some of the first-year students and tell them, like, hey, you know, this is some of the stuff you might see. Some of them either have similar classes as to what I was taking, or maybe they have the same major as me. So, I can always help with that end of it. So, it's always been really good, and of course, I've been able to connect with them as well and kind of show them some of the professional opportunities you might have with AAMI...I really like the program and it's something I'm like always excited to hear about and see what they've got going on.

When asked if he would recommend AAMI to others, he responded "Yes!"

Tyler

Tyler remembered receiving information in the mail about AAMI. During his first year, he enjoyed taking core classes with the other AAMI participants, and making real connections and friendships. He described it as a “brotherhood.” He also recalled community service activities such local road clean ups, and services provided to youth in the community. Tyler was also very appreciative of the knowledge acquired in the program and the life lessons learned. He had an opportunity to study abroad with AAMI during the spring semester of his freshmen year. This trip to Brazil was life changing for him as he was able to experience a culture outside of his own.

Tyler was extremely complimentary of the AAMI program director and shared, “I was like, he's passionate about this. Like, he wasn't like somebody who was just doing it for, like I guess, money or anything like that.” Tyler also shared that the director encouraged the students to take advantage of resources that help with success and college and life. Tyler shared, “I was like, yeah, this is somebody who really cares about what happens to us and things like that.” Tyler went on to share that the director encouraged and incentivized high standards for the AAMI participants. He shared,

I feel like we wanted to stand out and separate ourselves from the pack because I know, especially my freshman year, it was like [the director] had this rule where like if you get a certain GPA, you can get an additional scholarship that he'll provide out of his own pocket ...and then not only that, if you had a certain GPA, he'll take you to the [Atlanta] Hawks game and things like that. So, he gave us incentives to perform well, but it was like we want to do for ourselves, but the incentives he offered was an additional bonus. So, it made me happy [when] one

of my AAMI brothers would succeed or had a high GPA... there was one person, I'm not going to say his name or anything like that, but he had a 4.0 his freshman year, and I took pride in that because I'm like the type of person like, when one person wins, we all win. So, I'm like, dang, we did it. Like, he made it, and it's possible, and like there's no excuses that you can't achieve this...

He took pride in knowing that anything was possible for a student like him to achieve any level of success. When asked if he would recommend this program to other incoming students he replied, "Oh, yeah. So, I definitely recommend this... You're hindering yourself if you don't take advantage of this... it's like something [that will] help you." Tyler also serves as a mentor for AAMI and revealed that his mentors were instrumental to his acclimation to college life.

Nathan

Nathan didn't confirm how he learned about AAMI, but he shared, AAMI was a very good, a very positive thing for me in my freshman and sophomore years... For the first year, we had a first-year program class where basically we'll meet on campus, and it's a good way to make friends, because you're a freshman and don't know anybody [and you get to] meet people, and meet a bunch of really good professors...

Nathan also mentioned the professional opportunities provided with AAMI such public speaking preparation. He enjoyed the connection with the director of the program and revealed that he felt comfortable sharing and connecting with him formally and even informally if he saw him around campus. Nathan enjoyed taking core classes with the other participants and having teachers that he felt "seemed [like] they actually cared

about us.” He mentioned an English teacher who was one of the best teachers he’s ever had and allowed the students to go deeper in class about some elements of Black history, such as the Tulsa Massacre, that are rarely taught in school. Nathan enjoyed the lively conversation and takeaways that conversations like that afforded him. He commented on the value of the mentoring opportunity for incoming AAMI students. When asked if he would recommend the program to others he said “In a heartbeat, yes!”

Trevor

Trevor shared that he learned about AAMI from the program director and he said that he is “really a great, phenomenal person.” Trevor said that the program offered a “sense of comfort” and he continued and shared,

The sense of comfort comes from meeting 40 to 60 students that look like you and that you can build a brotherhood with, and be able to tackle the things and obstacles around the campus. Along with that, you had a couple classes with each other. It was easier to be able to work, go to study hall, to be able to just, I would say, learn better because you are around students that you know and along with that, it makes it easier. With advising, advising was always smooth because they have it laid out for you. You just pick and choose and then they will give you feedback on it...I feel like it is a great first-year program for African-American male students.

He also touched on the importance of programs like this especially for African-American males who may be first generation students. Trevor believed that “it is good to be around other African-American male students at that time when you first get in college to be able to transition into college smoothly.” When asked if him would recommend this program

he said “yes” and also shared that “I am telling you that it is one of the best programs that the University System of Georgia has, in my opinion.” Trevor serves as a mentor for the AAMI program.

David

David had a unique situation. He began college during the COVID-19 pandemic, so most of his collegiate experience was virtual at the beginning. He shared that he was automatically registered for the AAMI learning community and after he realized what it was, he was happy to be a part of it and hoped to gain new relationships. He shared that although connecting with others was virtual to start, he appreciated the moments to connect with other men and said,

It meant a lot to me because a lot of the men that I come from are completely different than men that I’m dealing with now or whatever. So, it was great to know that I’m in an environment where I can relate to other men, not just by the basis of this program, but actually getting to know these men and getting to build a relationship with them, and know that a lot of our backgrounds are [more] similar than we think and we wouldn’t know this unless we have these conversations.

David also mentioned the director of the AAMI program. He was empowered by a statement shared with him and others to “start off strong” when beginning their collegiate journey, so that if the time comes where you can’t handle everything, it shouldn’t affect you as much due to the strong start. David was motivated by this comment and it provided the needed push to continue to pursue this journey. He would recommend AAMI to others and shared that this program really helped him to navigate

through his first year of college. In addition, he was very complimentary of the AAMI mentorship because he “never had a mentor” and he “never had someone just look out for his [best] interest outside of a family member.”

Michael

Michael received a phone call about AAMI the summer prior to his first semester at CSU. He read some information about the program and was definitely interested in participating. He shared,

In AAMI, we were like a brotherhood. We took all our classes together. We helped each other when we needed it. When we went out to eat or when we went out somewhere we always went together, I mean, it was so many of us, everywhere we went it was a lot of people...I’m not going to say it’s a fraternity but the community service we do, the amount of time we spend with each other, you might as well say it’s something similar to it...AAMI in general is just a great program. I feel like every Black man that comes to college needs to be in this program. It’s great. Not only does it help, I mean, it’s a first-year program, don’t get me wrong, but not only does it help you this first year, it helps you throughout college. I still use AAMI resources right now. It’s great. AAMI is the bomb, man, I love it.

Michael believes in the power of programming like this for students who attend PWI’s.

When asked if he would recommend the program to others, he shared,

I recommend the program to others now. When I talk to people just in high school, my mentees in high school, I talk to them and let them know whatever college you decide on going to, make sure they have an AAMI program because

if they don't, it's not necessarily going to be a bad experience, but I'd much rather them have an experience like I had. Even if it's not AAMI, even if it's just some other kind of African-American first year program, I encourage them to be in it. I strongly encourage them to be in it because it really helps.

Michael currently serves as a mentor for the AAMI program.

The AAMI program provided a space for African-American male students to thrive and safely acclimate into college life. It is also important to note how well the students received the program director and other faculty/staff involved in the program. Overall, the experience gained in the AAMI program added real value for the participants and their transition from high school into college.

Other Campus Programming

Students who are motivated to be involved are more likely to increase their educational opportunities and personal development (Astin, 1984). All of the interviewees participated in other campus activities in addition to AAMI. These are engaged students, who are interested in making a difference in their lives and in the lives of others. Michael, Kelvin, Tyler, and Trevor are mentors for first year AAMI students. Michael and Trevor are both involved in campus ministry groups. Nathan is a part of a club for students who are interested in anime. He shared,

Through this club, I can be [myself]. I can talk about any weird nerdy subject I want to and one person's going to know what I'm talking about...I actually eventually became the president of that [anime] club. I was like, this is such a place for me and people like me that I want to let everyone else know... if you think that no one's going to understand that weird joke you've made about that

show that no one watched, don't worry, we have like ten people who know that joke and will talk about it forever.

Nathan also shared that he met his girlfriend through the anime club. He credited the institution for having such a variety of activities that all students could find a place in. Michael and Trevor served as ambassadors for various campus organizations and both Tyler and Trevor worked on campus and eventually were in supervisory positions. Trevor shared about his position that he gets to “work with many different types of people.” He also shared that was a great way that he “learned how to become a young, emerging professional and learn how diversity works in the workplace.”

David was able to engage in a campus group for young entrepreneurs and a student group with an interest in fashion and modeling. He also recently secured the opportunity to welcome new students to campus for the upcoming academic year as an orientation leader. Through Kelvin’s volunteer work with a regional volunteer organization and with an organization dedicated to helping student with disabilities, he discovered the importance of having counseling services on a college campus and shared,

We also have counseling there as well, where people feel like they might feel overwhelmed in whatever endeavor they’re going through, they can always go to that and be able to connect and talk to someone, if need be...I feel as though that’s something I think every institution should have if they don’t, just so if someone is feeling overwhelmed and they feel like they might not have someone to talk to or someone to help them with the situation they’re in, they can go to the counseling service ...that can help them just get to a more rational mindset, to feel better internally.

Michael was able to use his basketball talent and lead the AAMI basketball team through intramural sports. He really enjoyed opportunities to connect with other students on campus through sports. Michael also participated in an organization focused on the welfare of Black students on campus. Tyler had an amazing opportunity to participate in pre-college programming with an outdoor camping trip. He built great relationships before beginning his first year of college. Lastly, many of the participants were also involved in academic clubs and organizations. Michael was accepted in a special organization for nursing students. Tyler joined a few business organizations and Trevor joined an organization for students majoring in sports related disciplines. Through their eagerness and willingness to connect, the participants in this study provide valuable insight on how powerful and impactful campus programming can be if a student is willing to engage.

Networks of Support

Good networks of support have been cited in other studies as important to African-American male college students (Harper, 2012). The same holds true for the participants in this study. Many of the students referenced parents, other family, faculty, staff, and programming, such as AAMI, as strong networks of support. Michael and Kelvin definitely cited their families, especially their mothers. Tyler credited his mother, twin brother and the AAMI program director and mentors as networks of support. He shared,

I was always confident in my ability [to succeed in college] because I feel like I have a strong support system. My mom, she was the type that whatever you set your mind to or whatever you start, you've got to finish...[College] was

something new for me... but as far as like making friends and then building a support system whether it is from [the AAMI program director] or like my professors or like the people who just want to, because it's like there are certain people who just want to see you succeed so anything that you need they'll try their hardest to make sure that they help you out...

Tyler was very honest about difficult times experienced in college. His support system was there was for him. He revealed,

There were days that I was definitely feeling down and I was like, dang, I think I need a break...I was depressed...I don't want to throw the word depressed around because there's like people who are really depressed, but there were days when I was down and I was like I don't feel like doing nothing. I don't want to be bothered and then I'd talk to my brother or I'd talk to my mom and it would just bring me up. They would just give me confidence. Then, if I'm out and about and I'm just working through [feelings], I see [the AAMI program director] and he'll sit down and talk with me. He'd like read my body language and let me know what's up or my mentors [would] sit down and talk with me...I say it's better to talk to somebody who has been through the same stuff you've been through so they can tell you what worked for them.

Tyler also viewed faculty as a network of support and shared,

One thing I will say is most of the professors that I had made a step to engage with me, as far as like if they seen that I was behind in classes...they'd be like I feel like you're way better than what you're giving me and they would sit down with me or ask if they could talk to me. So as far as like stuff like that, I know

that they care because they're putting forth the effort. They don't have to call me to the side or like sit down and talk with me...

