Against All Odds: An Interpretive Qualitative Exploration of African American Males'
Life Experiences and Strategies for College Graduation Attainment

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ABSTRACT

African American (AA) males face significant challenges in persisting academically and completing college degrees, leading to a widening achievement gap between them and other minority and non-minority groups. Despite efforts to improve low academic persistence rates, AA males continue to underperform compared to their African American female counterparts and other groups in undergraduate degree programs. The graduation rates for AA males at higher education institutions remain less than 40%, and the decline in their college degree attainment can be attributed to various factors such as lack of mentoring, insufficient student support services, inadequate academic preparation, societal expectations that are low or non-existent for their success, and socio-economic factors including high incarceration and homicide rates among AA males aged 18-35.

The widening achievement gap limits opportunities for AA males in both education and the workforce, thus posing a significant problem for the United States. This dissertation aims to identify the factors hindering academic persistence and college degree attainment among AA males in higher education and effective strategies that facilitate their academic success.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

that have led me to this moment. Thank you from the depths of my heart, for your boundless love, understanding, patience, kindness, and dedication to our partnership.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my three extraordinary daughters. To my eldest daughter, Jade McMillan, may this accomplishment serve as a testament that hard work is the key to achieving your aspirations. To my middle daughter, Jia McMillan, may this achievement inspire you to be fearless in pursuing your dreams. To my youngest daughter, Dior McMillan, may this accomplishment ignite a fire within you to confidently embrace your genius and carve out your space in this world. I pray this achievement paves the way for you to realize all your dreams. I love you endlessly

DEDICATION

For Jade, Jia, and Dior

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

"Understanding how and why some Black males avoid pitfalls and hardships that best others may help us to devise ways to protect and support more of them" (Noguera, 2008).

Empirical evidence suggests African American (AA) males are confronted with noteworthy difficulties in persisting academically and completing college degrees (Garibaldi, 2007; Gibson, 2014, McElderry, 2022). Despite higher education institutions' efforts to improve low academic persistence rates, AA males underperformed compared to African American females, minority, and non-minority groups in undergraduate degree programs. For instance, the graduation rates for AA males at higher education institutions were less than 40% (Farmer & Hope, 2015). Tolliver and Miller (2018) note the graduation rate of AA males at their initial enrollment institution was only 25%, with a total graduation rate of 33% within six years. Moreover, research indicates that the decline of AA males seeking college degree attainment could be attributed to many factors, such as lack of mentoring, insufficient student support services, inadequate academic preparation, societal expectations that were low or non-existent for their success, and socio-economic factors, including high incarceration rates and homicide rates among AA males aged 18- 35, negative depictions of AA males in media, poverty, lack of academic support in predominantly white schools or underserved urban schools,

lack of financial assistance or resources to attend college, and institutional racism (Tolliver & Miller, 2018; Warde, 2008).

The college degree attainment gap between AA males and other minority and non-minority groups in America has posed a notable problem (Gardenhire & Cerna, 2016). Despite efforts to address the issue, the gap continues to widen, limiting opportunities for AA males in both education and the workforce. As Noguera (2008) noted, "We must urgently treat this as an American problem, not just for those directly impacted. The continued failure of so many men not only led to dire outcomes for them but put our society in danger of accepting it as normal" (p. 12). Addressing the challenges of AA males attending college and achieving academic success has been critical to promoting equity and fairness across all communities and closing the achievement gap (Nettles, 2017). This dissertation has examined the life experiences of AA males in higher education, with the goal of identifying the factors that contributed to their academic achievement and the successful strategies that facilitated their college degree attainment.

Problem

The underperformance of AA males in undergraduate degree programs persists despite efforts by higher education institutions to improve academic persistence rates, posing a significant problem in America (Perna & Jones, 2013; Siedman, 2012). Empirical evidence indicates that a range of factors contribute to the decline in college degree attainment among AA males (Snyder, 1999). The graduation rates for AA males at higher education institutions are less than 40%, indicating persistent underperformance compared to AA females, as well as other minority and non-minority groups (Farmer &

Hope, 2015). This achievement gap continues to widen, limiting opportunities for AA

males in both education and the workforce (Gardenhire & Cerna, 2016). This dissertation

investigated the life experiences of AA males in higher education and identified the

numerous factors that hindered their academic persistence and college degree attainment.

By understanding these challenges and effective strategies that facilitated academic

success, this study investigated solutions that promoted equity and fairness in higher

education, narrowing the achievement gap for AA males.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of AA males in

higher education, with a focus on identifying the barriers they encountered and the

strategies they utilized to persist academically and obtain college degrees. Specifically,

the study examined AA males who attended an identified Georgia four-year state

university. The research aimed to contribute to the existing literature on the challenges

faced by AA males in higher education and to identify successful strategies that could be

implemented to support their academic success and college degree attainment. Through a

comprehensive analysis of the factors that hindered and facilitated AA male students'

academic persistence and degree attainment, the study provided insights that could be

utilized to develop effective interventions and policies to promote equity and fairness in

higher education and close the achievement gap.

Research Questions

R1. What were the life and academic career experiences of African American

male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution

in Georgia?

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

Significance of Study

The graduation rates of African American (AA) males at higher education institutions are significantly lower than that of other minority and non-minority groups, with less than 40% of AA male students graduating (Farmer & Hope, 2015). Tolliver and Miller (2018) note AA male students had a graduation rate of only 25% at their initial enrollment institution, with a total graduation rate of 33% within six years. This underperformance has a significant impact on the economic potential of these students, limiting America's capacity to compete on a world stage. The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers encountered and strategies used by AA male students who attended an identified Georgia four-year state university. The findings of this study could contribute to improving existing federal and state higher education initiatives aimed at increasing AA male graduation rates. Additionally, university administrators and faculty could use the study to improve student engagement, retention, and faculty mentoring, while admissions and recruitment counselors could benefit from it by refining recruitment strategies and orientations for AA male students. Finally, AA male students could learn about effective methods for degree completion through this study.

Conceptual Framework

The utilization of Critical Race Theory, the African American Male Theory, and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure was essential to this research study aimed at

understanding the life experiences of AA males seeking college degree attainment. Critical Race Theory is deeply rooted in social constructs and posited that racism was a regular and frequent occurrence in American society (Mitchell & Stewart, 2013). This theory has a significant impact on the educational system in the United States, by promoting research on race and the importance of comprehending the effects of race on society and acknowledging the existence of systemic racism and its impact on the lives of minorities, including in education. Thus, Critical Race Theory provides a lens for the researcher to analyze the barriers that AA males face while attending college, including institutional racism or discrimination.

The African American Male Theory articulates how AA males drew from their culture of pre-slavery and post-slavery to develop themselves socially, spiritually, and psychologically (Bush & Bush 2013). This theory has a specific emphasis on experiences and the culture of the AA male, offering insight into how their experiences and culture influenced their self-identity and progression to achieve college degree attainment. It recognizes the importance of taking a deeper look into the unique challenges faced by this population and the need to develop strategies that aligned with their cultural and individual needs.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure, on the other hand, highlights the challenges of retention and graduation (Tinto, 1993). This theory emphasizes the importance of social and academic integration, as well as engagement in extra-curricular activities, to achieve obtaining a college degree. These three theories offered a comprehensive conceptual framework providing a guide to understanding the life experiences of AA

males attending college while offering insight into how to improve their academic persistence to increase their graduation rates.

Methodology

In this research study, a basic interpretive qualitative approach was utilized to examine the life experiences of African American (AA) male graduates from an identified Georgia four-year state university. The selection of the university was based on the fact it had graduated a substantial number of AA males. Purposive sampling was used to select four participants who represented various degree programs to provide a comprehensive understanding of the university. As the primary instrument for this study, the researcher ensured all participants understood the study's scope and purpose before commencing the interviewing process. Seidman's (2005) three interview series framework was used to examine the participants' life history, lived experiences, and reflections on the meaning of their experiences. The interviews were conducted virtually and in person using open-ended, in-depth inquiries to maintain focus for both the researcher and participants. Each stage of interviews averaged a duration of 95 minutes. Upon data collection, the data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to provide a detailed description of multiple perspectives based on the interviews. Triangulation and member checking were used to validate the data. The purpose of this study was to identify the strategies, institutional factors, and teaching methods that contributed to the success of AA male graduates from the selected site. This study provides valuable insights for university administrators and faculty to improve student engagement, retention, and faculty mentoring. It also offers AA male students methods that have proven to be successful in degree completion.

Limitations

This study faced several constraints. The primary limitation was the scarcity of available data in the chosen south region. It is essential to emphasize that my focus was on individual AA male participants rather than the university. The results were specific to the chosen institution and the selected region of the South. A similar study conducted in another location or state could have produced different results, due to trends and needs of specific populations there. There is no guarantee that strategies could be transferred to different pools of AA male participants from other state schools until further studies are completed. The results of this study were based on one gender and one minority demographic; these results could not be transferred to AA (African American) women, Latino, Asian, or Native American males that may fit any of the criteria described in this study. This study did not evaluate students attending two-year institutions nor did this study evaluate students who were pursuing graduate-level degrees.

Terms and Definitions

AA: African American

Affirmative Action: An action or policy favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially concerning employment or education; positive discrimination.

African American Male Theory: A theoretical framework that can be used to articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society by drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development and station (Bush & Bush, 2013).

Attrition Rate: A factor, customarily expressed as a percentage, reflecting the degree of losses of personnel or materiel due to various causes within a specified period.

Bachelor's Degree: A degree that is earned for an undergraduate course of study that requires three to five years of research (depending on institution and field of study). *Critical Race Theory:* A theoretical framework in the social sciences focused upon the application of a critical examination of society and culture to the intersection of race, law, and power ((Mitchell & Stewart, 2013).

Matriculation: The condition of being enrolled at a college or university

Pell Grant: A grant of funds that the government provides for students in need to pay for college. Grants, unlike loans, do not have to be repaid. Eligible students receive a specified amount each year under this program.

Post-Secondary Degree: A degree marking a level of educational attainment such as an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma; college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma; or a university certificate or diploma below bachelor's level.

PWI: Predominately White Institution

Qualitative Research: Research, primarily exploratory, that is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. *Remedial Classes*: Classes that some students must take to build up math, reading, or English skills before they can take regular college courses.

Retention: The condition of remaining in a course or program, such as in the following: remaining enrolled full-time each semester until graduation; continuing enrollment, but on a part-time basis; or leaving college at one point and later returning.

Student Departure Theory: This theory emphasizes the significance of integrating social and academic aspects together, as well as engagement in extra-curricular activities, to obtain a college degree (Tinto, 1993).

Socio-economical: Relating to or concerned with the interaction of social and economic factors.