David shared that in addition to his family and AAMI, his grade school teachers provided support to him. He shared,

I would definitely have to go back to the beginning with the whole AAMI thing. I really didn't know how to go about [college]. Like I said, all the foundations that I set before I came to college, I really didn't know how to tie them altogether while I was pursuing my higher education...Outside of the institution, I definitely know I can go back to my high school and have that connection because the majority of my teachers, even with middle school, the majority of my teachers are still there and I still have them like on social media, and they've been really still supportive about my journey pursuing higher education...

David also revealed the hardship that he experienced which almost led to him not returning to CSU, but the support from his family and from the faculty and staff of the AAMI program, was exceptional. In general, David was very complimentary of the faculty and staff outside of AAMI also and shared,

As far as like other people and the staff, I mean the dining hall staff, pretty much all of my professors, I pretty much have been acquainted with everyone and I try to make sure I get these relationships as another resource added to my life, because you just never know where one person's connection can take you. And outside of AAMI, my professors and the staff at my institution have definitely been supportive.

Trevor felt support from AAMI as well as from faculty. He said,

I feel supported with AAMI for sure....They created that sense of comfort, the sense that I matter, and a sense that I belong here. It was very easy to identify that. They make it very normal. They do a lot of things even to this point. Even though I am a mentor now to the first-year students, it is still that same feeling that I got when I first got into college. I would say the support is great even from my professors. I always build a bond with my professors. I will be able to look back at them, get information, and get advice. Being able to do that not only makes you feel good, but it also makes the professor feel good because it shows that you care about them [and it's not just] about just getting the grade in class. You never know. One day you might need them. That is why it is important to invest in people and be able to build connections with them.

Nathan felt that this family and friends provided a good support network for him. He knew that if anything ever happened while he was in school, he could reach out to his family and friends for support. He shared,

There was a pretty good support network for me. I definitely know I have friends that have my back and people that I know that I feel like I have some type of a strong relationship with now that I know have my back at the institution, whether it be more on an instructive level or more of just a friend level.

Networks of support are important as students transition from high school to college. In addition to family and friends, the participants spoke highly of the support received by the faculty and staff who assist with AAMI as well as other campus personnel. This support is important to note as a major influence on student acclimation to campus life and retention.

The Perception of Racial Climate from African-American Male College Students

Historically, HBCU's have maintained higher rates of retention for African-American students in comparison to PWI's (Beeks & Graves, 2017) and overall campus climate make HBCU's more appealing than PWI's to Black students (Bir & Myrick, 2015). However, African-American students at Campton State have maintained high rates of retention. Participants noted the large number of minority students on campus. Some researchers referenced the term "critical mass" to describe the positive relationship between retention numbers of minority students if there is a large community of similar individuals at PWI's (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2012). Michael felt that students were "evenly distributed" between Black and White students, and Nathan shared,

I would say when I first got in as a freshman, one of my professors said that by the time I was graduating [this would be] a majority-minority school. But if you're walking around on campus, it's always like a majority-minority school...In the gym, [I see] mostly minority students, and in the cafeteria, a mixture of both. To me, it was already a majority-minority school.

Tyler acknowledged that the large number of African-American students at Campton offsets the assumption made about Black students and predominantly White institutions. He shared,

It's a lot of us out here, you wouldn't think that, like the stuff you see in the movies, that's not how it is...I'm really happy to see it's a like a lot of African-Americans or just different races.

Similar to Tyler and Nathan, David also commented on the large number of African-American students at CSU and said,

It was actually, like, kind of surprising because I actually met more African-American people versus, like, the Caucasians, and it struck me...despite like COVID or anything like that...I was mainly more surrounded by more African-American people. I did see Caucasians, but I also saw Asians, Koreans, Africans, and other races, and it was a good experience to know that I'm not the only African-American person here and that's actually after learning that it was a more predominantly White school.

David also shared that he wasn't quite sure if the racial mix would be different in a non-COVID year, but he was very complimentary of the university's racial climate. He was excited to share how he was influenced by interactions with White students on the campus and how those connections helped him to become a better student. He admitted that he didn't do a lot of research about college prior to attending and that many of his White classmates assisted him with their knowledge about college and were shown to be quite resourceful for David. He commented that the intersection of the cultures allowed both Black and White students to learn more about each other. David continued to share about the climate and his ability to "build community" with students of other races. He talked about a campus position as an orientation leader where the White student leaders outnumbered the Black student leaders. He shared about the racial mix that,

I'm not going to say that I wasn't surprised, but what did surprise me was how fast we were able to build our connections and our relationships from being able to communicate outside of our work environment, and being able to go deeper into

our relationships and learn more about each other. I definitely don't feel like the race thing is intense, but I definitely feel like it gives people the opportunity to know that we do co-exist together.

The Story of a Small College Town

Trevor was quite thoughtful in his response about racial climate at the institution. As an African-American male who grew up in a small majority White town, he had personal experience on how racial climate influenced the experiences of minorities. Trevor noted that “the climate has changed more on the campus than in the community” and he credits programs, such as AAMI, as an important part of the climate change experienced on campus. He shared about the city that “it is kind of known for racism in a sense because of a couple things that may have happened in the past.” When asked if he felt that the city could overcome their history of perceived racism, he shared,

They would have to put the right foot forward. They would have to go about it in the right direction. When you have those cities with that standpoint, it is hard to change it because they have been doing the same things their whole life. People do not want to develop and grow because they do not see why... You can even say it is a comfort in a sense because that is what they are used to. It would have to be something that would really have to sit there and change the community to strive towards that. It is making leaps especially with the groups on campus. Especially with the Black groups on campus, there are a lot of things they do in the community. I can see it is changing. The sense of the climate is changing. It would have to take a lot of steps, especially to change some of the people in the community, because things have been the way it has been for so long. Change is

hard for people. Change is hard for people when they think things are right and think things how they think are right.

Trevor wanted to share more about his thoughts of the racial climate of the town that the college is located in. He recognizes that any change in racial climate will be a “process” and “everything is mostly systematic.” He said about the process,

I feel like it is very slow. I would not say they are not trying to transition into it fast, but I feel like the process can be sped up a little bit. It can be that way when taken into the right hands...I feel like the climate will slowly change especially with the community and continue to change on campus...I would say, the climate has changed more on the campus than in the community, but I can see the strides that the [community] continues to make.

Although Trevor is mostly satisfied with the climate on the campus, he still feels that more can be done. He commented,

I would say that the racial climate is relevant. We have those instances where stuff like that [racism] happens. You can feel it. In those aspects, as for me, I always am mindful of who does what. Basically, who wants to take action? Who talks about it? Especially, who is not from our race? I want to see those faculty members. I want to see those administrators. I want to see the other races feel a sense of wanting to make the situation better and not just relaxing or be like that is not my problem or that's not me. Like I told you, I always feel like it could have been me. With that mentality, I always take it as you have to be able to do something. You have to try to change something.

The participants recognize the larger number of African-American students on the campus of CSU. However, students, like Trevor, do not shy away from sharing that there is still work to do in the area of racial climate. Trevor echoed a well-known sentiment when he shared “change is hard for people.”

The Choice to Return

The longitudinal model of institutional departure describes the student departure process (Tinto, 1993). Pre-entry attributes, family background, skills, and prior education are used as determinants of goal commitments (Tinto, 1993). Based on the participant profiles, most of the students interviewed in this study credited strong family support as a determinant of their decision to attend college and stay committed to the goal of graduating. Mostly all of the participant’s mothers attended college with the exception of David, and Nathan was the only participant whose mother and father attended college. All of the participants noted some type of preparation for college from high school preparation courses, to simply mentally deciding that college was a part of their journey. Mindset was discovered to have been a major theme as a result of this study.

In addition to pre-entry attributes, family background, skills, and prior education, the departure theory recognizes both formal and informal experiences that occur within academic and social systems (Tinto, 1993). Extracurricular activities and academic outcomes, are considered formal experiences, while the interactions experienced with faculty, staff, and students, though informal, are imperative to a student’s total collegiate experience (Tinto, 1993). Those informal interactions can be seen as the link to a student feeling connected to a campus and not isolated. Faculty/student and student/student interactions are factors that can affect a student’s decision to return (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 1991). A student's mindset can also greatly affect a student's decision to stay in college (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). Both Tyler and Trevor credited faculty/student interactions as reasons that they chose to return to CSU year after year.

Tyler shared,

The connections that I made with students, faculty, professors, mentors, and just like everybody who I had a relationship with, I feel like we all, especially the students as well, we all know we're here for a reason. I feel like, if we all stick together, we're stronger together than apart, and I feel I've made strong connections with people that I feel like, if I didn't return, I'd be letting them down if you get what I mean. It's like we're better together because they know me and I know them.

Trevor was very complimentary to CSU's ability transition students to the campus. He enjoyed the availability of the faculty and staff that made students feel like "family" and initiated support where it was useful for all. In addition, AAMI provided great resources to acclimate students to include tutoring, study halls, and group activities. He shared more about his experience and decision to continue at the university and shared,

I feel like it is great having those programs, especially first-year programs, for students, especially African-American male students. Having those programs in place, I feel that it gives us a sense of wanting to stay in college and wanting to succeed in college. You know you have people other than your family that are behind you and that push you to be greater.... I would say those experiences [AAMI and other campus activities] helped me return. I always felt like I was growing. I was growing as a person...It only helped me to develop more into a

professional and into a man... There have only been strides forward for me as a person. Coming back has been easy. I never considered leaving the institution. I always considered moving forward and always making those opportunities and those experiences [something I could] learn and take things from to grow and develop as a person. That is something that I am big on. It is growing and developing more as a person.

Nathan realized that the friendships made in college would not be easy to replicate somewhere else. He shared,

I'd say one of the experiences that brought me back, even more, are the people I met on campus, all of my friends that I had gotten, the student organizations that I joined like they got me... I don't really make friends easily when it comes to first impressions, like if I transfer schools, then I'll be leaving behind this life that I built. So, that's something that brought me back year after year. The other part was mostly the campus itself... It wasn't too big or too small, and I feel like I could talk to anyone...

David faced some hardships during his freshmen year and wasn't sure if he would be able to return for a second semester. His grades were fine, all of his course requirements were met, but a financial concern almost caused him to not return for the spring semester. He was extremely grateful to the campus and family support received during that time. He credited that experience as a defining moment of his decision to return to CSU and shared,

I was able to reach out to my professors, from AAMI actually, and discuss my situation that was going on. Immediately, they worked to resolve this issue for

me to continue my spring semester, helping me financially, and that meant way more to me than not continuing school because at this point, I could see and feel the physical support that I had coming from my professors who were over this program because honestly, I didn't know if I was going to continue because of the financial situation that was so minor, but it was a big reason that I could not continue... So, in that moment, I felt the relief, I felt the support, I felt the love... I had people counting on me, and that's what it's about. It's not just about my life, it's about the people that's really looking at you ... [this] is a main reason why I definitely want to continue to pursue [college]... my siblings all behind me with their support, and their love is all worth it on why I do want to continue my education at this institution.

Though Kelvin and Michael had great experiences in college, they both credited their focus and determination as to why they continued to return to CSU. Kelvin shared, I don't know if there was really anything that I've done or at least involved myself in that had made me want to stay. I think, I guess, again, still going back to like what I wanted to do on my career path... I kind of knew that if you wanted to do what you said you wanted to do coming out of high school then you might want to stay here at this institution and go ahead and finish this journey... that way you're able to further your career and be able to go down whatever career path you say you wanted to do. So, I don't know if there has ever really been [anything] I have done at the school that was a big thing for me wanting to stay. It's just more of like those are great add-ons, but at the center of it all, it's still like you know what you came here for...

Michael said,

Honestly, nothing influenced me to return. In my head, I already started and I need to finish it. I'm not the type of person that starts and wants to leave. Now, at one point, I was thinking about transferring when my brother left just because I was like, I'm going to be by myself, but that was one of those [feelings] in the moment. I probably thought about it for one or two days and forgot about it... So, nothing has really influenced me to continue coming back besides the fact that I know where I want to be, I know where I'm going, and I got to keep coming back to get there.

The faculty/staff/student interactions experienced by Tyler, Trevor, Nathan, and David are depictions of Pascarella & Terenzini's (1991) thought that those types of interactions are important with a student's decision to return to an institution. Mindset has also shown itself to have a major influence on retention, as Kelvin and Michael shared. The participants were all very positive about their time at CSU and their choice to the return to the institution.

Emerging Themes

During the data collection and analysis process, four themes emerged during participant conversations about identity, race, campus programming, climate and retention. The themes were (1) mindset (2) diversity matters (3) peer mentorship and (4) simultaneous incubation. The last theme, simultaneous incubation, is a concept created by the researcher to explain how minority groups can thrive and be successful on predominantly White college campuses based on the data provided in this study. We will examine each theme in this section.

Mindset

Dweck's (1999) mindset research revealed that those who believed that growth was achievable through intelligence and influence experienced a growth mindset, while others who thought that intelligence and abilities were fixed and could not be changed experienced a fixed mindset. The concept of growth mindset and its relation to resilience is a newer concept in academia that can provide a perspective of why some students experience academic success (Barclay et al., 2018). In addition, mindset could also be considered as a pre-entry attribute from Tinto's (1993) departure model. All of the participants referenced mindset during the data collection process. As an emerging theme from the research study, all of the participants attributed mindset to their ability to push forward in the college environment despite any obstacle that could cause discomfort.

Michael

Mentioned earlier in the text, Michael attributed his mindset to his ability to manage perceived race related experiences. Michael is proud of who he is and does not get easily offended or uncomfortable in situations that may cause others discomfort. He viewed college as a place of growth and typically encourages others to do the same, especially when it comes to dealing with others that may not fall in alignment with you. He shared,

I feel like once you come into college, you need to learn quick that you need to use what people say to you negatively in a positive manner...everybody is not going to be your friend, but if you keep your head on straight and you can empower yourself, then it will help.

Michael shared about college students that many “go to college and drop out. So just because you got to college, are you going to make through college?” He had a very strong belief about one’s ability to stay on the right path in college and shared,

A lot of people coming to college are making excuses because they want to go out and party, which is fine, but if you got class in morning at 8 a.m., you shouldn’t be partying the night before just because your friends want to party. Yeah, in college, you’re going to meet people, you’re going to make friends, but also you have to realize that you have classes. A lot of people don’t understand that.... and a lot of people don’t understand that first year is crucial because that’s when a lot of people’s GPA drops and it hits hard, and it’s easy to get it down, but it’s hard to get it up. I can guarantee that much. That’s all I can really say, just have your head on straight when you come in. It’s okay to have fun, but you also got to be about your business.

When asked about retention and experiences that influenced his return each year to CSU, again, mindset was referenced. He also referenced preparation as an important tool to stay on track to allow a shift of the mind prior to attending, which directly relates to a form of Tinto’s (1993) pre-entry attributes in the departure model. He said,

The only thing I would just say for preparing for college is just do your best and be ready. I can’t really say what you can prepare on because everybody’s different, but college is college. It’s not high school. It’s not middle school. They’re not going to hold your hand...They’re not going to baby you. It’s like they’re going to give you an assignment. They give you plenty of time to do it. All you got to do is do your work.

Michael was very clear on his stance on how mindset could shape a student's college journey. In one last mindset comment, he applauded Black men for pursuing college degrees, but also warned about the dangers of not taking college seriously. He ended his comments about taking on a serious mindset about college and said "that's all I can say about that one."

Tyler

Tyler began his college journey with understanding how his mindset could affect his college experience. He said that "nothing doesn't come easy and then you get what you put in it in college. That's the mindset I had." He also recognized that hard work is valuable and shared that he must put the work into anything that he wants to achieve. After touring the campus with his mother and brother prior to beginning college, he was able to assess whether or not he could be successful at Campton State. He shared,

I took a tour and I pictured myself in this environment and I was like, yeah, I can see myself living here. I can see myself putting the work in here. I feel like I can thrive in it and things like that. Once I had that mindset that I could see myself in it, I've just got to surround myself with the right people who are going to have the same intention and want to see me succeed as I do for myself.

When he began college, he heeded the advice of others and shared that:

A lot of people was telling me college is what you make it so I knew for a fact I couldn't sit around and just expect everything to come to me so that's why I made sure that I was a part of a lot of programs, a lot of organizations, and then took advantage of everything because you never know what could be that special calling... I knew that I couldn't rely on professors to be over us and stuff like that

because we're adults. I remember a lot of my teachers in high school used to say that your professors won't be doing this for you or they won't remind you constantly to do this and do that. They're going to send you the syllabus, and then on the due dates, they're just going to say you're supposed to turn in all the work. After that, they're going to leave at that.

Tyler was able to use that advice and learned how to manage college level courses and said,

As far as like my schoolwork, I started making sure I was staying on track because I knew I was not affecting the people around me, but I was affecting myself as far as like if I decide to make certain decisions or I decide not to go to school or I decide to make bad grades, it was only affecting my future. So as far as that, once I understood that, and then you know took control of my life and things of that nature, I began like, I guess you could say, progressing pretty easy because I got comfortable in the situation. I knew I didn't really have no control over it, so I just accepted it for what it was.

Tyler's mindset also provided a foundation on how he dealt with differences in race, mindsets, etc. that he experienced and shared,

It's like you're going to be in college with a whole lot of different mindsets and points of views and I've got to be open because I don't want to be close minded and just be like, no, this is what I grew up on. This is what I'm believing. You've got to be open minded. You've got to be able to take criticism. You've got to be able to listen to people and hear their side of the story because everybody don't come from the same upbringing...race doesn't really represent who you are, you

represent who you are. You take your own path to what you feel is right. It's like you do what's best for you.

David

For David, his mindset allowed him to take a different path than many of his family and friends. He shared,

I didn't come from a background with men who pursued higher education. So, of course, me taking this different route, I had to receive, like, I wouldn't say like the backlash, but more so like the judgment of, "Well, you're going to school, so you're a simp," or essentially someone who is like sensitive, someone who is not as hard as far as like African-American culture and slang language, or someone who isn't, I would say like, not built for the real world, basically. Like I said, [I'm] just taking a different route. Like most of the men that I came from, they all ended up in jail or dead, really, and I knew that wasn't a route that I wanted to take...I knew I would have to shape my own experience, shape my own background, and my own knowledge behind pursuing higher education. And so, that's exactly what I did.

David learned quickly that in order for him to grow through this experience, he would have to adopt a different way of thinking and learned that "everyone can't be with you on your journey." Beginning college during a pandemic also created new challenges.

Negative family and friends coupled with a pandemic pushed David to find creative ways to balance himself and his mind. He shared,

So, for me pushing forward, I started practicing yoga, and meditation, and things like that. This was my first year practicing these things, so, it helped me to get

like more understanding with myself, and with that understanding, I knew it was my journey, it wasn't no one else's, and I knew either you were going to be able to support me on my journey or you were going to hinder my journey. So, for the people who were hindering my journey, I just let them be...communication became really slight and it wasn't so much of a personal thing against them, but it was more so a personal thing for me and my journey because I don't want to hear about the person who failed on their attempt, I want to hear how you got this, I want to hear those motivational things when it comes to me and my journey. I don't want to hear about all the bad things that you may have heard, but yet you didn't even experience yourself.

David also shared,

So, pushing forward, I found myself doing a bunch of journaling and being able to write, like I said, I'm a creative, so being able to write helped me to release the things that were always in my head that didn't come from me to begin with, it came from outside sources. So, I began to just release these things that did not help me, and most importantly, I caught myself just praying more than I ever did because I knew it was something that I wanted to do [college], and I knew what didn't seem impossible, and I know for me, anything that's possible, I'm going to try to attempt. So, I just knew like it's something greater than just me on this journey of attending an institution; I do it for my community, my family, my future, and literally the future of this world. That's the reason why I'm doing it now.

Trevor

Trevor was quite fortunate to have had a strong support system with family members who attended college. He remembered family members sharing and celebrating college success. He shared,

I always had a great support. Not only that, but I had a great, I guess you could say, mentors of older cousins, older uncles, and aunties, that were able to put that in place and tell me that college is a place where you can succeed. From looking at it from a different aspect, I have seen people go, strive, and be great. I always had a great outlook on college students...I never felt that Black students or Black people did not go to college and succeed, because I always had that in me. I always saw that from my community and my family.

When it comes to mindset, Trevor shared,

I am a very level-headed person. My mindset coming into college was just come in, do what you have to do, and do not waste your parent's money. I always took advantage of the opportunities that came towards me, especially in college. For instance, I have taken summer classes every summer. This is my first summer not taking summer classes...We already pay out of pocket for school, so I do not have any built-up debt...I had a very straightforward mindset going into college. Do not mess around. Do what I have to do to succeed.

Nathan

Similar to Trevor, Nathan had family members who successfully attended college. He shared that education was very strong in his family. Nathan said that in addition to his mother and father "almost my entire family went to college." In addition, he revealed

that grandparents on both sides of his family were “very adamant” that other family members attended college.

Although Nathan admitted that high school did not have a major impact on his mindset about college, he still believed that he could succeed in college. When Nathan arrived at CSU, it was an eye-opening experience for him to understand the lack of exposure that many students had when about college. When asked about his beliefs about Black college students and how those beliefs influenced his decision to attend college he shared,

I would say it didn't really affect me much, mostly because at the time, like when I was like applying for colleges, I didn't know about the statistics, like college retention, for African-American males. I just thought that once you get into college, you stay all 4 years and that was my thought. I thought that no one really drops out...and then once I got to school, I was like people do drop out pretty frequently in order to take breaks from school. With my family members, all the men and women had gone to college, and all of them who hadn't yet were still planning to go to college. But to me, it's more just like if you're a Black man, you just go to college and get your education, and get a good job. That was my thought until I got there and saw other people [and learned] that's not how their experiences were.

Kelvin

From the beginning of his interview, Kelvin set the tone that his mindset played a major part in his success as a college student. For him, college was a natural part of his journey. When sharing about his high school years, he shared that he was a good,

attentive student and felt that his mindset would allow for success in college. During a high school career-based assignment, Kelvin shared that he learned about speech pathology and decided to attend an institution that offered that program. He also said that since his mother attended college, she mentioned often that college was a way to “further your career in whatever you want to do.” He shared,

I guess that’s kind of always stuck with me in a way, you know...as I kind of got closer to this time period [college], it was more like it is just a part of the journey. It got to a certain point where it was like, I kind of knew, like I probably wouldn’t be doing anything in like some different type of path and walk of life like in music or some type of business or anything like that. It was just more, I wanted to do something that was, I guess a little more (I don’t want to call it normal), but I guess in a way it is. So, going more of just the, I guess the typical college route, was always something I kind of thought I would do.

Kelvin also shared his thoughts about how he has managed to “fit in” and make new friends. He shared,

In terms of like trying to implement myself within a certain friend group or something, I kind of thought as though, since people are a certain way, people like certain things and they don’t like certain things, I’ll be able to find a friend group or someone that I can connect with that can have some of those same interests and some of those same likes and dislikes of what I might like to do. So, I think I guess it kind of has worked out for me that way...

When dealing with uncomfortable situations, he shared,

I felt as though I've always kind of tried to maintain a level head, a level state of being, in terms of making sure that I'm constantly clearly thinking through things and not trying to act on actions emotionally or out of context. So, I always try to maintain that good level head and know that it could be a lot worse. As long as I kind of see it that way, I am able to maintain a good stable mind and be able to get through whatever type of challenge or situation I might be going through.