Summer Bridge Program: A program that provides incoming students with the academic skills necessary to be successful in their college experience. Bridge programs are designed to improve the preparation and ease the transition into college in the fall.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Overview

Chapter two reviews the social experiences of African American (AA) males while addressing factors that disrupt their path to attend college, sustain attendance, and graduate from universities. African American (AA) males possess the lowest matriculation rate amongst all minority and non-minorities attending four-year universities (Hall, 2017). Two thirds of these students do not graduate impacting their economic potential, a loss of university resources and a reduction in America's capacity to compete on a world stage (Hall, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative research study was to discover the educational challenges and success strategies of AA males during their attendance at a four-year university in Georgia. This study intended to answer the following research questions:

> R1. What were the life and academic career experiences of African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?
>
> R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?
>
> R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

The concepts within this chapter provided essential historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives that were key to addressing the research questions from the study.

For clarity, this chapter has been divided into three parts, an overview of AA (African American) history, university engagement for AA males, and conceptual theories.

Through this historical exploration, my aim was to uncover past instances of oppression that contribute to the racial barriers impacting the academic progress of AA males today. The research questions presented in this study inherently justify the incorporation of historical literature of African American ancestry, AA males' historic experiences pursuing an education, and theoretical framework that supports AA males in higher education. The exploration into the life and academic journey of AA males, culminating in their achievement of degrees from a distinguished four-year state university in Georgia, underscores the essentiality of grasping the AA male's historical context, culture, and heritage. By drawing upon historical literature, particularly that which delves into the complexities of slavery, the study aimed to establish a contextual foundation and substantiate the importance of focusing on the historical educational experiences of AA males. The underlying objective was to investigate how the echoes of slavery and its educational implications have indelibly influenced AA males' academic trajectories, shaping their journey through the world of academia.

A comprehensive exploration into the social systemic barriers necessitates an inquiry into the AA male's historical underpinnings and the systemic impediments that have progressively materialized. This comprehensive literature review illuminates the genesis of systemic inequalities, racism, and socioeconomic challenges that have endured through the passage of time. Additionally, delving into the strategies deployed by successful AA male students in their academic pursuits significantly benefits from an understanding of established theoretical frameworks tailored to support the academic

journey of AA males. Through the examination of prior literature and theories, this review unveils the historical bedrock that continues to exert an influence on the academic progression of AA males in the present era. Furthermore, the retrospective review of historical literature extends its illumination to the tenacity, coping mechanisms, and strategies embraced by prior generations of AA males in their quest for education amidst adversity. By establishing parallels between historical and contemporary strategies, this study reveals a variety of insights. This multifaceted approach underscores the study's depth and its aspiration to glean invaluable lessons from the past, thereby enriching the present and future academic pursuits of AA males.

Through a comprehensive examination of retention models employed in higher education over the past 50 years, these models serve as benchmarks for identifying the most effective approaches to enhancing student engagement and progression. The primary objective of this review was to establish a standard against which I could assess my findings. As I dove into the exploration of effective strategies that aid AA males in achieving academic success, these well-established retention models became invaluable reference points. In addition, the literature review segments to the exploration of faculty-student mentorship, a cornerstone of a student's educational journey. By elucidating the roles and expectations within these relationships, my aim was to provide readers with a clearer understanding of their significance. Furthermore, as a researcher, my objective was to determine whether the influential role of faculty mentorship, as demonstrated in various contexts, could be applied to enhance the academic achievements and progression of AA males.

In explaining the conceptual framework that guides this study, I will clarify why I chose these specific themes and show how they were used in this research. Through this meticulous exploration, I strive to illuminate the rationale behind the chosen themes and how they collectively formed a robust foundation for this study. A comprehensive exploration of Critical Race Theory (CRT), African American Male Theory (AAMT), and Tinto's Student Departure Theory is undertaken to illustrate and identify the challenges that AA males face within higher education institutions. The review of these three theories aimed to provide a conceptual framework that sheds light on the AA male's education journey. Critical Race Theory resonates harmoniously with the overarching themes explored in the literature review, as its core focus is on comprehending the historical impact of race on social structures and higher education institutions. The extensive literature analyzed within this study delves into the influence of slavery and the evolution of social systemic barriers that impact AA males' education aspirations, echoing the historical context emphasis of CRT and its capacity to shed light on existing disparities and hurdles.

The African American Male Theory (AAMT) interfaces with this body of literature, noting the significance of discussing the ancestral origins of African Americans. Rooted in this theory is a holistic exploration of the distinctive experiences and obstacles that AA males navigate within educational environments. The discourse on strategies employed by AA male students parallels the AAMT's mission to uncover the factors underpinning academic resilience and accomplishment among AA males. Tinto's Student Departure Theory uncovers the factors impacting student persistence and attrition in higher education. This theory aligns with the exploration of barriers and strategies

along AA males' academic journeys. Tinto's emphasis on comprehending the myriad elements contributing to student success and retention closely mirrors studies in this literature review to pinpoint historical and contemporary strategies that shape the academic trajectory of AA males. Collectively, this examination and alignment of these three theories underscores the depth of understanding the AA males in this study. It accentuates the interplay of historical context, social structures, and individual strategies in molding the academic journey of AA males, offering invaluable insights for present and future educational endeavors.

Many resources were utilized to develop this chapter review, which included multiple search engines, journal articles, and online databases. Galileo, Epic, ProQuest, and JSTOR were the primary databases used to gather information. Important search terms were as follows: "African American Male Student Retention," "African American Male Achievement", "Best Practices for Faculty in Higher Education," "African American Males", "African American Males in Higher Education", "Education African American Males", "Retention Theories", and "Systemic Barriers in Educating African Americans." Important works (e.g., books, articles, and reports) that discussed slavery, AA male education, retention, CRT, and/or AAMT were synthesized to create the conceptualized framework for this study.

African American History

It is vital to acknowledge that the continent of Africa stands as the cradle of humanity, harboring the earliest known traces of human existence (Barton, 1929; Tuttle, 2023). Fossils of early human ancestors have been found in Africa, and they have existed for at least four million years (Tuttle, 2023). Early human civilizations originated within

North Africa and Mesopotamia (Barton, 1929). Unfortunately, this is often overshadowed by the historical trauma encountered from the 1500s to the 1800s. During this time, Africans were sold to Europeans because of war with other ethnic groups or they were captured from their lands by European conquerors getting shipped from various parts of Africa to North America. These series of historical events are known as the "Triangular Trade," a system of trade with mutual benefits involving three separate locations: Europe, Africa, and the Americas (Morgan, 2016). In the era of slavery, Africans endured deeply inhumane treatment, referred to as property by European colonist and American settlers. This practice was perpetuated by systemic beliefs that African slaves and their descendants were less than human. This sentiment was echoed indirectly through certain clauses in the United States Constitution such as the "Three-Fifths Compromise" which considered slaves as three-fifths of a person (Henderson, 2016).

This socially dysfunctional time in history has created a foundation of White privilege resulting in systemic racial barriers in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Harper et al., 2009). By the 1830s, enslaved Black people had become a significant workforce, making the southern states of America an agricultural powerhouse (Morgan, 2016). This caused an economic shift resulting in the northern states being unable to compete in the job market. With the advent of industrialization, major opportunities for machine efficiency challenged agrarian and feudal systems that had already been in place across the globe (Eltis & Engerman, 2000; Khan Academy, 2023). Abraham Lincoln, recognizing slavery's crippling effect on the north as well as the need to weaken the military power of the Confederate forces, issued a presidential order on January 1, 1863.

This order was called the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the freedom of every

slave living in southern states by the end of the Civil War (Drexler, 2019; Morgan, 2016).

Before the Civil War, there was no school for slaves (Butchart, 2010; Span,

2009). Span (2009) explained that after the Civil War, freed slaves established churches

and schoolhouses throughout the United States of America for purposes of individual and

collective improvement (as cited in Butchart, 2010). After the Civil War, the United

States government took on the task of educating free slaves through a government agency

and church missionaries from the north (Butchart, 2010; Fleischman et al., 2014; Span

2009). The government agency called Freedmen's Bureau built schools and sought out

existing educated teachers along with those who were willing to help (Fleischman et al.,

2014). These schools were soon filled over capacity as free slave school attendance

increased five times in size (Butchart, 2010). Over the next ten years, AA school

attendance tripled to one-third of children under 18 years of age (Butchart, 2010).

Resistance to the increased education of AAs took many forms. According to Butchart

(2010), teachers facing social ostracism and intentional rudeness were unable to receive

board or assistance for retaining supplies. Black schools, as well as Black churches that

housed schools, were often terrorized to disrupt the learning process.

Butchart (2010) further recounted stories between the 1860s and the 1900s. For

instance, hundreds of schools burned to the ground in the 1860s and 1870s. Examples of

these occurrences took place in 1866, where dozens of schools were destroyed in

Maryland. In 1869, almost 40 schools were destroyed by fire in Tennessee over a four-

month span. In the early 1900s, White southerners attempted to prevent Black people

from having equal educational opportunities as a way of manipulating the voting system.

Ten of the eleven former Confederate states passed new constitutions or amended existing constitutions to disenfranchise Black voters, using methods such as the poll taxes and literacy tests (Henderson, 2016). Furthermore, no Black officeholders were elected, which resulted in AA interests being overlooked. In turn, White-controlled state legislatures passed laws that systematically segregated AAs and labeled them as second-class citizens. This resulted in a lifestyle of segregation which included schools, hotels, restaurants, railways, water fountains, and bathrooms. These segregation laws became known as "Jim Crow" (Butchart, 2010).

AA families were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools. The 1896, the Supreme Court's ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson stated these segregated schools were legal if they offered "separate but equal" classroom experiences and facilities (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010). In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court case known as Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, ruled that laws enforcing segregated schools was unconstitutional (Rogers, 2013). This new ruling forced all schools across the country to become integrated. According to Rogers (2013), the racial makeup of schools did not change despite the lack of legal impediments to integration. This was due to numerous economic and social factors. White teachers excluded curriculum that discussed African culture and AA history. Instead, they remained steadfast in offering a Eurocentric curriculum that placed Whites in a favorable light. Another factor impacting AAs was the lack of family involvement in their child's schooling. One reason for this lack of involvement was the fact that many AA families did not live near their children's integrated schools, which made it difficult for them to attend school conferences and events (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010).

Zamani-Gallaher and Polite (2010) examined the downfall of AA families through the decline of urban industrial jobs throughout the 1960s. This resulted in increased crime, drug addiction, welfare dependency, school dropout rates, and unemployment for AAs who resided in inner-city communities. These problems led to AA men removed from households where they otherwise would have been significant role models. For AA males growing up in this environment, the lack of adult male presence made it less likely for them to have positive self-identification. This void tended to create misguided self-identification through pejorative and depreciating images produced by newspapers, movies, television, music, and illustrations, such as those that glamorized pimps and gangsters (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010).