Similar to David, Kelvin found ways to stay mentally balanced while experiencing the challenges of college life. He shared,

Of course, everyone has their own troubles that they might go through on the day-to-day, but I think, like I kind of, at least in personal issues that I deal with, I kind of can, I guess, alleviate those by going walking, listening to music, and working out. Those are like my stress relievers. So, whenever it comes to situations that I feel like are overwhelming me, I either do one of those three things, or I do all three of those things. So, it kind of helps with being able to manage the situation and being able to be like, okay, I'm back on schedule and back at a good mindset and back to thinking rationally to where I'm not going to make some rash decision that might hurt me in the long-run.

Kelvin shared a similar mindset like Michael when comes to retention in college with a focus to finish rather than experiences influencing his choice to return. He is very clear about his chosen career path and very certain that his mindset enables him to stay on the right course. Kelvin also shared that he is looking forward to job shadowing in his chosen career field of speech pathology to start gaining "firsthand experience" about the discipline.

A student's perspective of their abilities in their academic setting is a mindset concern (Barclay et al., 2018; Rattan et al., 2015). Students with a growth mindset can increase their ability to learn and achieve, and their ability to show resilience when faced with difficult situations (Barclay et al., 2018). All of the participants have shared how their mindset attributed to their ability to stay the course in college and push through difficulties if faced. This growth mindset (Dweck, 1999) can greatly affect their decision to stay in college (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015).

Diversity Matters

The college environment is ideal for students to learn how to navigate diversity (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). A study conducted by Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) revealed that students experienced "more hospitable racial climates" on campuses with 21%-35% minority students. Diversity mattered to many of the participants interviewed as they shared stories about their college experiences. Nathan commented about a conversation he had with a fellow student about Catholicism. They also shared their perspectives about other topics, including race, and found it to be enlightening. Nathan also commented that he was appreciative that the diversity of the campus allowed him to meet different types of people and have those types of conversations. Tyler wanted to have a White roommate so that he could experience the differences in culture. As for Kelvin, he acknowledged that the town that the university is located in is not as diverse as he would like, but he also shared that "I don't think it ever would really be a good thing to have such a strong majority of Black people or a strong majority of whatever race or ethnic group."

Trevor was purposeful in his choice to attend a PWI after considering an HBCU. After growing up in a predominantly White community, he had firsthand experience of being in the minority. Trevor shared that at times he felt uneasy and that someone was always watching him. Nevertheless, he wanted to attend a PWI so that he could experience “ a real diversity of students” and work with peers from all backgrounds. He shared,

Going to a predominantly White institution helps prepare you for your phase after college. That is how it is in real life. It is not as if it changes because you are out of college. I feel like when I came to the institution, that was something that I wanted to get because I wanted to experience it firsthand in the community so that I would be able to take the next step [of] becoming a professional... It is like there is so much stuff you can get from different perspectives and from different cultures and races...I wanted to get the real experience, especially working and learning in a diverse community, to be able to enhance my professionalism and as a young emerging professional.

For Michael, he enjoyed collegiate groups that were all Black and groups that were more diverse. He shared,

I wanted the experience and the knowledge of not only the Black race but of all races, but that’s just something I needed to understand. I wanted to understand all the cultures, so I spent a lot of time with other cultures.

As a former high school basketball player, Michael enjoyed playing on the AAMI team and has fond memories of getting together after the games with other teams that could

have been mostly White. In addition to sports, Michael has been involved in campus ministry and says this about the diversity on CSU's campus,

With the ministry group, everybody's invited. It's not a Black race or a White race or Latino race; it's everybody. And that's something I really enjoyed doing because I feel like not only am I seeing everybody from a different race, but also from a different culture and also from a different spiritual background because it's what they believe and how they believe it. It's kind of like it influenced me personally to just kind of understand everybody as a whole instead of just one race.

Diversity mattered to these students and many purposefully opted to have diversity included in their college experience. From sports to ministry, the participants viewed diversity as essential on a college campus to mimic the real world.

Predominantly White institutions with a large number of minority students have a unique advantage to offer this type of diverse experience for all students.

Peer Mentorship

Many of the participants cited peer mentorship as an important activity in their college experience. The AAMI program provides peer mentors to the incoming freshman AAMI students. Nathan called the peer mentoring program a "big brother system" and said that "it was really helpful." Tyler considered peer mentoring "something big that students benefit off of." He said that if were not for the mentors he "would have been lost." Tyler shared how he directly benefited from the mentorship. He shared,

One time my freshman year when I was registering for spring classes, I knew the classes I was supposed to take, but I just forgot how to do it and I didn't want to

apply for the wrong class. I remember I had to call one of my mentors, and he just walked me through it telling me how to do it... a mentor also introduced to me clubs on campus...he was the one that told me to get a leadership role on campus and set myself up for greatness...having a mentor that is also a college student helps because it's like I'm going through the same thing you're going through so it's worked for me.

David was very appreciative of the opportunity to connect with men that were supportive of his collegiate journey. He shared,

I never really had a mentor. I never had someone just look for my greater interest outside of like a family member...having men to like truly relate and having a good connection with men, that meant a lot to me because I always felt like it was me who was the problem as to why I couldn't have a good relationship with men, or whatever the case may be, where I didn't have these connections.

After having a great experience as a mentee, he is looking forward to becoming a mentor. David also realized through mentoring, that future students will need his guidance. He shared that he understood that there are people counting on him and “it’s not just about my life” but instead, his journey can be an inspiration to others.

Kelvin and Tyler currently serve as AAMI mentors. Kelvin was really interested in mentoring incoming freshmen after realizing how impactful that relationship can be for a student. He shared,

I decided to do the mentoring program, just to help some of the first-year students out that would be going through the program like I did. So, eventually I did that. I’ve been doing that now, and it's been all really good.

Kelvin enjoyed talking with the students to prepare them for college experiences that may occur. In addition, for students with the same major, Kelvin took pride in his ability to walk them through courses and scheduling and share information that they probably would not have received in their first year of college. Tyler shared lessons learned from his mentor that he also shares with his mentees. He said,

One of the biggest things I realized was, if I succeed, they succeed as well. I remember one of them [mentors] told me, he was like whatever you do, don't give up. He was like please go far...He was like, if you get big or whatever and you've been over here and you shine light on what's going on over here, they'll pay more attention to us. So, he's like, you're not only succeeding for yourself, you're succeeding for everybody out here...so I was like, damn, my life don't only affect the people around me or like the people who I'm closely related to or like myself in general, it affects the people who look like me or people who are going through the same situations that I go through. I was just like that's crazy because I used to think I'm only affecting myself.

The participants have shown, through this study, that there is power in peer mentorship.

Peer mentors have a unique opportunity to guide the college experience through lenses that are not far removed for most mentees. As a result, hands on guidance through processes, culture, and academic provides a safe opportunity for mentees to thrive and grow. Michael, Tyler, Kelvin and Trevor currently serve as peer mentors for new AAMI freshmen.

Simultaneous Incubation

Tinto (2012) referenced the lack of social support for students of color at PWI's and used Fleming's (1985) study on hostile climates to support the drain of emotional energy that these students constantly face and why they often leave PWI's to attend HBCU's (Fleming, 1985; Tinto, 1993). The climate of an HBCU provides an opportunity for students of color to be nurtured and feel protected while pursuing their degree. However, programming and initiatives that include students of color are one of the factors that may increase retention amongst African-American students (McClain & Perry, 2017), and the University System of Georgia's African-American Male Initiative is such an example. Many of the participants in this study shared that the AAMI program was vital to their success as a CSU student, and some even called it a "brotherhood" or referenced other students in the program as their "brothers." However, most acknowledged that they wanted to attend a PWI and were interested in learning how to navigate through a diverse space.

Michael explained this experience best by capturing the importance of AAMI and programs like this, and why experiences where Black students learn how to navigate through diverse populations are also important. The experience with AAMI provided a safe place for students of color to begin the transition into college life. They took classes together and often studied together in addition to sharing meals and downtime together. Michael, as many others, called AAMI "a brotherhood" and even shared with high school mentees to find colleges that offer either AAMI, or a similar program, so that they could have this experience. However, Michael also realized the importance of "understanding all cultures" and having the desire to spend time with other students who are outside of

his race. He shared an example about the campus ministry group where all students were welcome and how it influenced him “personally to just kind of understand everybody as a whole instead of just one race.” He also shared how different groups on campus enjoyed activities together and used those opportunities to bond. He shared,

Even with the intramural basketball teams, it was an AAMI team but we played all White teams because some fraternities had their own team. We played a variety of people, and after the game we would all get together and talk and hang out, like whoever we played, those two teams together.

Michael’s comment mirrors this experience that the researcher calls “simultaneous incubation.” AAMI, and programs like it, provide the nurturing and protection for African-American students as shared through the stories of the participants. In other words, special programming targeted for minority students at PWI’s provide a very similar incubation experience as that of an HBCU simultaneously. Students are able to experience a safe space while learning how to navigate through diversity. Hurtado & Ruiz (2012) shared that the college environment is ideal for students to learn how to navigate diversity. Michael’s examples provide context as to how students are able to use the college environment to learn how to share space with others who may not have the same racial identity, but may share other common interests, such as sports and spirituality, as Michael shared.

Tyler referenced the brotherhood when he said,

One thing I do know about the cohort, the AAMI cohort, it was like a brotherhood. It was like we had tutoring sessions on, I want to say Tuesdays,

where we had like our mentors come to help us with homework or teach us how to do certain things. So, there is really no reason to fail unless you wanted to. However, Tyler was also very interested in learning more about White students and actually requested a White roommate for that purpose. He shared how his roommate annoyed him with “leaving messes behind” and expected Tyler to clean up behind him. When asked if Tyler thought that the expectation to clean up behind his roommate was racially motivated, he shared that he thought that people were just raised differently and that he did not take it personally. He also revealed that the roommate’s mother would drop by and clean up after the roommate which confirmed Tyler’s thought of his roommate’s upbringing.

The impact of AAMI was quite evident from David’s story. However, he enjoyed “building community” with others on campus as he shared how the campus orientation leaders, who were mostly White, bonded with the Black orientation leaders. They spent time together outside of their campus work and Tyler said that it gave the “people that opportunity to know that we do co-exist together.”

Trevor expressed early on that he wanted to experience a more diverse campus. However, when sharing about his background, he mentioned a “sense of comfort” felt when he played against sports teams in a majority Black environment. When asked about choosing a PWI over an HBCU where this “sense of comfort” could most likely be experienced in college, Trevor shared that “just because it is a comfort, it is not in the workplace.” He felt like “society is shifting now” and is “trying to shift towards the better.” However, Trevor also expressed to the researcher that this “sense of comfort” is experienced at this PWI by meeting large numbers of African-American males whom you

can build real connections with and learn how to face obstacles together. Trevor also commented that he enjoyed working in groups with others in his classes and building new connections in addition to AAMI. Nathan really enjoyed faculty who taught the AAMI cohort and allowed open dialogue and expression about race and gender. He said that one White faculty member “actually asked our opinions on race because she actually wanted to know more about our opinions.” PWI’s are an ideal environment for students to learn how to navigate diversity (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012) and these societal shifts in cultural differences. Simultaneous incubation at a PWI, in its purest form, allow students to formally gather in safe, nurturing cultural spaces, and then navigate a diverse collegiate world all at the same time or simultaneously.