Throughout the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement took the media by storm, bringing attention to America's educational system (Jones & Williams, 2006). Colleges from all over the nation attempted to attract more minorities to enroll, resulting in the development of financial aid programs to make education affordable for minorities and non-minorities who were unable to afford to attend college (Jones & Williams., 2006). However, increased numbers of AA college students had an adverse effect, creating more racial tensions on campus. Jones and Williams (2006) examined these racial tensions stemming from effects of Jim Crow laws. When AA students attended college, they were hopeful, but they also were determined to bring awareness of racial injustices placed upon them using protest as a vehicle to bring attention to these micro aggressions. They were unapologetic in their self-awareness as AAs, and they were committed to having a voice to address systemic racial barriers that existed on college campuses at that time.

These feelings held by AA students motivated others to face hard truths of systemic oppression, placing a spotlight on racism in America.

Moving forward in the timeline to transition into a broader context, it becomes evident that challenges faced by AA males continued to persist throughout the 20th century. By the mid-1980s, AA males were the highest demographic for student suspension, expulsion, and drop-outs in K-12 grades while also being the demographic group least likely to get selected to test for any gifted programs (Garibaldi, 2007). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted that many AA students came from communities that discouraged them from attending college. AA students could be viewed as "acting White," resulting in being isolated from their classmates in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Jones & Williams, 2006). This uphill battle continued as AA males dared to pursue higher education, enduring a lack of support that persisted even throughout their university years. This lack of backing extended to their communities, where AA male college graduates found themselves socially shunned upon returning home (Jones & Williams, 2006).

Low Attainment for African American Males

Factors That Cause Low Attainment

In this historical backdrop of challenges, the struggles faced by AA males in their pursuit of education find resonance. Research underscores the multi-dimensional nature of these struggles, rooted in systemic racism that permeated university practices and policies (Hall, 2017). According to Hall (2017), systemic racism is engrained in the AA male psyche due to its presence in university practices and policies. Research also notes the reason for AA male's declining enrollment is due to the following factors: (1) AA

males from the ages of 18-35 encounter high incarceration rates and they fall victim to homicide; (2) Advertisement of negative AA male images in media discourages AA males from pursuing a college degree; (3) Poverty within communities and abroad creates barriers for success; (4) Lack of academic support in predominantly White schools or underserved urban schools exists; (5) Cost to attend college is unaffordable for many; (6) Lack of financial assistance or resources to attend college is commonplace in society today; and (7) Institutional racism exists within the educational system (Warde, 2008).

The challenges for the AA male begin in elementary school and continue throughout his schooling. One specific, unreasonable idea involving the perceptions of AA males and their intellectual abilities is known as deficit-deprivation. Those in this perception believe that there are inherent differences in intellectual ability according to race. Wilson and Banks (1994) stated that teachers who have subscribed to such beliefs have formed unconscious racial biases. They concluded that educators played a considerable role in students' self-concept, attitude, and cognitive development. The beliefs and expectations teachers had for their students often resulted in self-fulfilling prophecies in areas of academic performance. The Coleman Report et al. (1966) also revealed such disparities in resources and teacher attitudes have the potential to affect both the academic outcomes of the AA male and their perception of their own intellectual abilities. Teachers in these urban communities placed low expectations and biases, as a result it influenced their teaching style and their relationships with their students, inadvertently limiting students' motivation to perform at an elevated level or continue their educational pursuits. This aspect aligns with Wilson and Bank's assertion that

unconscious racial biases triggered low motivation amongst teaches to effectively educate AA males (Wilson & Banks, 1994).

With respect to higher education, many challenges remain in addition to new obstacles, making the attainment of a college degree even more difficult. Research historically indicated 27% of high school students who enter college will be labeled as first-generation college students (Owens et al., 2010). From this population, African Americans were uninformed about the college process and were less likely to be prepared to handle the academic rigor required to successfully graduate (Owens et al., 2010; Thayer, 2000). Warde (2008) pointed out that AA males faced challenges in their academic performance, which was often below the expected level of excellence. Among all demographic groups, AA males had the highest rate of receiving low grades and dropping out of high school. Surprisingly, even when AA males attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), they tended to fall behind AA females in terms of earning high grades and successfully graduating.

Newton and Sandoval (2015) determined AA students had a higher chance of being assigned to classes with non-minority teachers who had not received training in multicultural education. This lack of training and lack of understanding led to teachers drawing from social perceptions found through media, preconceived stereotypes, and inherited cultural views. Based on these biases, teachers lowered their expectations of the AA males. This resulted in less motivation on the part of the teacher to ensure those students were academically prepared to attend college. This lack of motivation decreased grade retention rates, increased suspensions, and increased poor academic performance (Newton & Sandoval, 2015).

Noguera (2008) stated that negative imagery of African Americans throughout society impacted and continues to impact the perception of the AA male. He emphasized that AA males and Hispanic males are viewed as students who are not equipped to handle academic rigor. As a result, they are not placed on college track programs. AA males are suspended at a higher rate, expelled from schools at a higher rate, and enrolled in remedial courses more than any other minority group (Garibaldi, 2007). Strayhorn (2008) found that teachers viewed AA males as a better fit for work rather than college. The teachers' views negatively influenced grades and enrollment into college. His findings support Warde's (2008) assertion that negative stereotypes toward AA males that are visible through music, film, and print can create a bias for both teacher and student.

Images of racial oppression and bias filtered into the classroom through the views of teachers, counselors, and administrators, which in turn shaped the minds of these AA males (Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 2007; Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Warde, 2008). These outward biases become internalized, leading to anti-self-beliefs, low performance, and low achievement. Building upon these observations, the ramifications of these biases are evident and more pronounced when considering the plight of AA male youth within the education system.

Systemic Barriers of Oppression

African American male youth are plagued with systemic racism as early as their first years in the education system. Enduring these aggressions has resulted in low performance, low self-esteem, and a negative view towards academic achievement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Garibaldi (2007) determined AA males showed poor academic performance during their K-12 grade years due to high

rates of not being placed into gifted programs, getting suspended, getting expelled from school, and having the highest placement into special education programs. He further stated that school counselors, teachers, and administrators created a disadvantage for AA males when they created "lockout" systems for this group that lasted from elementary school to college. He also concluded the perceptions and expectations of teachers were the reason behind the systemic failures of many AA males. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) ongoing disparities of AA males reaching their full potential to achieve academic success in K-12 institutions existed resulting in a huge deficit percentage when compared to their birth rate. These deficits were a result of systemic barriers placed in educational systems, policies, practices, and existing programs.

Fewer resources were given to AA males despite federal and state efforts to provide equal opportunities (Lewis et. al, 2015). Lewis et. al (2015) revealed public school systems were faced with enterprising challenges, such as structural inequalities, charter school competition, changes to curriculum over the years, and changes to how teachers are evaluated. They found AA males who received a public K-12 education in high-poverty areas endured differences in access, experiences, exposure, and enrichment. This supports Zamani-Gallaher & Polite (2010) findings which revealed that AA males were often placed in schools with inadequate school resources, large class sizes, less-qualified teachers, and high staff turnover. The inadequate placements encouraged social inequalities, emphasis on lower-level thinking skills, less constructive feedback or encouragement, fewer opportunities to gain high-level skills, and infrequent referrals to advanced programs.

Adams (2014) examined the educational opportunities given to AAs as he found they experienced opportunity gaps that had a negative outcome stating, "across the board, we are providing African American students with less of everything we know contributes to achievement in schools" (p. 64). Scott et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study identifying challenges AA males encounter while navigating high school as college bound students during their senior year. The data collected gave leaders in the educational field insight, highlighting factors that have caused a decline in high school graduation rates. They analyzed 70 male students' scholarship essay submissions. Their data analysis revealed four themes: (1) A need for skilled and culturally competent male teachers of AA descent; (2) A need to set high standards and academic opportunity in the classroom; (3) A need for more mentorship opportunities with positive AA male role models in society; and (4) A need for family and continued support. Many of the respondents indicated that education was not a priority in their household nor in their communities. Based on the results, Scott et al. (2013) recommended more alignment between the curriculum and students' cultures. They encouraged AA teachers, professional mentors, and support groups to encourage student engagement and student success.

Research on AA male achievement is often presented with alarming negative statistics, followed by stories offering little assurance of academic success. The amount of support a student receives in high school to achieve academic success will determine how much academic support would be required attending a university (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). Student graduation is more likely to occur when students establish goals, understand how to prepare for college, and place a high value on their aspirations (Chen,

2012; Palmer et al., 2011; Simmons, 2013; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). Fleming (1984)

noted that for African American four-year college students, underperformance started

early, and the gap continued to widen over time. Further reports showed AA students

were on grade level until fourth grade, after which they began to perform below White

children.

Fleming (1984) also found sociohistorical and political patterns that caused

African American students to underperform. These elements created challenges for

disadvantaged minorities and have historically shifted minorities into vocational skills,

hostile educational environments, and stereotypical expectations of intellectual

inferiority. There existed a void of cultural relevance in education and a lack of positive

references of minority cultures and their accomplishments in the school curriculum. This

lack of inclusion resulted in less information retained, more criticism, and less assistance

from non-minority professors. Transitioning from these considerations, a deeper

examination of retention reveals the ongoing challenges the AA male face in the pursuit

of higher education.

<div align="center">University Engagement for African American Males</div>

Retention Models

In 2007, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asserted AA male students graduated,

at a much lower rate than AA female students who also obtained a college degree

(Brooks et al., 2013). The graduation gap between AA females and AA males has grown

since the 1970s and continues today throughout higher education institutions (Brooks et

al., 2013). Cuyjet (2006) argued that the graduation gap impacted economic growth for

the AA family. Because there is less likelihood that the AA male will not have a degree

<div align="center">25</div>

or complete a college degree this puts married and unmarried AA households in a lower economic status as a family unit (Brooks et al., 2013; Cuyjet, 2006). AA males who enrolled as freshman experienced a notably diminished matriculation rate observed to be less than 33% (Brooks, et al. 2013). To address this dilemma, many universities have created a variety of programs to retain the existing AA male population on campuses.

Notable retention programs are the *Meyeroff Program, the Black Male Initiative, the Student African American Brotherhood,* and *Black Man's Think Tank* (Funk, 2012). Retention programs focused on AA males offer student support services, mentoring with AA (African American) faculty who can serve as role models, and peer support. These types of retention programs create specialized techniques that allow social integration into the school culture while also addressing the educational and social requirements of the AA male (Brooks et al., 2013).

Bean and Metzner (1987) argued that previous retention models focused on social factors did not impact their college experiences (as cited in Ozaki, 2016). They developed an alternative model that focuses on a student's academic performance, how they grew up, their environment, and psychological variables (Ozaki, 2016). Their research concluded a student's environment had the largest impact on a student achieving graduation (Ozaki, 2016). If a student withdrew from an institution, it was likely due to academic reasons. If they stayed, it was based on their commitment to the institution.

Furthermore, the mechanics of the expanded retention model begin with a student having pre-set characteristics upon entering a university. This includes characteristics relative to their past academic experiences. Bean & Eaton (2000) stated these pre-set characteristics can impact the environment as well as how students interact with people

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on or off campus. Their interactions tend to affect how they see themselves. If they are in a positive environment, they are more likely to have a positive outlook about themselves as students. Having positive self-awareness can encourage a student to assimilate to a university's culture. An example of an expanded model is The Psychological Model of Retention. It has eight pre-set characteristics established from past behaviors, conviction, character, morals, talents, motivation, stress management, and abilities (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). The model shows how students' feelings about the university can influence how they interact in their classroom and assimilate into the campus culture. As the model illustrates (see Figure 1), when a student successfully integrates into a university, they will cultivate positive self-awareness. This self-awareness moves them to continue to complete their studies, thereby achieving matriculation (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Rodgers et al., 2008).

Rodgers and Summers (2008) used the Psychological Model of Retention for their theoretical framework to address Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and their inability to increase retention rates for both AA males and AA females as effectively as HBCU institutions. Both recommended revising the model, suggesting it would be more applicable to a PWI. Their study addressed students' feelings about their experiences on campus in terms of how they were motivated, how they are self-identified, and how they set their goals. They stated that AA students' experiences and views concerning race and culture must be considered when evaluating how they process their feelings. Retention plans should be intentional and tailored according to the type of institution. When creating a retention tool, institutions should have assessments that recognize the AA students' cultural needs and identity.

Figure 1

Concept Map of the Psychological Model of Retention
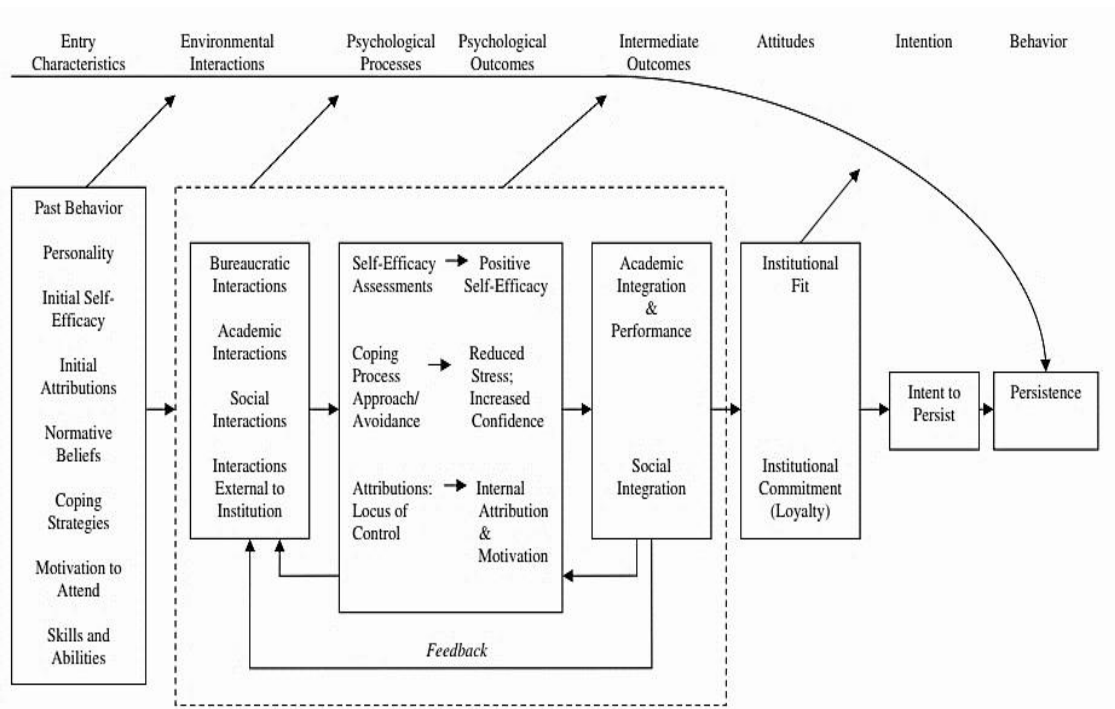
Note. Adapted from Bean and Eaton (2000).

Astin (1975, 1999) theorized how students get involved in school and how they learn in class. He defined student participation in extracurricular activities as a behavioral factor (as cited in Lewis et al., 2015). In a longitudinal study, Astin (1975) found college students who lived in dorms, who were active in extracurricular activities such as a sorority or fraternity, who immersed themselves in the university culture through extracurriculars, or who worked part time were more likely to remain in college and matriculate (Lewis et al., 2015). Astin (1999) found that student involvement and learning were attributed to several factors: (1) how much physical effort they wish to give to the task; (2) how they wish to continue to complete a task; (3) how they measure the value of a task; (4) how much they are involved on the task; and (5) how much return of

investment is observed from their involvement (as cited in Lewis et al., 2015). Lewis et al. (2015) supported these findings by stating that student involvement encouraged faculty and practitioners to pay more attention to how active a student is on campus doing extracurricular activities and pay less attention to their efforts in the classroom. They emphasized that a student's involvement is not based on how motivated or dedicated they are in the classroom. Faculty and classroom experience had insignificant impact on a student's motivation to pursue graduation.

Astin's (1975, 1999) theories and findings eventually evolved into the Input-Environment-Outcomes (IEO) model, which helps researchers examine factors that influence student matriculation (Ozaki, 2016). Serving as a methodological guide, there are three elements that make up the model. These are inputs, environments, and outcomes. They provide a variety of factors demonstrating how a university can affect college students (Ozaki, 2016). First are the pre-set characteristics students bringing to college, their past experiences, and their learned behaviors from peers or family. This input allows practitioners or researchers to correlate past experiences with current variables that appear within the campus culture (Ozaki, 2016). Second, the environment represents everything a student encounters (e.g., people, classes, campus culture, school policies, and school programs) while attending college (Ozaki, 2016). These factors can also have an impact on student outcomes. Lastly, the outcomes dimension factors a student's personality, intellect, moral compass, and behaviors (Ozaki, 2016). The IEO model asserts that students learn by becoming active participants on college campuses. Chickering and Gamson (1987), note seven principles to student engagement: faculty interactions, student cooperation, proactive or reactive learning, motivation to complete

class tasks, feedback for others and self, lofty expectations, and inclusive experiences

(Brooks, et al. 2013). Figure 2 illustrates the seven principles. This research explores

student outcomes. Although AA males performed at lower levels than other minority and

non-minority students, they did make meaningful connections regarding their academic

experiences (Corbin, 2018).

Figure 2

Concept Map of the Seven Principles
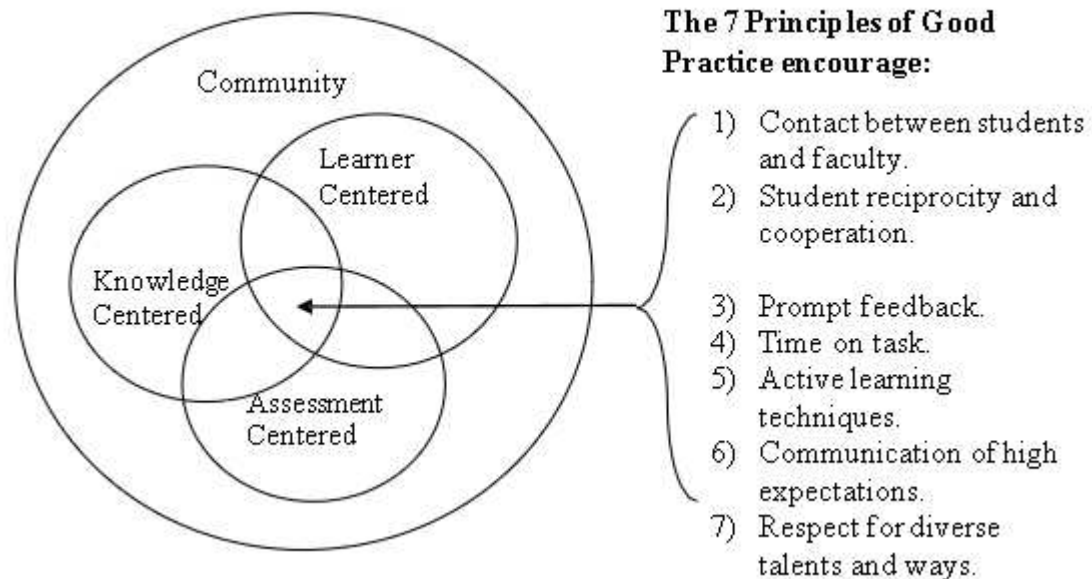
Note. Adapted from Chickering and Gamson (1987), "The 7 Principles to Student

Engagement."

Several studies have explored retention as it applies to IEO and the seven

principles. Anumba (2015), for instance, sought ways to address retention for AA males

by studying their motivational drives. While studying AA males pursuing an

undergraduate degree at two universities in Southern California, she conducted a

qualitative investigation researching factors that facilitated college persistence. The

experiences of eight participants were recorded and examined resulting in the emergence of six themes relative to college persistence. The themes were as follows: (1) Establishing networks of support systems, (2) Seeking academic resources and being involved in extracurricular activities, (3) Tailoring support from faculty, administrators, and school officials, (4) Having financial support, (5) Having access to academically enriched programs, and (6) Representing the culture of AA males and other students. Tolliver and Miller (2018) acknowledged there were several barriers impacting retention for AA males in higher education. Conducting a qualitative phenomenological study, they selected participants who fit the criteria of needing academic assistance and needing guidance on how to socially integrate into college. They used purposeful sampling to select participants. They conducted structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect their data.

Four themes emerged from their study: (1) Mentorships, (2) Inclusivity on campus, (3) Family motivators, and (4) Community expectations (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). One unique finding from the study was that social networks were very personal and individualized (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). This supports the belief that students must surround themselves with individuals who have grand expectations for them. Brooks et al. (2013) sought to highlight how retention programs impact freshman AA male students. Participant criteria used three characteristics: male gender, freshman classification, and AA designation. A total of 136 freshman AA males were invited to participate, ranging from 18 years of age to 21 years of age. The researchers explored several factors that were important to their participants, and a cogent quantitative background supported the results. There was a significant difference in students who

participated in retention programs during their freshman year compared to those who did not participate in any retention programs (Brooks et al., 2013). Further, AA males were found to have higher chances of matriculating when they were given mentoring at the beginning of their freshman year along with academic support and monitoring.