Conclusion

The emerging themes from this research study, mindset, diversity matters, peer mentorship, and simultaneous incubation, were expressed through the data provided from the participants. A short data summary of the themes is included in Appendix F. Although participants were from various backgrounds with varying degrees of exposure to college, their mindsets played a part in their ability to move through college where diversity mattered to them. In addition, the peer mentorship experienced and the safe space provided in AAMI proved to be a valuable resource for success for all. Lastly, simultaneous incubation was a term created to describe how minority targeted programs, like AAMI, aid in the success of Black students at PWI’s.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This research study explored the college experiences of Black males and how climate impacted their experience. In this final chapter, the background and purpose, research design and questions, and data collection and analysis process will be reviewed. In addition, the results and limitations of the study, along with future recommendations, will be shared. Lastly, the research questions will be answered and the conclusion of this research study will be presented.

Background and Purpose

African-American college students have reported low levels of satisfaction, feelings of alienation, and unwanted stereotyping at PWI's (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), while many African-American students who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities reported high levels of engagement and achievement (Bir & Myrick, 2015). HBCU's have maintained higher retention rates than African-American students who attended PWI's (Beeks & Graves, 2017). Fleming's (1985) study on hostile climates was referenced by Tinto (2012) for the lack of social support for students of color at PWI's and why these students are often drained emotionally and leave PWI's and attend HBCU's (Fleming, 1985; Tinto, 1993).

A study was conducted in 2012 by Hurtado and Ruiz to measure the effects of climate and diversity on underrepresented groups at PWI's, including African-American students. According to the study, a "more hospitable racial climate" was experienced on campuses with 21%-35% minority students (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). Campton State

University's fall 2019 Black student population was 34.5% (IES, 2020). In addition, the African-American student population has increased by over 8% since 2010, and this subgroup maintained a 72% retention rate over a three-year span beginning fall 2017, while the campus average was 70% during the same timeframe (IES, 2020). However, the average retention rate for African-American males, 65.9%, was disproportionate to that of African-American females, 75.5% (IES, 2020). According to research presented by Harper (2012), complexities from enrollment to graduation have been experienced by African-American males with few solutions from institutional decision makers.

The purpose of this study was to examine the college experiences and retention decisions of African-American male students at a predominantly White institution in the south as they experienced the racial climate of the campus. African-American students have historically struggled at PWI's, citing feelings of isolation and high levels of dissatisfaction (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Hurtado et al. (1999) described campus racial climate as an academic society's perception, current beliefs, and judgements about race, ethnicity, and diversity and the racial climate of a campus often impacts the retention decisions of students of color (McClain & Perry, 2017). Campton State has experienced an increase in overall African-American student retention, but the Black male population's retention rate has steadily decreased. Although CSU could be deemed "a more hospitable racial climate" based on research by Hurtado and Ruiz (2012), critical race theorists Carter-Andrews and Truitt (2013) argued that even in such climates, racism is still prevalent and cannot be escaped or avoided.

Research Design and Questions

Targeted programming for Black students often results in higher levels of collegiate retainment (McClain & Perry, 2017). The University System of Georgia's African-American Male Initiative, which is funded on campuses across the state of Georgia to include Campton State (USG, 2020), is an example of such a program. The participants for this study were all current African-American male students at CSU who participated in AAMI. A basic interpretative study was used to allow for a broader perspective to understand the views of the participants (Merriam, 2009). Critical race theory and Tinto's student retention model provided the framework needed to gauge the college experiences of the students. The following questions guided this study:

1. How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?
2. How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?
3. How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Data Collection and Analysis

Six African-American male students from Campton State participated in the study. The first round of interviews was scheduled for 90 minutes. Follow up conversations were scheduled to clarify information and transcripts were provided to the interviewees for member checking. The results of the study revealed the students' experiences with understanding racial identity and the college experience, programming and networks of support, and how racial climate effects retention. Four themes emerged

from the data analysis: (1) mindset (2) diversity matters (3) peer mentorship and (4) simultaneous incubation. The results and emerging themes will be discussed in this chapter.

Results of the Research Study

The research questions used to guide this study were thoughtfully composed to examine the college experiences and retention decisions of African-American male students. All of the participants engaged well in conversations with the researcher. This qualitative research study allowed the researcher to understand how the participants interpreted their experiences, constructed their worlds, and provided meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Racial Identity and the College Experience

In the first research question, racial identity and its influence on the college experiences for African-American male college students was explored. The participant's family background differed and many had varying levels of support before beginning their collegiate journeys. Kelvin, Tyler, David, and Nathan moved to Georgia permanently with their immediate families as teens after spending most of their childhood in other states. Kelvin, David, and Nathan moved to towns in the Atlanta metropolitan area, while Tyler's family moved to a southern Georgia town. Most credited the moves for better work opportunities for their families. Both Trevor and Michael are Georgia natives. All of the participants had some family member who attended college to include parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. When asked about immediate families and college education, all of the participant's mothers attended college, with the

exception of David, and only Nathan had both mother and father noted as college attendees.

Nathan and Kelvin were the only participants raised with both parents. Trevor noted a stepfather, and Michael revealed that his father was not present at all. In fact, he shared that he gives Father's Day gifts to his mother and older sister each year. David and Tyler's move to Georgia consisted of their mother and siblings, and only David mentioned that his father lived outside of the state. Both Nathan and Michael were the youngest children in their families, with two older siblings that attended college, Kelvin, Trevor, and David were the oldest of three, three, and five siblings, respectively, and Tyler has a twin brother. All of the participants had some level of college preparation, from dual enrollment and/or rigorous courses in high school, to mindset preparation to reset their thinking for their college experience.

As we started to explore how racial identity influenced the college experiences of the participants, the data revealed that *race was not a factor when choosing a college* for any of our participants. In fact, David shared that he did not realize that CSU was a PWI during the application process and he was more focused on the program offerings. Kelvin, too, was interested in finding a college that offered his major, speech pathology, and it was an extra bonus that CSU was close to home for him. Tyler, Trevor, Michael, and Nathan were impressed by the welcoming feel of the campus. Tyler felt like he could "adapt to any situation", and Trevor wanted to be intentional about diversity with his college choice and he liked that the school was close to home. Nathan was not even aware of the social perceptions of Black males until later on in high school, so race was

not an embedded factor in choosing a school and he felt that most colleges were the same and “you get the same degree from all of them.”

As we began to take a deeper dive into race and the college experiences at a PWI, the data revealed that perceived racially motivated experiences were common for the participants, but the participant’s response to perceived racist behaviors was offset by their ability to *change their perception about perceived racism*. CRT theorists could argue that the students may be normalizing racism, but Hurtado & Ruiz (2012) shared that the college environment is ideal for students of all backgrounds to learn how to navigate and appreciate diversity. When dealing with perceived racism on campus, Kelvin shared,

I feel like in a way, certain people might act certain ways because, either they don’t know better, or they may not realize that they’re doing it. So, whenever it comes to like some type of situation where, say if you look at it from a different perspective, you might think, oh, this might be racially motivated, I think it's just more of like, you know, people don’t really realize that what they’re doing might be racially motivated.

Trevor admitted that racism is “disappointing” and “it hurts.” However, he equated bad behavior to how people were raised and said “how you are raised kind of shifts the way your behaviors are.” In agreeance with Hurtado & Ruiz’s (2012) thought about learning how to navigate through diversity on a college campus, Trevor shared that learning how to have conversations about race in college are important opportunities to grow and those same skills can be applied in “adulthood” to create solutions that can “make everything better for everyone.” Michael directly credited mindset with how he deals with racism

and shared that even in uncomfortable situations, his personal pride in who is his and where is he going in life allows him to push forward and not be consumed by the words or actions of others.

Unfortunately, most of the participants in this research study experienced or knew of other African-American students who experienced racism on campus. In addition, the students used for the exploratory studies prior to the study, William and Ashley, all shared similar experiences either personally or through the eyes of other classmates at their institutions. Examples of stereotypical racial interactions are consistent with research by Harper (2012), Lee (2016), Smith et. al (2007) and Strayhorn (2012). Tyler had campus friends who experienced police harassment while hanging out around the campus residence halls and revealed that he often wondered if he would face harassment. David felt moved to advocate for students who experienced racism or discrimination and shared that he “didn’t look at it just as their problem, I looked at it as my problem as well.” Nathan, Trevor, and Michael had firsthand experiences of perceived racism. Nathan experienced very strong reactions from female students while walking down the hall in a dorm. Both Trevor and Michael experienced uncomfortable encounters in the campus library. For Trevor, a staff member was not kind and friendly when asked to use a stapler for an assignment. While studying, Michael experienced the police asking him to leave the building at closing, but he didn’t notice the officer asking White students to leave.

In this study, it was revealed that students have managed racism by learning how to manage their perceptions. In the examples provided by Nathan, Trevor, and Michael, all decided to change their perspectives to manage the perceived racist behaviors. Nathan

shared that he wasn't sure if he just scared the female students because he is a tall male and perhaps the reaction could be the same if he were a tall male of any ethnicity, Trevor decided to use the stapler incident as a way to continue his personal work on learning how to deal with people and navigate through attitudes and personality, and Michael shared that although the police officer approached him about leaving the library, he knew that it was time for the library to close and he had been there for hours studying. As Kelvin shared, some people may not realize that their behaviors could be perceived as racist, and Trevor acknowledged that such behaviors could be attributed to how people are raised. Some may view the student's reactions to normalizing racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). However, by changing their perceptions about race and racially motivated experiences, the participants have revealed that their identity has influenced their college experiences by giving them an opportunity to learn how *to navigate through a diverse environment* and create growth strategies that could transition into life after college.

Programming and Networks of Support

In the second research question, programming and networks of support were explored to understand how they have assisted in the acclimation to college life for the research participants. Programming and initiatives that include students of color are some of the factors that may increase retention amongst African-American students (McClain & Perry, 2017) and AAMI is such an example. All of the participants spoke highly of the program with full consensus that this program assisted with their ability *to transition and acclimate to college life*.

From the data, it was revealed that CSU's AAMI program consisted of a freshmen cohort who took courses together and participated in study halls and additional programming. After their freshmen year, many students stayed connected to the program by serving as peer mentors and/or attending outside programming and events that involved AAMI students. None of the participants mentioned that they were familiar with AAMI prior to acceptance into college, and most recall receiving an email or phone call from the AAMI staff to share information about the program during the summer before their freshman year. Many of the participants spoke fondly about the opportunities to bond and create a "brotherhood" which was extremely helpful while transitioning into college life. Kelvin was impressed with the opportunity to meet professional African-American men who shared knowledge about their professions and the opportunity to learn how to conduct yourself in a professional interview. Tyler recalled opportunities to participate as a group in community service projects such as local clean ups and youth mentoring programs. Tyler also shared that he was able to participate in a study abroad program and travel to Brazil with other AAMI students. Nathan enjoyed the opportunity to be coached in public speaking. He also enjoyed the faculty who taught the AAMI cohort classes and felt that they actually cared about the students. Trevor was complimentary about the "sense of comfort" that AAMI provided for students and he stressed the importance of programs like this especially for African-American males. The impact of being around positive Black males was significant to David. Due to his personal history, the exposure that AAMI provided allowed him to begin to create a new path in life for himself. Michael was very impressed with the

format of the program and like Trevor, Michael felt that all African-American male students should participate in programs like this.

During the data collection process, the researcher was not surprised by the responses of the students about their experience in AAMI. When asked if they would recommend this program to others, all responded favorably. Tyler even said that “you’re hindering yourself if you don’t take advantage of this.” Michael shared that he actually encourages high school students to look at colleges that offer AAMI. Trevor commented that “this is one of the best programs that the University System of Georgia has.” What was surprising to the researcher was the how well the students received and admired the AAMI program director with no direct question asked about the director’s influence on the program. Tinto (1993) shared that resources and incentives must be available for faculty and staff to implement the program and to train effectively to execute the plan in order to implement effective retention programs. Many campus faculty and staff who direct student programs often find themselves in thankless roles although such resources may be provided. The responses from the students about the program’s leadership revealed that his work has been appreciated throughout the years. Kelvin described the director as “an amazing guy” and the “most phenomenal person” he ever met. Tyler felt that the director’s interest in the program and in the students was genuine and shared that “he wasn’t like somebody who was just doing it for, like I guess, money or anything like that.” Nathan shared that he valued the opportunity to comfortably have informal conversations with the director and like Kelvin, Trevor called the director “phenomenal.” David acknowledged the power of an early conversation with the director that motivated

him to take this collegiate journey as he worked through previous obstacles, and like Kelvin, Michael echoed the phrase “an amazing guy” when describing the director.

In addition to the AAMI director, other networks of support were shared as important and highly valued to the college experience of the participants. Support networks have been noted as important to African-American males from other studies (Harper, 2012). Every participant included their mother as a strong network of support. Tyler shared that his mother would build up his confidence if he felt unsure of himself. The participants also valued the support from family members and friends. Support was also noted by faculty/staff at the institution and most of the participants identified AAMI as a source of support. David even credited the dining hall staff as a network of support and shared about all support networks that “you never know where one person’s connection can take you.” All of the participants were involved in other campus activities which presented an opportunity to meet new faculty/staff and students and enlarge their campus networks in addition to AAMI. Michael and Trevor participated in campus ministry groups and served as campus ambassadors, Nathan led a campus anime club, David was in a club for young entrepreneurs and a fashion club, and Kelvin served as a volunteer for an organization that helped students with disabilities. In addition to the activities shared, Michael led an intramural AAMI basketball team, Michael, Tyler, Kelvin and Trevor served as AAMI mentors, and Michael, Tyler, and Trevor joined or were accepted into academic clubs and organizations specific to their majors.

Strayhorn’s (2012) prior research revealed that a Black male’s campus involvement was key to successfully acclimating to a college campus. Student engagement is an important component to the retention decision of students. In Astin’s

(1984) student involvement theory, involvement was described as the quantity and quality of the energy and time invested in the college experience which include class preparation, club and organization participation, and interactions with faculty, staff, and students. CSU has provided an abundance of opportunity for student engagement according to the research participants. AAMI provided an immediate impact to the research participants and the programming created allowed students to acclimate to college life. The programming package for AAMI consisted of the cohort model for academic courses, engaging programs with a focus on transferable skills such as public speaking and interviewing, opportunities to bond formally and informally through study halls, programs, and meals, and an engaged director and other faculty/staff. In addition to AAMI, students joined other campus organizations, served as volunteers, and worked campus jobs. The support provided by AAMI, and family and friends, allowed the students to feel confident that they were not alone. AAMI automatically *created an intentional safe space and built in networks of support for the college experience* for African-American male students as they transitioned into college life.

Racial Climate and its Effect on Retention

Historically, many PWI's have struggled with access and inclusion for students of color (Thelin, 1985), but the norms and beliefs of an organization's culture affects the climate (Hurtado et al., 1999). According to Hurtado et al. (1999), increasing the number of students, faculty and staff of a certain ethnicity, or structural diversity, is an important first step in changing campus climate as it relates to diversity. The concept of "critical mass" has been referenced by researchers who believe that retention numbers of students of color can increase if there is a larger community of like individuals on the campus of a

PWI (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2012). The participants of this study were overall pleased with the racial climate of the campus. Michael felt that the students were “evenly distributed” between Black and White students, and Nathan provided anecdotal evidence by his experience of seeing more Black students in the gym, cafeteria, and casually walking around and claimed that CSU was a “majority-minority school.” Tyler and David both commented on their surprise and relief of the large number of Black students on campus, in addition to other races, and Trevor shared that “the climate has changed more on the campus than in the community.”

The African-American student population at CSU has increased by over 8% since 2010 and is currently 34.5% of the student population (IES, 2020). The numerical representation of those students at CSU supports Hurtado et al.’s (1999) structural diversity concept. Even though the institution has experienced an increase in the number of African-American students, both in population and retention (IES, 2020), the decline in retention for African-American males is troubling. Lee (2018) shared that the Black college experience is not experienced by all Blacks equally. The complex issues experienced by black males in the areas of enrollment, engagement, achievement, and graduation need attention in higher education (Harper, 2012). Tinto (2012) argued that a climate of support, belonging, general well-being, and the value of involvement that one senses is attached to their collegiate setting often shapes a student’s decision to stay or leave and McClain & Perry (2017) shared that increased retention for African-American students can be influenced by targeted campus initiatives for minorities.

As a targeted campus initiative, AAMI provided an opportunity for African-American males students to build a sense of belonging and an important network of

support. Since its inception, the USG, as a whole, has experienced high rates of enrollment, retention, and graduation from Black male students who participated in AAMI across the state of Georgia (USG, 2020). Trevor shared that programs like AAMI gave him a “sense of wanting to stay in college and wanting to succeed in college” and that the growth experienced helped him “to return.” When faced with a challenge that could have led to his departure from the institution, David leaned on the network of faculty and staff that he built within AAMI for assistance and appreciated the availability of such a resource. Faculty/student and student/student interactions are factors that can affect a student’s decision to return (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition to AAMI, many of the participants acknowledged that other campus experiences contributed to their decision to return to CSU. Tyler was very complimentary of the connections made with faculty, staff, and students that created a positive environment for him, and Trevor commented that his interactions with faculty and staff made students feel like “family.” Nathan realized that his collegiate friendships would be hard to recreate at another institution and that, too, led to his decision to stay.

According to Tinto (1993), the longitudinal model of institutional departure describes the student departure process, and pre-entry attributes, family background, skills, and prior education are used as determinants of goal commitments. Mindset became an emerging theme in this research study and Hochanadel & Finamore (2015) revealed that a student’s mindset can also greatly affect a student’s decision to stay in college. Kelvin began college very focused on his career path and credited that as the reason for his return, and Michael, too, was focused on the end goal and shared that “I got to keep coming back to get there.”

The participants revealed that *racial climate had very little influence on their decision to return to CSU for subsequent years*. However, targeted programs for minorities, such as AAMI, provided a safe space for minorities to adjust to the culture and climate of the campus. The *participants credited the network created by AAMI, positive interactions with faculty, staff, and students, and family support as their main influences for retention*. In addition, some of the student's mindsets were already positioned for the goal of *degree attainment which became a major influence* to their decision to return.

Summary of Emerging Themes

Interpretation of a participant's experience, understanding how they constructed their worlds, and how meaning is attributed to an experience is all a part of the qualitative researcher's process while conducting a study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The research questions guided this process, but additional themes emerged as a result. For this research study, the following themes were revealed: (1) mindset, (2) diversity matters, (3) peer mentorship, and (4) simultaneous incubation.

Students with a growth mindset can increase their ability to learn and achieve, and their ability to show resilience when faced with difficult situations (Barclay et al., 2018). A student's mindset and ability to persist can greatly affect their decision to stay (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). All of the participants mentioned mindset as a cause of their ability to navigate through the college experience as Black males. Positive mindset was also integrated into the core of the mission of AAMI (USG, 2020). As mentioned earlier, a mindset shift allowed them all to change their perception about racism and allow those experiences to become teachable moments of how to navigate through the

world. In addition to that shared interest, mindset was attributed to both Michael and Kelvin's reason for returning to CSU. Michael felt that many students are not able to balance the academic components of college and the social aspect. Michael also credited college preparation activities and spoke with clarity on the importance on how mindset could alter the trajectory of a student's journey. Kelvin decided on a career path in high school and was extremely focused on his experience to attain a degree and work in his chosen field of study. Tyler shared that "nothing doesn't come easy and then you get what you put in it in college. That's the mindset I had." David purposefully chose a growth mindset as a way out of the normal route that childhood friends and family had taken. He recognized that "everyone can't be with you on your journey" and that he would have to create his own experience. Trevor and Nathan shared strong family ties in the collegiate space and entered college with a solid mindset of finishing all requirements needed for degree attainment.

Hurtado and Ruiz (2012) shared that the college environment is ideal for students to learn how to navigate diversity. Diversity mattered to many of the research participants. Trevor wanted to attend a PWI so that he could experience and learn how to navigate through diversity and he shared that "Going to a predominantly White institution helps prepare you for your phase after college...It is not as if changes before you are out of college." Michael and Nathan enjoyed the opportunity to meet people who were different from them to learn how to navigate through conversations and shared activities. Kelvin commented that diversity was important and it's not good to have "a strong majority of whatever race or ethnic group."

In Harper's (2012) study with African-American male students, the data revealed that peer mentoring programs were cited as being extremely successful for college transitioning and retention, especially when the mentors were Black male upperclassmen and student leaders. The participants in this study agreed and attributed peer mentoring as an important benefit of participating in programs like AAMI. Tyler shared that he "would have been lost" had it not been for peer mentors. David appreciated the positive males in his life who were interested in guiding him down a positive and healthy path. Michael, Kelvin, Tyler, and Trevor currently serve as peer mentors to incoming freshmen in AAMI as a way to give back and lead new students.

Simultaneous incubation is a term coined by the researcher as a result of this study. This theme was developed to capture the essence of how African-American students can thrive at PWI's despite the more common themes of racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007), low levels of satisfaction, feelings of alienation, and unwanted stereotyping at PWI's (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), and consistent uncertainty with their sense of belonging (Stephens et al., 2012). Targeted programming for minority students, like AAMI, provides a safe, nurturing incubation experience as that of an HBCU, while students are learning how to navigate through a diverse campus simultaneously. Many of the participants shared that the "brotherhood" of AAMI provided a safe space for them and the faculty/staff who managed the program created new networks of support for their college experience. However, the students still wanted to engage with students from other races such as Tyler's purposeful request for a White roommate, Michael's purposeful choice to lead a diverse ministry group, and Trevor's purposeful choice to attend a PWI for the diversity.

The emerging themes from this study provided additional information on how African-American male students experienced college life. Mindset, diversity and peer mentoring were all important attributes to their experience. In addition, simultaneous incubation was a new term created to describe how programs like AAMI allow students of color to thrive at PWI's.

Limitations of the Study

Strategies were used to validate the accuracy of the data and offset questions about authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility (Creswell, 2014). A purposeful selection procedure was used to recruit participants for this study. Although the participants were all a part of the AAMI program at CSU, their academic levels and disciplines varied. However, only 7 students responded to the recruitment survey with 6 who actually continued with the process. Because the study was limited to African-American males who participated in the AAMI program at CSU, a wider audience could not be contacted to increase the number of participants for the study. Member checking was used as an additional research method to confirm accuracy after the findings and common themes had been discovered (Creswell, 2014). All data for the study was collected by the use of interviews and follow up conversations, and the researcher had to assume that the information shared was accurate. Tinto (2012) shared that it is useful to understand how academic and social engagement can be enhanced at an institution from a student's perception, although contradictory evidence or negative information can be shared as part of the research study as a validity strategy (Creswell, 2014). However, a student's perception is just that: a student's perception.

In addition to the student's perception, the researcher's bias must be recognized as a potential limitation to the study. Creswell (2014) shared that the researcher's bias deserves clarity in sharing "how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background" (p. 202). As a college administrator who is also a minority, it was important that I did not link my perspective of the college experience for African-American students to the participants. Because I have a genuine interest and concern for college enrollment and the college experience for students, especially for students of color, part of my bias to the research may have been a hopeful journey to find solutions that institutions could implement to benefit faculty, staff, and students.

Future Research Recommendations

It would be interesting to conduct this study at other PWI's across the state. The location of the PWI could also make a difference on how students experience racial climate. A research study could also be conducted at an HBCU to compare a Black male's college experience at both types of institutions. In addition, a similar study at an HBCU could be of interest to understand if programs like AAMI have a different purpose and how Black male students experience college at an HBCU. McClure (2006) shared that membership in Black Greek organizations allow one to feel instantly connected to a larger community of African-Americans both on and off campus. Murguia et al. (1991) referred to a connection as such as "ethnic enclaves" which often serves as a resource for Black students to navigate through campus life more effectively. Understanding if or how Black Greek organizations effect the college experience of African-American students at a PWI could be interesting to study. In addition, understanding if there is a

greater influence on the retention decisions of males who participate in programs like AAMI versus fraternities could also provide interesting results.