In conclusion, the explored retention models and campus initiatives provide valuable insights into enhancing the low graduation rates among AA males. Initiatives like *The Black Man's Think Tank,* and *The Student African American Brotherhood, Black Male Initiative,* and *the Meyeroff Program* are just a few programs noted that offer a holistic approach to retaining the AA male. These programs are designed to cultivate a sense of belonging, promote social integration, and improve graduation rates for the AA male. Notably the Expanded Model stands out due to its emphasis on academic performance, environment contexts, and psychological variables. This model suggests the AA male's environment will have the most significant impact on their journey to graduation. Furthermore, the Input-Environment-Outcomes (IEO) model provides a comprehensive framework to analyze the intricate factors influencing student matriculation. The Psychological Model of Retention to predominately white institutions (PWI's) underscore the necessity of tailoring retention plans that acknowledge students' cultural experiences and identities when crafting effective retention strategies. Reviewing these insights from retention models and initiatives it becomes evident a multifaceted approach is necessary in addressing the low graduation rates among AA males. Through precise support mechanisms, inclusive campus environments, and a deliberate consideration of the AA male's cultural and individual needs, higher education institutions can work toward cultivating a more equitable and empowering education

journey for AA males. The next topic is social integration, a crucial aspect to underscore, particularly for the AA male, as it plays a pivotal role in nurturing their progression towards matriculation and graduation.

<div align="center">Social Integration</div>

To comprehend the importance of social integration in promoting graduation, it is crucial to acknowledge Tinto's (1993) assertion that a university has the potential to impact a student's morals, values, self-identification, and personality. If students assimilate with a student network that shares the same values in school, it becomes easier for those students to adapt and become immersed in the school's culture. Tinto also suggested that elevated levels of socializing for campus assimilation have proven vital for increasing retention (Simmons, 2013). Getting immersed in campus culture can only be sustained through faculty mentoring, networking, and participating in campus activities (Simmons, 2013).

African American (AA) males' early integration into campus culture has proven to increase retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Simmons, 2013). For this population, being active on campus through extracurricular activities provides the social and cultural capital required to matriculate from both a PWI and HBCU (Simmons, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). Therefore, staying involved and networking with peers allow the AA male to have a stronger sense of purpose, resulting in increased persistence to obtain a college degree (Simmons, 2013). To improve a campus climate, a university should use a four-dimensional framework to understand what is needed to create an inclusive environment that encourages a diverse student population (Cole, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998). The four dimensions are as follows: (1) previous record of inclusivity; (2) diverse faculty, student

population, and staff; (3) psychological dimensions including awareness of unconscious bias; and (4) behavioral dimensions that include interacting with students and faculty (Cole, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1998).

Negative interpersonal experiences in PWI settings have resulted in AA students refraining from participating in academic support programs and other extracurricular activities on campus (Schwitzer et. al.1999). Johnson-Durgans (1992) found AA students living in college dormitories experienced hostile living environments and microaggressions from their White peers (as cited in Schwitzer et al.1999). In addition, the AA students reported that dormitory staff were also guilty of creating hostile environments and exhibiting microaggressions (Schwitzer et al.1999). Using qualitative research methods, Schwitzer et al. (1999) studied AA college students' social integration to PWI campuses. Participants in the study were fourth-year college seniors. There was a total of 126 AA seniors at the university with 22 (13 females and 9 males) participating in a focus group. The data were collected and reviewed using constant comparative methodology. Four themes emerged from the study: (1) Awareness of lack of representation, (2) Awareness and self-perception of racist acts, (3) Difficulty to interact with faculty, and (4) Impacts of faculty being familiar. Participants in this study reported they experienced feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of representation. They shared they experienced racist microaggressions and macroaggressions while on campus.

The students expressed they had more support from their families and received more support from teachers and peers while attending K-12 schools. As a result, adjusting to this new hostile environment proved difficult to accept. Tierney (1999) researched how the racial climate of a campus impacts matriculation for minorities (as

cited in Brooks et al., 2013). Tierney's findings showed AA students who experienced prominent levels of satisfaction of the racial climate performed better academically, resulting in higher matriculation rates. Tierney's research supports the notion that AA males' cultural uniqueness needs to be a factor when creating retention programs or creating policies to help them matriculate (Brooks et al., 2013; Tierney, 1999).

Lastly, Robertson and Mason (2008) conducted a study examining how universities retain AA males in mid-sized PWIs located in the south. Their findings revealed that faculty mentoring, academic support, financial resources, and extracurricular activities all have an impact on matriculation. Their study also investigated if racism had a direct impact with the AA male matriculating from PWIs in the south (Robertson & Mason, 2008; Sedlacek, 1999; Simms,1993). Fifteen AA male students were interviewed from August 2008 to April 2009 (Robertson & Mason 2008; Sedlacek, 1999; Simms,1993). Several themes emerged from the study: racial prejudice, faculty-student interactions, social isolation, and classroom setting (Robertson, 2005; Sedlack, 1983; Simms,1993). These themes were consistent with similar studies of AA student retention. Transitioning to the discussion of student support organizations, the pivotal role of student organizations emerges as a strategy to enhance retention and bridge academic achievement disparities for the AA male.

<center>Student Support Organizations</center>

Student organizations can serve as a bridge for increasing retention while shortening the gap on academic achievement (Kuk & Banning, 2010; Smith, 2019). When a university is insensitive to the needs of minority students and does not create an inclusive environment for minority students, it creates an environment that negatively

impacts their emotional and academic growth. It often results in them leaving the university without a degree (Jones & William, 2006). He further suggested that universities need to increase their awareness of the needs of minority students and work towards creating an inclusive environment to increase retention (Jones et al., 2006).

According to Bressler & Whitlock (2002), having AA student organizations on campus could be interpreted by their White peers as a form of rejecting White student organizations that already exist. Universities reject this mindset, explaining that minority organizations created during the early era of de-segregation were intended to provide support for minority students, nurturing their academic development (Bressler & Whitlock, 2002; Jones & William, 2006;). He concludes that minority-focused housing, Black student unions, and the Divine Nine (i.e., fraternities & sororities) have proven impactful to AA students attending PWIs. It allows them environments to share common experiences and safe spaces of inclusivity to enhance their academic experiences (Bressler & Whitlock, 2002; Jones & Williams, 2006).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted that student support services served as the gateway, often bridging the gap in academic persistence and social inclusion for AA males. They also noted AA males who engage in extracurricular activities on campus have a higher chance of achieving degree completion. Feelings of isolation were contributing factors to the academic and social challenges that AA males experience (Strayhorn 2012). Strayhorn (2012) stated the AA male population's under-representation on campus creates feelings of being ostracized both in the classroom and throughout the campus community. Strayhorn (2012) noted that the AA male will struggle to adapt and connect with peers and faculty if there is a lack of engagement when shifting through the

campus climate and engaging in campus activities intended to foster campus culture and community.

Strayhorn (2008) also explored AA male relationships, specifically with academic support groups who foster academic achievement. They investigated the impacts these organizations have on their student engagement (Brooks et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). The study evaluated 231 AA male participants, where 51% were AA male freshmen, 13% were AA male sophomores, 20% were AA male juniors, and 15% were AA male seniors. The findings of this study noted that having impactful academic support groups were vital to the academic persistence of the AA male that led to graduation (Brooks et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). The results concluded that although an academic supportive environment was not a contributing factor to increase the AA males' grade point average, their engagement with these academic support groups showed a direct link to them acclimating into the campus culture, which was an indirect result of academic persistence (Brooks et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2008).

AA males have low matriculation rates for universities and degree programs (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). Tolliver and Miller (2018) argued that there were many reasons for low graduation rates for AA males. These included a lack of mentoring, unawareness of academic support services, not being academically prepared to manage the academic rigor in a college classroom, and feelings of isolation on college campuses. They acknowledged that early-intervention programs created by universities produced less than desirable results due to their broad design for assessment.

There are several student support programs created to improve retention rates for AA males enrolled in higher education institutions. In 2009, The University of California

Los Angeles (UCLA) created The Black Male Institute with a doctoral cohort of AA males attending the Graduate School of Education and Informational Studies in its Urban School Division (Howard, 2024). African American doctoral students, alongside their peers, established a cohesive cohort united by shared scholarly interest in exploring interdisciplinary facets related to the achievement of Black males (Howard, 2024). The Black Male Institute conducts research, student interventions, and impactful programs that enhance the academic experiences and enrichment opportunities of AA males in America (Howard, 2024).

Another program created to increase retention for AA males is the Students of African American Brotherhood (SAAB). The organization began at Georgia Southwestern State University on October 17, 1990 (Student African American Brotherhood, 2020). Its mission is to offer early-intervention and academic support services to AA male college students. Today, SAAB has 180 chapters spanning over middle schools, high schools, university campuses reaching across 39 states in the U.S. (Student African American Brotherhood, 2020). Scholarship programs were also created to assist in the development of the AA male student. One such program is The Meyerhoff Scholarship Program. This scholarship program started in 1988 as an experiment by Robert and Jane Meyerhoff for AA males enrolled at the University of Maryland Baltimore County who were interested in pursuing scientific research careers (University of Maryland, 2024). Since its origin, the scholarship program has been the national model for preparing AA students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) related careers (University of Maryland, 2024). The program received national recognition for producing an outstanding number of AA STEM graduates who further

pursued graduate or professional degrees at top universities (University of Maryland, 2024).

<div align="center">Faculty Relationships with an African American Male</div>

Cross Cultural Mentoring

As one might perceive, student-faculty interaction is the most reoccurring socialization of student engagement on campus (Cole, 2007). As a result, these relationships have been positively linked to students' academic achievements, satisfaction with the university, retention, and academic persistence to achieve degree completion (Cole, 2007). Faculty mentoring is viewed as a significant factor to consider when evaluating retention and academic persistence for minorities (McCoy et al., 2015).

Strong, encouraging relationships between faculty and minority students can reverse racial hostility, promoting inclusive environments inside the classroom and outside the classroom (McCoy et al., 2015). Tillman (2001) defines mentoring as a mutually agreed relationship between an individual who has a large amount of experience paired with an individual who has less experience in a structured setting (as cited in McCoy et al., 2015). There are many benefits to those who select to engage in a mentoring relationship. Those benefits include an enhanced level of academic capabilities through academic support for the student, increases self-awareness for both student and faculty, and the opportunity to become a more effective faculty member (Cole, 2007; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; McCoy et al., 2015; Merriweather & Morgan, 2013; Tillman, 2001). Many assumptions, values, and practices of non-minority students, staff, and faculty produce negative projections toward AA students, resulting in creating an environment that hinders their learning (Costner et al., 2010). Faculty has viewed

teaching AA students as an undesirable task, which forces these students to matriculate in systems where faculty had low expectations of them (Costner et al., 2010; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). In questioning the existence of racial bias, Cole (2007) examined student-faculty interactions to assess this phenomenon.