Family background is an element explored in Tinto's student departure model (Tinto, 1993). In this research study, all of the participants attributed successes to their mothers. A study on the effect of mothers as a network of support for African-American males could create an interesting dialogue. Some of the participants mentioned their fathers and some shared that their fathers were not a major source of support for their families. Understanding the dynamics of Black males and their fathers and how or if that influenced their college experience could be explored. In addition to family background, other aspects of Tinto's student departure model such as prior education and other pre-entry attributes (Tinto, 1993), could be explored. With prior education, a student's high school experience, both academic and personal, could be explored to understand how or if that effects climate or retention decisions once the student begins their collegial journey.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, after lower-order needs such as physiological and safety are met, people are motivated by higher order needs which begins with belongingness, followed by esteem and self-actualization (Williams, 2019). Using higher order needs as the framework, it would be interesting to explore needs and intrinsic motivation for African-American male students as mindset emerged as a major theme for this study. Motivation could also be explored in university faculty and staff to understand the experiences of such who are motivated to curate a positive experience for college students as the research revealed in the data collected about the AAMI faculty and staff.

Lastly, other states may have similar programming for African-American students offered. McClain and Perry (2017) shared that retention of Black students in higher education could be influenced by targeted campus initiatives for minorities. Other states may offer similar initiatives like AAMI for students of color. It would be interesting to research how other states create college programming opportunities for minority students and its effect on retention for those students. In addition, comparing private and public college initiatives for African-American students could be interesting as well as understanding the differences in resources used for programming.

Research Question Results and Emerging Themes

The result of the three research questions that guided this study are provided below.

How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

The research study revealed that racial identity itself did not influence the college experiences of these African-American male students at a PWI in the south. In fact, race was not a factor when the participants chose CSU for college. Although perceived racially motivated occurrences were experienced by the participants and/or their friends, their response to perceived racist behaviors were offset by their ability to change their perception about perceived racism. CRT theorists could argue that the students may be normalizing racism, but Hurtado & Ruiz (2012) shared that the college environment is ideal for students of all backgrounds to learn how to navigate and appreciate diversity, and the data from the study aligned with this statement. According to the participants,

attending a PWI allowed the students to learn how to navigate in a diverse environment as they prepare themselves for the post college transition.

How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?

The study revealed that programs like AAMI are highly effective in the transition and acclimation to college life for African-American male students. Programs as such create an intentional safe space and built in networks of support for the college experience. In addition to families, the participants credited the faculty and staff of AAMI, with special acknowledgements to the director of AAMI, for the support and encouragement needed for this collegiate journey. Their experience aligned with research presented by Harper (2012) where good networks of support, from parents to pre-college programs, assisted with the journey of choosing, getting in, and transitioning to college from data collected from African-American male students from that study. In addition, Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Strayhorn's (2012) prior research on Black male student involvement aligned with the data collected from this research study that student engagement is effective for a successful college experience.

How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Overall, the participants were pleased with the climate on campus but noted that the climate in the small town where the university was located needed to be adjusted. The study revealed that racial climate had very little influence on their decision to return to CSU for subsequent years. The large number of Black students on campus referenced by the participants aligned with the concept of critical mass or the belief that retention

numbers of students of color can increase if there are a large number of like individuals at a PWI (Grier-Reed et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2000; Tinto, 2012). Targeted programs for minorities, such as AAMI, provided a safe space for minorities to adjust to the culture and climate of the campus. The participants credited AAMI and the network provided by the program, positive interactions with faculty, staff, and students, and family support as their main influences for retention. In addition, some of the student's mindsets were already positioned for the goal of degree attainment.

In addition to the research question results, four themes emerged from this study: mindset, diversity matters, peer mentoring, and simultaneous incubation. The data collected provided evidence of commonalities around growth mindset, learning how to navigate through a diverse population, and how formal mentoring from peers is helpful to the college experience. Most of all, understanding the relevance of creating safe spaces for minority students, such as AAMI, that are formally managed by faculty and staff at PWI's allows students to be nurtured while navigating through a diverse environment simultaneously.

Conclusion

The research study revealed that African-American male students can thrive and have a healthy college experience at a PWI. Although racism exists, the study revealed that a change in mindset can create more opportunities for more positive outcomes. Creating an environment where existing networks of support are welcomed and new networks can be nurtured, provides an intentional opportunity for Black males to be successful at a PWI. The participants revealed that student engagement is not simply engagement, but instead, engagement with a purpose. Brotherhood, strong networks of

support, and engaged faculty and staff were terms used often in this study to describe their environment. College campuses should evaluate models used for the first-year experience for students of color. In addition to the first year, pathways should be created, such as peer mentorship and additional programming, to keep students connected to each other until graduation. Most of all, institutions should evaluate such programs to make sure that the right faculty and staff are involved with the operations and management of the programs. AAMI in itself has been an invaluable experience for African-American males to safely acclimate into college life. In the words of Trevor when asked about AAMI, “I am telling you that it is one of the best programs that the University System of Georgia has.”

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APPENDIX A

Statistics from Campton State University

APPENDIX A

Statistics from Campton State University

Figure 1

Retention rates per year and the 3-year average for Campton State University

	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	Average
All Students	72.38%	68.84%	69.07%	70.10%
All Black Students	75.53%	71.34%	69.53%	72.13%
Black Females	77.73%	74.91%	74.02%	75.55%
Black Males	71.39%	64.52%	61.95%	65.95%

APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Report

APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Report



***Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants***

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04156-2021

Responsible Researcher(s): Monica Williams Smith

Supervising Faculty: Dr. James Archibald

Project Title: *A Research Study Exploring Climate and the Experiences and Retention Decisions of African-American Male College Students.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interview sessions provided the recordings are made for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. The recordings must be deleted immediately from all recording devices upon creation of the transcript. Exempt protocol guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, or sharing of audio recordings.*
- *The interview statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of the interview session, questions answered, and confirmation obtained of the participant's understanding and willingness to participate.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie 04.15.2021
Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*

APPENDIX C

Messages to Participants, Research Flyer, and Statement of Consent

APPENDIX C

Messages to Participants, Research Flyer, and Statement of Consent

Email Message to Students

This message is sent on behalf of Monica W. Smith:

Hello! My name is Monica W. Smith and I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am recruiting CSU students to participate in my research study. The targeted participants are African-American males who have participated in the African-American Male Initiative (AAMI). This study is a part of my doctoral education program. The study will explore how African-American males from AAMI experienced the campus climate and how those experiences influenced their decision to return to college. Please see the attached flyer for additional information about the process and how to express your interest in participating. If you choose to participate, please complete the form below by April 25, 2021. My contact information is below should you have any questions. I look forward to meeting and working with you on this study.

Participation form:

https://valdosta.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_03ds2mdn0WzwtO6

Kind Regards,

Monica W. Smith, Doctoral Student, Valdosta State University

Email: monicwilliams@valdosta.edu

Flyer to Students

Research Participants Needed

About the Researcher: Monica W. Smith is a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. This study is a part of the researcher's doctoral education program.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how campus climate influences the college experiences and retention decisions of students from the African-American Male Initiative (AAMI) at Campton State University (CSU).

For Questions or Clarification: Please contact Monica W. Smith at monicwilliams@valdosta.edu if you have any questions.

Procedures: To express interest in being a participant, please complete the google form that includes the following:

- Your first and last name
- Confirmation of your ethnicity (African-American)
- Confirmation that you participated in AAMI
- Confirmation that you are currently enrolled at CSU
- Your preferred email address to receive correspondence

After expressing interest in participating, a separate email will be sent to your preferred email address requesting the following if you meet the inclusion criteria:

- At least (5) dates and times that you are available for one to three interviews (interview could be safely face to face or virtual using google meets or zoom).
- Available interview dates should be sent to monicwilliams@valdosta.edu

The Interview: The researcher will confirm an interview date and time based on availability. At the start of the face to face or virtual interview, the researcher will review the consent statement contents with you to ensure your understanding and to allow you to ask any final questions before the interview begins.

- You may be asked for a second or third interview if clarification is needed.
- Participants will be provided the interview transcription and analysis to review and confirm accuracy.

Time Commitment: I am requesting one to three separate interviews that will cover various topics about your college experience. Individual interviews may last from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Before the first interview begins, the researcher and the participant will discuss the consent statement and the participant will be able to address any questions or concerns. If further information is needed after the first interview, the interviewer will request a second interview.

Research Statement of Consent (located in Qualtrics survey and read out loud by researcher to participants)

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “A Research Study Exploring Climate and the Experiences and Retention Decisions of African-American Male College Students,” which is being conducted by Monica Williams Smith, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this study is to examine the college experiences and retention decisions of African-American male students at a predominantly White institution in the south as they experience the racial climate of the campus.

The interviews will be audio recorded in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. The recording will be used for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript and will be immediately deleted from all devices upon creation of the transcript. This research data will be stored securely for a minimum of three years. At the end of the required time, all collected data will be permanently destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Monica Williams Smith at monicwilliams@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D

Virtual Background Used for Interviews

APPENDIX D

Virtual Background Used for Interviews



APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

Part One: Racial Identity and the African-American Male College Student

How has racial identity influenced the college experiences of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

Tell me a little about your background.

How would you describe your identity?

How would you describe your academic experience prior to college?

Did anyone in your family attend college? If so, who?

What were your beliefs about your ability to succeed academically in college?

Why did you choose your current institution?

How did race, if at all, influence your college decision?

How were you connected to the institution before your first day?

How would you describe your experience with various operational processes (financial aid, registering for classes, housing and residence life, etc.)?

What are your experiences with your living arrangements?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about your identity?

Part Two: Programming and Networks of Support and the African-American Male College Student

How has programming and networks of support assisted in the acclimation to college life for AAMI participants at a PWI in the south?

What were your beliefs about Black college students?

How did those beliefs influence your decision to attend college?

Tell me about your experience with AAMI (classes, programming, advising, etc). Would you recommend this program to others?

What other types of activities do you participate in outside of class including campus or off campus work? Are there any activities that you want to participate in before graduation?

How do the activities shared in the last question affect your college experiences?

How was your experience meeting new people and transitioning into college life (living arrangements, classes, etc.)?

In what ways do you feel supported as a student at this institution?

What other types of programming or support activities are needed for students?

How did or do you respond to challenging interactions experienced with faculty/staff/students (in and/or outside of the classroom)?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about programming and/or networks of support?

Three: Racial Climate and Decisions of an African-American Male College Student

How has racial climate influenced the retention decisions of African-American male students at a PWI in the south?

What type of experience did you expect to have in college?

Have you experienced any presumed assumptions because of your race and gender? If so, what?

As you reflect on your first year of college, what experiences (interactions, activities, etc) were the most impactful to you? What about subsequent years?

How did those experiences shared in the previous question ultimately influence your decision to stay at this institution? If not those experiences, then what?

How would you define your “place” at this institution?

How does it feel to complete semesters of college?

Is there anything else that you would like to share about the climate at this institution?