He used regression analysis to measure the impact student-faculty interactions had on their GPAs among minority students. Results showed significant differences were found between students with elevated levels of faculty interaction and minority students who had less. Through a close analysis of narrative elicited from faculty, Gonsalves (2002) identified how communication between White faculty and AA male students can break down during interactions over student writings. Participants were first shown short vignettes depicting real life scenarios representative of various interactions that had taken place between AA males and White faculty. They were then asked to share any interactions, positive or negative, they had had with an AA male or a White faculty member.

Gonsalves (2002) found faculty had developed relational patterns that allowed them to cultivate supportive relationships with individual AA male students. She identified two main characteristics that defined cultivating relationships; Faculty members who cultivate relationships connected with AA males personally. This was achieved by listening and understanding to their experiences, discussing their educational and out-of-school goals, and serving as their connection or lifeline to the institution.

Second, faculty who supported AA males academically in their own classes as well as the students' other classes. The main support faculty offer was to remain open when hearing how personal circumstances impacted the students' educational endeavors.

They offered support whenever possible to alleviate some of the stress of those circumstances.

Strayhorn and Devita (2010) conducted a study exploring the experiences of the AA male attending higher education institutions, comparing their experiences to the type of university they matriculated (as cited in Brooks et al., 2013). They pulled data from the College Student Experience Questionnaire. The data was derived from surveys collected in 2004 from a total of 149 AA students. The students were categorized according to class classification, marital status, enrollment status, and institution type. They used hierarchical linear regression to compare AA male experiences to the type of institution they attended. Results revealed AA male's student-faculty relationship was independent of the type of institution they attended, but their relationship with faculty may have influenced other factors.

To further elaborate on mentoring options between cultures, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) stated that White faculty members were unlikely to engage in "color-blind mentoring" if they did not have a full understanding of how the presence of race and acts of racism can impact the student-faculty relationship (as cited in McCoy et al., 2015). Color-blind mentoring occurred when all faculty attempted to not see color and treated students the same regardless of their race (McCoy et al., 2015). McCoy et al. (2015) examined color-blind mentoring using Bonilla-Silva's Color-blind Racism as their conceptual framework. Twenty faculty members from a PWI and an HBCU participated in the study with 10 faculty from each location. Using a qualitative approach, participants were asked to describe their experiences in mentoring minority students. Following the year-long study, two themes emerged. First, faculty members revealed a desire to remain

unbiased, treating minority students the same as they do White students. Second, all White faculty research participants noted they did not view their minority students as being high achievers. Many of them used color-blind language to define their mentoring relationships with their minority students.

<div align="center">Conceptual Framework</div>

The current study obtained the perspectives of AA males utilizing three prominent theories relative to the target population. The first theory was Critical Race Theory (CRT), the second was African American Male Theory (AAMT), and the third theory was Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993). CRT is a theory created in the 1970s that draws from liberal philosophies giving voice to the idea that racism is present and is reoccurring in America (Mitchell & Stewart, 2013). This theory was vital to the desegregation movement, setting a path for higher education institutions in America to embrace research on race and the importance of understanding the effect race has on society (Holliday, 2013). The AAMT articulates how AA males draw from their culture of pre-slavery and post slavery to develop themselves socially, spiritually, and psychologically (Bush & Bush., 2013). Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory suggests that for a student to achieve matriculation, they need to integrate into the college, work with faculty, use academic support resources, and participate in extracurricular activities.

Critical Race Theory

CRT's purpose is to question paradigms of American society and culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Holliday, 2013). Specifically, CRT is used to challenge current ideals of race and racism, identifying how racism shapes practices, policies, and

societies in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Holliday, 2013). CRT uses writings

from theorists W.E.B Du Bois, William Tate, Derrick Bell, and many others, all of whom

share perspective on the realities of racial injustice in America (Ballard, 2006). CRT

provides a conceptual framework based on the work of Delgado (1995) regarding how

minorities view conceptual frameworks (Ballard, 2006). He suggested AAs speak from

experiences that are framed by racism. The stories told by minorities come from different

points of view, providing different points of reference that voice experiences that differ

from what is told by non-minorities (Ballard, 2006; Delgado, 1995). CRT is often used to

shed light on low academic achievement, excessive punishment, and harmful outcomes

of wrongfully held perceptions and stereotypes (Bush & Bush, 2013). Bush and Bush

(2013) state CRT proponents contend that every foundation, systemic process, or social

construct is built on the ideals of race or based on racism.

     Using the CRT, Harper et al. (2009) found a contradiction to beliefs that AAs do

not have the mental ability to learn, therefore there is no need for formal education.

Similar studies note America's foundation is rooted on racist principles that have become

embedded in how this country functions, including our education system (Harper et al.,

2009). They concluded AAs slavery created the perception amongst White people that

AAs were nothing more than property. If viewed as property and not people, they would

be inferior to the White population, thus creating oppressive systems throughout America

(Harper et al., 2009). AAs had to prove they were worthy of learning, thanks to the help

of early trailblazers like Mary Jane Patterson and Alexander Lucius Twilight (Harper et

al., 2009). Sadly, even those trailblazers failed to make a positive change to eliminate

racism from our educational system. Hall (2017) used CRT with research on racial

macroaggressions. The implications this has on minorities in America is crucial, and the research helps to create better strategies and policies to eliminate racism. He further suggested racial macroaggressions could be viewed as less than important, even invisible due to the current success obtained by AA male students and Hispanic male students.

African American Male Theory (AAMT)

AAMT articulates how AA males draw from the culture of African pre-slavery and post slavery to develop themselves socially, spiritually, and psychologically (Bush & Bush, 2013). Bush and Bush (2013) created six principles that make up the AAMT. The first principle states the collection of experiences, values, and behaviors of an AA male's life is best examined using an ecosystems approach. The second principle states AA males are unique because they are AA males who come from African descent. The third principle recognizes AA culture, past and present, resides in the AA male. It is in his consciousness and his genetic makeup; his culture influences his experiences. The fourth principle describes the resiliency of the AA male. He can overcome obstacles, even when the odds are against him. The fifth principle reveals the AA male is not only impacted by racism in America, but he is also impacted by classism and sexism. The sixth principle states any programs created to uplift the AA male should be programs that enlighten the AA male to pursue social justice for himself and others.

While it is necessary to use a theory that considers racism, White supremacy, and systemic oppression to examine the AA male demographic, CRT and AAMT are important to study because they use AA males as the primary subject (Bush & Bush, 2013). Solely using CRT to study the AA male offers only a myopic lens, providing a weak foundation to build research (Bush & Bush, 2013). To understand the AA male

perspective, it is necessary to comprehend not only the environment that has impacted the behavior but also the making of who the AA male is as an individual. This means studying the AA male's African ancestry, AA culture, religious practices, and social constructs, which differs from the research performed by CRT theorists.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Tinto (1993) provided a blueprint highlighting the simple approach to retaining a student in higher education institutions. Tinto argued that students should leave a university or college before graduating based on their experiences to integrate into the institution. His theory was based on research performed by Van Gennup and Durkheim. Van Gennup was an anthropologist who studied tribal societies, and Durkheim was a sociologist who built his works with a focus on the topic of suicide. Using these studies, Tinto (1993) developed the Tinto Student Departure Theory, which suggested students need three stages to achieve academic persistence (See Figure 3). The first stage involves separation of the individual from the community. In this stage, students dissociate themselves from their families, mentally or physically, depending on whether they are living on campus or still residing at home. If they fail to successfully separate themselves from the family or community, it will become difficult for the student to integrate into college. This becomes more likely if the family or community consists of those who may devalue the purpose of getting an education. The second stage is the time frame between old community and new community. The degree of familiarity with college will determine the transition period. If a student has parents who are college graduates, the transition will be more natural due to the assistance and advisement from parents who

have shared similar experiences. Students with parents who do not have college

experience would face difficulty during this transition phase.

Figure 3

Tinto's Student Departure Theory
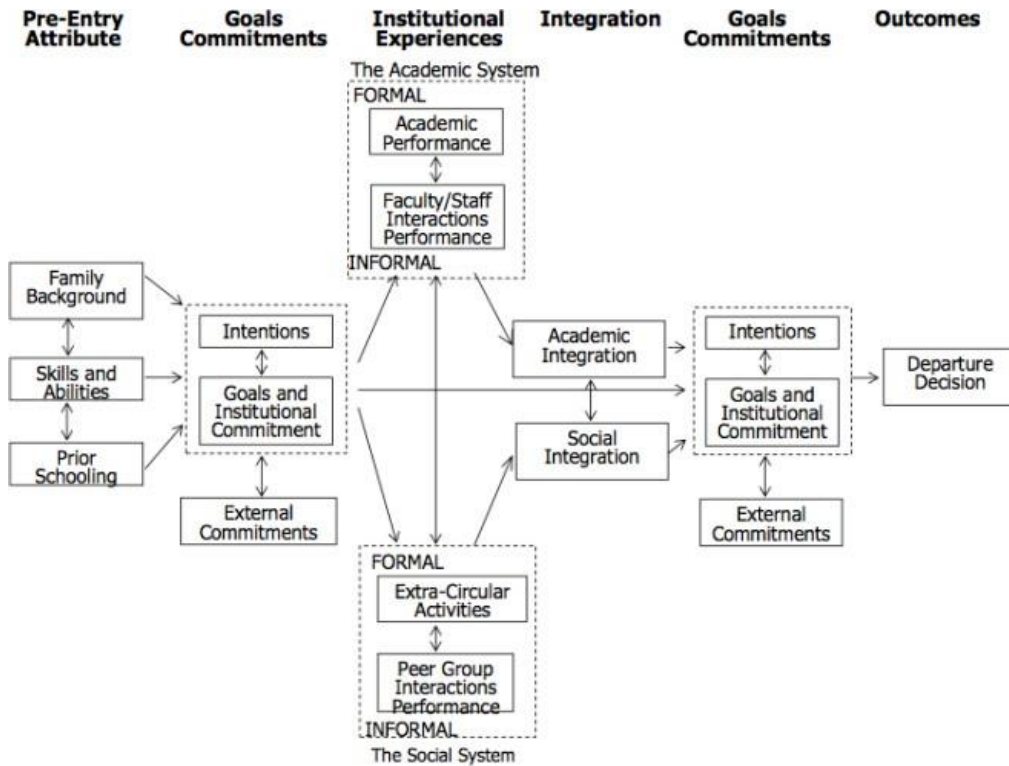
Note. Diagram mapping important concepts about Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

1993.

The last stage is incorporation into the college communities. During this stage,

college students need to integrate into the campus culture that is made up of formal and

informal integration. Those who are academically under-prepared are more likely to

depart college. However, if there is informal academic integration through day-to-day

interactions among university staff, their professors, and their peers outside the

classroom, it could provide the student with a reason to stay. Informal academic

integration allows the student to create a connection of association and sense of

belonging (Tinto, 1993). To elaborate further, Tinto (1993) stated higher education institutions should have lofty expectations for all their students whereby the environment should match their expectations for students to complete matriculation and graduate (as cited in Brooks et al., 2013). Second, college students should have a clear understanding of their curriculum and what is required to achieve degree completion. Third, college students must seek out academic support, social engagement, and peer and faculty support for their personal development. Fourth, higher education institutions need to ensure all college students feel valued, respected, and included. Fifth, higher education institutions should create a learning environment that encourages academic excellence inside and outside the classroom. He further suggested cultural differences of underrepresented students must be taken into consideration when creating retention programs. Because students need integration into campus life, higher education institutions often fail to eliminate systemic racial barriers. As a result, minority students are less likely to socially engage others on campus or become a contributing student in the classroom (Brooks et al., 2013).

Finally, Landry (2003) noted that minority students from troubled backgrounds struggle to meet the demands of higher education institutions (as cited in Brooks et al., 2013). They feel isolated due to the lack of inclusivity from campus culture. Contributing factors that resulted in early drop-out included not being able to assimilate into campus life, not being able to find students with similar ethnic backgrounds, increase in financial burdens, and anxiety from living away from home (Brooks et al., 2013; Landry, 2003). If a higher education institution prioritizes social integration for students, its impact would enhance student persistence for men more than women (Brooks et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Summary

From enslavement to the 21st century, AA males have tried and continuously

failed to overcome systemic barriers in place due to institutional racism. With respect to

higher education, many challenges remain in addition to new obstacles. This makes the

attainment of a college degree even more difficult. If the future is anything like the past,

then many challenges remain in higher education with respect to enrollment, retention,

and graduation. AA male youth are plagued with systemic racism as early as their first

years in the education system. Enduring these aggressions has resulted in low

performance, low self-esteem, and a negative view towards academic achievement

(Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Fewer resources were given to

AA males, despite federal and state efforts to provide equal opportunities (Lewis et. al,

2015). Researchers have shown AA males have poor academic performance during their

K-12 grade years due to systemic racism that is embedded in the educational system. As a

result, this demographic has been left academically disadvantaged, resulting in low

matriculation rates, low attrition rates, and low graduation rates in higher education

institutions.

In attempts to address these problems, many have examined, revised, or enhanced

available retention theories in hopes of creating methods that would retain the AA male.

Universities have used several different methods to retain the AA male yet remain

unsuccessful (Brooks et al., 2013). Metzner and Bean (1985, 1987) argued that previous

retention methods place a heavier emphasis on social variables that do not align with their

college experiences (as cited in Ozaki, 2016). Students who choose to no longer pursue a

degree are not just leaving due to academic reasons but also due to a lack of inclusivity

from the institution (Ozaki, 2016). Similarly, Tinto (1993) argued that students withdraw from a university without obtaining a degree because of their daily interactions with staff, faculty, and peers, referring to these interactions as a form of integration into campus culture (as cited in Brooks et al., 2013).

Social integration, along with faculty mentoring support, are vital to the academic achievement of the AA male. Chickering and Gamson (1987) noted seven principles to student engagement: faculty interactions, student cooperation, proactive or reactive learning, motivation to complete class task, receiving or giving feedback, setting ambitious goals, and inclusive experiences (as cited in Brooks et al., 2013). These researchers also cited an inability to assimilate to campus life, not being able to find students that are of similar ethnic backgrounds, increasing financial burdens, and anxiety from living away from home as contributing factors that result in early drop out for the AA male (Brooks et al., 2013; Landry, 2003). Faculty mentoring can be viewed as one of the most key factors to consider when evaluating retention and academic persistence for minorities (McCoy et al., 2015). Minority student success is predicated on the attitudes and perceptions of faculty (Cole, 2007). Overall, the research noted that to have a successful student-faculty relationship, faculty members need to create an inclusive environment that is culturally sensitive to all minority students (McCoy et al., 2015).

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter explains the methods used to complete this study. Using Basic Interpretive qualitative study design, I captured the narratives of African American (AA) male college graduates to determine the life experiences and challenges they faced when completing their undergraduate degrees. I also identified the strategies, institutional factors, and teaching methods they utilized for their success. There were three research questions that guided this study:

R1. What were the life and academic career experiences of African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to reveal barriers faced while attending college and document strategies that helped achieve graduation. Utilizing a Basic Interpretive qualitative design, this study sought to explore unique ways in which participants make sense of various situations and concepts (Merriam, 2002). This approach was particularly

suitable for investigating deeply context-dependent phenomena, context that would remain elusive to alternative quantitative methodologies or other qualitative frameworks. Moreover, this methodology effectively illuminated social, and contextual factors shaping the research participants' perspectives, fostering a comprehensive exploration of diverse viewpoints. The intricate nature of the research questions within this study necessitated an analysis that aligns with the principles of Basic Interpretive studies. As such, this approach emerged as the more fitting choice when compared to frameworks commonly employed for larger-scale quantitative studies.

Unlike grounded theory design, which aims at theory generation from data, this study sought to distill strategies rather than formulate a theory. While the individualized nature of a case study design did not align, the emerging patterns from the statements of different AA males were needed to answer the research questions with substantive answers. Since the focus was more about experiences and less about contexts and interpretive lenses, ethnography and critical qualitative research were not appropriate.

There were aspects of phenomenology and narrative analysis within this study, but the research direction required the strategies in a general sense rather than a specific format. In other words, suspension of personal beliefs, unit determination, and storytelling of experiences were not the central focus of this study. Neither was a postmodern approach appropriate because this study did not discourage traditional approaches and standardized interpretations of data. Consequently, the adoption of the Basic Interpretive design facilitated my exploration of (a) the interpretation of experiences by AA males, (b) the construction of their world view by AA males, and (c) the identification of common factors arising from their experiences.

Site and Sample Selection

Site Selection

The college selected was a large public research university with a student population of approximately 51,000 students, representing every U.S. state and over 170 countries. With seven campuses and 10 colleges and schools, the university as over 250 undergraduate and graduate degree programs offering 100 fields of study throughout the southeast accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. There are 30 associate degree offerings spread across five campuses. The college offers 72 study-abroad programs spanning across 45 countries, with 400-plus student organizations that include 31 fraternities and sororities. It awarded over 7,000 undergraduate degrees throughout the 2017–2018 academic year.

Top ranked on a national scale, this college has awarded degrees to AA males in the following programs: Biology, Finance, Foreign Language, History, Marketing, Psychology, and the Social Sciences. Making this college the first in history to matriculate 2,000 AA male students in one year. The university continues to achieve this milestone year after year. After the 2011 launch of their strategic plan, the number of undergraduate degrees awarded to AA undergraduates increased (See Table 1, Group B).

The college's commitment to AA male student success is evident with over a dozen strategic programs implemented the last decade. The bachelor's degree graduation rate is among the most significant increases across the country. Figure 2 displays more information about graduation rates within various academic programs.

Table 1

Bachelor's Degrees (2010-2021), Sorted by Demographic Group and Academic Year

	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Adult Learners	1,566	1,627	1,810	1,769	1,700	1,699	1,543	1,568	1,589	1,613	1,490
Pell-Eligible Students	2,403	2,765	3,140	3,132	3,280	3,379	3,428	3,510	3,711	3,554	3,626
First Generation Students	1,117	1,280	1,328	1,364	1,360	1,398	1,390	1,375	1,444	1,415	1,339
White Students	1,890	2,007	2,013	1,924	1,856	1,779	1,662	1,587	1,645	1,671	1,658
African American	1,388	1,552	1,666	1,727	1,829	1,977	2,017	2,035	2,241	2,199	2,213
Asian	548	507	633	541	536	568	699	735	813	820	913
More than One Race	170	153	167	176	184	276	320	355	358	412	424
American Indian or Alaska Native	13	9	18	12	19	11	13	17	11	14	24
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	19	14	9	10	8	0	2	5	1	11	8
Not Reported	194	226	278	278	356	258	246	256	191	200	182
Non-Hispanic	3,690	3,926	4,132	4,017	4,107	4,235	4,263	4,244	4,538	4,483	4,550
Hispanic	294	339	394	409	435	443	501	557	567	632	654
Not Reported	238	203	258	242	246	191	195	189	155	212	218
Total Bachelor's Degree Conferred	4,222	4,468	4,784	4,668	4,788	4,869	4,959	4,990	5,260	5,327	5,422

Sample Selection

To learn more about the experiences of the participants, I employed an array of techniques to shape my sample. I began with Snowball Referrals started with a faculty member to identify students who aligned with my predefined criteria. This process

entailed sharing my criteria with professors, who subsequently provided contact information for students who met the requirements and were eager to participate. Additionally, I harnessed the power of student referrals, asking selected participants if they could refer colleagues who also matched the criteria and had an interest in the study. Another approach was to recruit at the graduation ceremony. I engaged with potential volunteers at the university's graduation ceremony—an event that allowed for efficient screening of participants based on their degree programs, as signaled by their ceremonial attire, and distinguished honors displayed on their gowns. This approach was randomized. I asked for students who would be willing to volunteer to sign up to participate in the study. This method involved face-to-face interaction, proved to be a swifter alternative to traditional methods like distributing campus flyers and waiting for responses, streamlining the assessment of interest. Once I gathered my list of volunteers, I contacted all parties to inquire if they met the pre-established criteria (Appendix A). The final avenue for recruitment involved leveraging social media platforms like LinkedIn to connect with recent graduates. Through targeted emails, I reached out to AA males to gauge their interest in participating. These combined efforts culminated in the assembly of a group of 15 eligible students. Subsequently, I engaged in telephone conversations with these 15 respondents to provide them with comprehensive study information and address any queries they had. I made sure to outline study procedures and obtain consent (Appendices B and C).

      To reduce the 15 prospective participants to a manageable size for my given research design, criteria were used to filter the participants into a final group. These

criteria were designed to ensure consistency and relevance among the participants, aligning with the study's overarching focus:

- Received a bachelor's degree

- Were high academic performers

- Were full-time students

- Utilized student services, such as academic advising, tutoring, career counseling, mentoring, student engagement, or retention programs

- Took over 75% of classes on campus in a physical classroom setting

- Participated in a student engagement activity or organization (e.g., student government, student clubs, sports, or fraternities) at least twice

- Can provide documentation, if requested, to confirm qualifications

- Were from different degree programs, e.g., Business, Science, Art, Health, Education, and Law

Finally, focus was directed towards examining the deviation of graduation success within the study group from established norms. Specifically, attention centered on the variable of time to graduate. The participants were drawn from a university system where their graduation rates significantly diverged from the established norms among AA male undergraduates. These norms entail an average time of graduation period of six years. Notably, this divergence manifested in the shortened time taken by these participants to earn their degrees, positioning them as outliers in terms of quicker attainment. The primary objective here was to pinpoint a subset of participants exemplifying academic excellence, thereby fitting the category of overachievers. To unravel the experiences of AA male students and ascertain the pivotal elements influencing their success, I

deliberately sought out high-performing individuals who excelled academically and actively engaged on campus. To further comprehend the university's role in their achievements, I encouraged participants to share insights on their academic involvement, participation in campus activities, and utilization of support resources. The selected sampling techniques, guided by a meticulous and purpose-driven approach, facilitated the assembly of a diverse and representative group of participants. This strategic sampling aimed to capture the comprehensive essence of the phenomenon under investigation, while accounting for the unique attributes and perspectives within the study group.