APPENDIX F
Emerging Themes

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<i>Mindset</i>	I feel like once you come into college, you need to learn quick that you need to use what people say to you negatively in a positive manner...everybody is not going to be your friend, but if you keep your head on straight and you can empower yourself, then it will help. (Michael)
	A lot of people coming to college are making excuses because they want to go out and party, which is fine, but if you got class in morning at 8 a.m., you shouldn't be partying the night before just because your friends want to party. Yeah, in college, you're going to meet people, you're going to make friends, but also you have to realize that you have classes. A lot of people don't understand that... and a lot of people don't understand that first year is crucial because that's when a lot of people's GPA drops and it hits hard, and it's easy to get it down, but it's hard to get it up. I can guarantee that much. That's all I can really say, just have your head on straight when you come in. It's okay to have fun, but you also got to be about your business. (Michael)
	The only thing I would just say for preparing for college is just do your best and be ready. I can't really say what you can prepare on because everybody's different, but college is college. It's not high school. It's not middle school. They're not going to hold your hand...They're not going to baby you. It's like they're going to give you an assignment. They give you plenty of time to do it. All you got to do is do your work. (Michael)
	I've been with people where someone has said something or done a certain act, and they get offended or they get uncomfortable by it. But me personally, I can't say that I've been in an uncomfortable position because I'm proud of who I am. I don't care what you say to me. I don't care about none of that. If you say what you say, you do what you do, then in my eyes, it ain't got nothing to do with me because my head's still going this way. So, I can't say that I've been in an uncomfortable position, but it's probably because of my mindset. (Michael)
	I took a tour and I pictured myself in this environment and I was like, yeah, I can see myself living here. I can see myself putting the work in here. I feel like I can thrive in it and things like that. Once I had that mindset that I could see myself in it, I've just got to surround myself with the right people who are going to have the same intention and want to see me succeed as I do for myself. (Tyler)
	So as far as like preparing myself, I just said be open minded. Be myself and don't try to be somebody I can't be or I know I'm not. Really just be the hard worker that I know I am because, like I said,

	<p>nothing doesn't come easy and then you get what you put in college. That's the mindset I had. I was like I know anything that I want or anything that I want to achieve I know I've got to put in the work behind it. (Tyler)</p>
	<p>It's like you're going to be in college with a whole lot of different mindsets and points of views and I've got to be open because I don't want to be close minded and just be like, no, this is what I grew up on. This is what I'm believing. You've got to be open minded. You've got to be able to take criticism. You've got to be able to listen to people and hear their side of the story because everybody don't come from the same upbringing...race doesn't really represent who you are, you represent who you are. You take your own path to what you feel is right. It's like you do what's best for you. (Tyler)</p>
	<p>As far as like my schoolwork, I started making sure I was staying on track because I knew I was not affecting the people around me, but I was affecting myself as far as like if I decide to make certain decisions or I decide not to go to school or I decide to make bad grades, it was only affecting my future. So as far as that, once I understood that, and then you know took control of my life and things of that nature, I began like, I guess you could say, progressing pretty easy because I got comfortable in the situation. I knew I didn't really have no control over it, so I just accepted it for what it was. (Tyler)</p>
	<p>I didn't come from a background with men who pursued higher education. So, of course, me taking this different route, I had to receive, like, I wouldn't say like the backlash, but more so like the judgment of, "Well, you're going to school, so you're a simp," or essentially someone who is like sensitive, someone who is not as hard as far as like African-American culture and slang language, or someone who isn't, I would say like, not built for the real world, basically. Like I said, [I'm] just taking a different route. Like most of the men that I came from, they all ended up in jail or dead, really, and I knew that wasn't a route that I wanted to take...I knew I would have to shape my own experience, shape my own background, and my own knowledge behind pursuing higher education. And so, that's exactly what I did. (David)</p>
	<p>So, for me pushing forward, I started practicing yoga, and meditation, and things like that. This was my first year practicing these things, so, it helped me to get like more understanding with myself, and with that understanding, I knew it was my journey, it wasn't no one else's, and I knew either you were going to be able to support me on my journey or you were going to hinder my journey. So, for the people who were hindering my journey, I just let them be...communication became really slight and it wasn't so much of a personal thing against them, but it was more so a personal thing for me and my journey because I don't want to hear about the person</p>

	<p>who failed on their attempt, I want to hear how you got this, I want to hear those motivational things when it comes to me and my journey. I don't want to hear about all the bad things that you may have heard, but yet you didn't even experience yourself. (David)</p>
	<p>So, pushing forward, I found myself doing a bunch of journaling and being able to write, like I said, I'm a creative, so being able to write helped me to release the things that were always in my head that didn't come from me to begin with, it came from outside sources. So, I began to just release these things that did not help me, and most importantly, I caught myself just praying more than I ever did because I knew it was something that I wanted to do [college], and I knew what didn't seem impossible, and I know for me, anything that's possible, I'm going to try to attempt. So, I just knew like it's something greater than just me on this journey of attending an institution; I do it for my community, my family, my future, and literally the future of this world. That's the reason why I'm doing it now. (David)</p>
	<p>From looking at it from a different aspect, I have seen people go, strive, and be great. I always had a great outlook on college students...I never felt that Black students or Black people did not go to college and succeed, because I always had that in me. I always saw that from my community and my family. (Trevor)</p>
	<p>I am a very level-headed person. My mindset coming into college was just come in, do what you have to do, and do not waste your parent's money. I always took advantage of the opportunities that came towards me, especially in college. For instance, I have taken summer classes every summer. This is my first summer not taking summer classes...We already pay out of pocket for school, so I do not have any built-up debt...I had a very straightforward mindset going into college. Do not mess around. Do what I have to do to succeed. (Trevor)</p>
	<p>I just thought that once you get into college, you stay all 4 years and that was my thought. I thought that no one really drops out... But to me, it's more just like if you're a Black man, you just go to college and get your education, and get a good job. (Nathan)</p>
	<p>I guess that's kind of always stuck with me in a way, you know...as I kind of got closer to this time period [college], it was more like it is just a part of the journey. It got to a certain point where it was like, I kind of knew, like I probably wouldn't be doing anything in like some different type of path and walk of life like in music or some type of business or anything like that. It was just more, I wanted to do something that was, I guess a little more (I don't want to call it normal), but I guess in a way it is. So, going more of just the, I guess the typical college route, was always something I kind of thought I would do. (Kelvin)</p>

	<p>I felt as though I've always kind of tried to maintain a level head, a level state of being, in terms of making sure that I'm constantly clearly thinking through things and not trying to act on actions emotionally or out of context. So, I always try to maintain that good level head and know that it could be a lot worse. As long as I kind of see it that way, I am able to maintain a good stable mind and be able to get through whatever type of challenge or situation I might be going through. (Kelvin)</p>
	<p>Of course, everyone has their own troubles that they might go through on the day-to-day, but I think, like I kind of, at least in personal issues that I deal with, I kind of can, I guess, alleviate those by going walking, listening to music, and working out. Those are like my stress relievers. So, whenever it comes to situations that I feel like are overwhelming me, I either do one of those three things, or I do all three of those things. So, it kind of helps with being able to manage the situation and being able to be like, okay, I'm back on schedule and back at a good mindset and back to thinking rationally to where I'm not going to make some rash decision that might hurt me in the long-run. (Kelvin)</p>
<i>Diversity Matters</i>	<p>Going to a predominantly White institution helps prepare you for your phase after college. That is how it is in real life. It is not as if it changes because you are out of college. I feel like when I came to the institution, that was something that I wanted to get because I wanted to experience it firsthand in the community so that I would be able to take the next step [of] becoming a professional... It is like there is so much stuff you can get from different perspectives and from different cultures and races...I wanted to get the real experience, especially working and learning in a diverse community, to be able to enhance my professionalism and as a young emerging professional. (Trevor)</p>
	<p>I wanted the experience and the knowledge of not only the Black race but of all races, but that's just something I needed to understand. I wanted to understand all the cultures, so I spent a lot of time with other cultures. (Michael)</p>
	<p>With the ministry group, everybody's invited. It's not a Black race or a White race or Latino race; it's everybody. And that's something I really enjoyed doing because I feel like not only am I seeing everybody from a different race, but also from a different culture and also from a different spiritual background because it's what they believe and how they believe it. It's kind of like it influenced me personally to just kind of understand everybody as a whole instead of just one race. (Michael)</p>
	<p>I'm not going to say that I wasn't surprised, but what did surprise me was how fast we were able to build our connections and our relationships from being able to communicate outside of our work environment, and being able to go deeper into our relationships and</p>

	learn more about each other. I definitely don't feel like the race thing is intense, but I definitely feel like it gives people the opportunity to know that we do co-exist together. (David)
<i>Peer Mentorship</i>	One time my freshman year when I was registering for spring classes, I knew the classes I was supposed to take, but I just forgot how to do it and I didn't want to apply for the wrong class. I remember I had to call one of my mentors, and he just walked me through it telling me how to do it... a mentor also introduced to me clubs on campus...he was the one that told me to get a leadership role on campus and set myself up for greatness...having a mentor that is also a college student helps because it's like I'm going through the same thing you're going through so it's worked for me. (Tyler)
	One of the biggest things I realized was, if I succeed, they succeed as well. I remember one of them [mentors] told me, he was like whatever you do, don't give up. He was like please go far...He was like, if you get big or whatever and you've been over here and you shine light on what's going on over here, they'll pay more attention to us. So, he's like, you're not only succeeding for yourself, you're succeeding for everybody out here...so I was like, damn, my life don't only affect the people around me or like the people who I'm closely related to or like myself in general, it affects the people who look like me or people who are going through the same situations that I go through. I was just like that's crazy because I used to think I'm only affecting myself. (Tyler)
	I never really had a mentor. I never had someone just look for my greater interest outside of like a family member...having men to like truly relate and having a good connection with men, that meant a lot to me because I always felt like it was me who was the problem as to why I couldn't have a good relationship with men, or whatever the case may be, where I didn't have these connections. (David)
	I decided to do the mentoring program, just to help some of the first-year students out that would be going through the program like I did. So, eventually I did that. I've been doing that now, and it's been all really good. (Kelvin)
<i>Simultaneous Incubation</i>	One thing I do know about the cohort, the AAMI cohort, it was like a brotherhood. It was like we had tutoring sessions on, I want to say Tuesdays, where we had like our mentors come to help us with homework or teach us how to do certain things. So, there is really no reason to fail unless you wanted to. (Tyler)
	Even with the intramural basketball teams, it was an AAMI team but we played all White teams because some fraternities had their own team. We played a variety of people, and after the game we would all get together and talk and hang out, like whoever we played, those two teams together. (Michael)
	When I talk to people just in high school, my mentees in high school, I talk to them and let them know whatever college you

	decide on going to, make sure they have an AAMI program because if they don't, it's not necessarily going to be a bad experience, but I'd much rather them have an experience like I had. Even if it's not AAMI, even if it's just some other kind of African-American first year program, I encourage them to be in it. I strongly encourage them to be in it because it really helps. (Michael)
	I wanted the experience and the knowledge of not only the Black race but of all races, but that's just something I needed to understand. I wanted to understand all the cultures, so I spent a lot of time with other cultures. (Michael)
	The sense of comfort comes from meeting 40 to 60 students that look like you and that you can build a brotherhood with, and be able to tackle the things and obstacles around the campus. Along with that, you had a couple classes with each other. It was easier to be able to work, go to study hall, to be able to just, I would say, learn better because you are around students that you know and along with that, it makes it easier. With advising, advising was always smooth because they have it laid out for you. You just pick and choose and then they will give you feedback on it...I feel like it is a great first-year program for African-American male students. (Trevor)
	Going to a predominantly White institution helps prepare you for your phase after college. That is how it is in real life. It is not as if it changes because you are out of college. I feel like when I came to the institution, that was something that I wanted to get because I wanted to experience it firsthand in the community so that I would be able to take the next step [of] becoming a professional... It is like there is so much stuff you can get from different perspectives and from different cultures and races...I wanted to get the real experience, especially working and learning in a diverse community, to be able to enhance my professionalism and as a young emerging professional. (Trevor)