In the end, a total of 9 participants began the data collection cycle. By the time the data collection period ended, 4 participants remained. Findings from their experiences are presented in the following chapter.

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers are deeply involved with participants while seeking to minimize ethical and personal issues. The researcher is responsible for identifying any biases that could stem from personal beliefs to prevent improperly shaping the study's interpretation. I am an AA female who has worked for several universities and colleges in Georgia for over 15 years in several different student affairs departments. I have also held a faculty role for 13 years, teaching Freshman Orientation Seminar classes full time for two years and Business Management course's part time for 11 years.

My bias comes in two forms, professional and personal. Having a background in higher education, I am aware of how student support initiatives can influence AA males because I have utilized many of these services professionally. Personally, as a college

graduate who is married to an AA male college graduate, I understand and empathize with the participants' struggles based on the challenges my husband and I faced. As the sole researcher for this study, I did not guide or direct the participants, instead allowing them to create a free-flowing narrative through interviews and reflective writing to draw out sensitive concepts. This study had observations based on an emic perspective. As another means of managing biases, I did not communicate my background or provide any personal points of reference that might influence the direction of participant interviews.

My overall worldview is one that is constructivist in nature. Everyone has a unique perspective, especially those who have been mistreated and marginalized in society. Life is a dynamic experience where personal background and acquired knowledge can influence learning and teaching. The amount of influence these factors have on others varies from person to person. My choices have encouraged those involved in this study to be active individuals in the research process, frequently building on their experiences and sharing them with others. For another means of managing biases, I did not communicate my background or provide any personal points of reference that might influence the direction of participant interviews.

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Data Collection

Interviews

Approval statements for data collection were obtained through emails and consent

forms (Appendices B and C) accepted by Valdosta State University's (VSU's)

Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix D), staff, and the AA male participants. As

a qualitative researcher, I performed my role as the principal instrument for collecting

and reviewing the data (Merriam, 2002). When using primary data from sources such as

interviews, the researcher must disclose the process of scheduling, identifying a location,

and establishing the duration. Using Seidman's (2005) three-interview series framework,

I explored the participants' life history, lived experiences, and the meaning they assigned

to their experiences. The semi-structured interviews were in sit-down meetings in person

or virtual via phone using open-ended questions. The allotted time for each interview was

95 minutes. Seidman (2005) suggests that interviews shorter than 90 minutes are often

insufficient for participants to deeply reflect on the significance of their experiences and

contextualize them within their lives (p. 20). Using Seidman's recommendation, I

distanced the interviews three to seven days apart, giving the participants time to consider

what was discussed in the previous interview without losing meaningful connections.

The interviews occurred in locations that accommodated the participants and their

schedules. I obtained each participant's permission to audio record the interviews, which

I had transcribed into Microsoft Word using recommendations supported by Maxwell

(2013) and Patton (2002) concerning transcriptions. I drafted interview questions

(Appendix E) by drawing upon prior research, as delineated in the literature review, and

incorporating input from my committee members. The questions underwent review by my

chair and co- chair, both offered their expertise to enhance the instruments' face validity. The questions were specific to student engagement, retention, and conceptual theories to gain insight into the viewpoint and experiences of AA males.

Memos

Maxwell (2013) recommended the creation of memos during the research process. Creating memos is a way to capture experiences and relationships with research participants. As researcher, I reflected on how I processed the data, gave myself self-critique, and provided an analytical lens. I created participant observation field notes after each interview in the form of memo writing. After each interview, I asked each participant to put in writing any additional thoughts or experiences they wanted to share in the form of a memo. These memos served as additional artifacts to validate the interview data. I used Microsoft Word to organize data, create descriptive files, and group information into folders. After I gave the folders descriptive names, I reorganized them into subgroups to create logical connections between topics and data types (see Hahn, 2008).

Artifacts

Before conducting the interviews, I requested college artifacts that included AA males' college admissions applications, transcripts, and proof of student engagement, such as club memberships, awards, or faculty recommendations. The college applications allowed me to review the participants' academic profiles, which showed their post-high school interests, desired outcomes, and proficiencies. The college transcripts showed the academic progression of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year. The transcripts allowed me to validate the participants' claims of successes and failures they endured

while attending the college selected for this study. Proof of student engagement was documented, which provided insight into the participants' interests, goals, and experiences.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using Hahn's (2008) pyramid structure as a guide. This required four levels (i.e., phases) of data analysis. During the Level 1 coding process, I read and reviewed all data. While reading, I identified text triggers or significant thought patterns that were related to the research questions. In the second phase, I took the data from Level 1 coding and developed categories. For Level 3, I refined the data from Level 2 to form axial/thematic coding and identify highly refined themes. Level 4 combined Level 3 themes into more concentrated groupings. Figure 4 shows this process.

Validity and Reliability

A researcher should achieve validity in a study to ensure accuracy and credibility of findings (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). I triangulated multiple data sources collected from each participant to justify themes, thus enhancing credibility. As Creswell (2014) noted, if themes converge from multiple data sources or participant perspectives, it enhances the study's validity (p. 201). Using thick description to convey what I have found, I assessed supporting documents and artifacts to identify emerging themes.

Offering many perspectives on themes made the results richer and more realistic, which provided a detailed picture for the reader. While the approach aimed to make the results more realistic, accuracy was established through the process of triangulating data sources, adhering to established validity criteria, and using a comprehensive analysis methodology.

Figure 4

Hahn's (2008) Qualitative Coding Terms
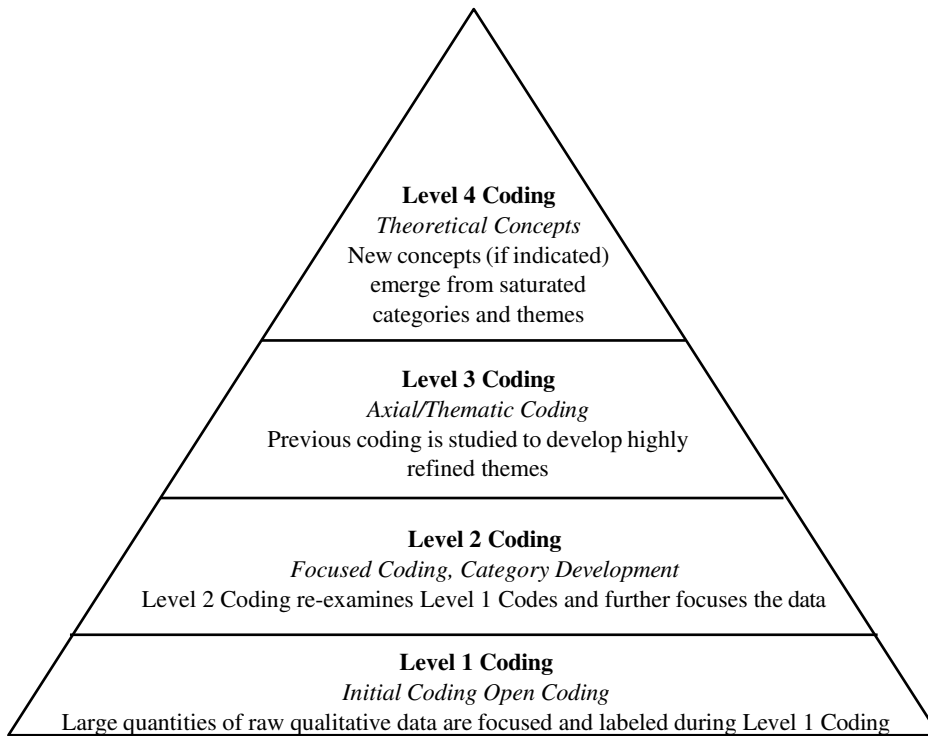
Furthermore, I engaged in reflective memo writing after every interview to minimize validity threats (i.e., researcher bias, reactivity, and unethical behavior). I created an honest narrative of my interpretations. In recording personal insights and experiences to accurately interpret the phenomenon of interest, I remained aware of managing personal biases and preconceptions. In qualitative research, preconceived notions are viewed as unavoidable; however, they can be temporarily set aside to accurately document different perspectives and experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2005). Setting aside biases allowed me to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the phenomenon. Memo writing helps minimize subjectivity and reactivity, further validating the interview data (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative researchers document the steps taken to ensure other researchers can follow the process (Creswell, 2014; Yin,

2009). To improve the transferability of the findings, I created an audit trail documenting how I collected and analyzed the data (see Merriam, 2002). I used member checking as well because it offered participants an opportunity to review their interview transcripts and my preliminary findings, giving feedback for revisions.

In addition to the techniques above, I reviewed participant-provided artifacts to support their stories. All tangible artifacts were cleaned, sorted, cataloged, conserved, packaged, and organized. Upon study completion, I returned all hard copies to each participant. I used Microsoft Office to organize all text files, scanned pictures, and audio files. On my personal computer, I created a profile for each participant using naming schemes that had binomial and trinomial components, allowing me to identify audio, transcript, data, and artifact files. I stored all files on a USB flash drive, using the Dropbox file hosting service as a backup. A researcher should also achieve reliability in terms of consistent interview protocols and coding (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2005). Each participant completed three interviews that were 95 minutes per session, with similar break times allotted between each interview session. Interview content was based on an interview guide of important questions for each session, which allowed for comparisons and consistent coding according to the questions addressed.

<center>Ethical Procedures</center>

As the researcher for this study, I considered the moral and ethical responsibility I had to my participants. I conducted a study that met all relevant ethical standards of the institutions and individuals involved in the research. I addressed informed consent, benefits, risks, confidentiality, and data ownership while adhering to all regulations implemented by the college selected and VSU. As the researcher for this study, I held a

<center>62</center>

deep sense of moral and ethical responsibility towards my participants. I conducted a study that adhered to the relevant ethical standards set forth by the institutions and individuals integral to the research process. I took particular care when handling aspects like informed consent, ensuring that I thoroughly explained the significance of giving consent to each participant and I addressed any queries they had before finalizing each participant's consent. Each participant received a comprehensive breakdown of the potential benefits and risks associated with the study. In addition, I provided written and verbal methods when communicating the stringent confidentiality measures, I would implement to every participant, my committee, and the staff involved.

The intricate matter of data ownership was handled with the utmost consideration. This dedication to ethical guidelines seamlessly harmonized with the specific regulations laid out by the college of my choice and VSU, underscoring my endeavor to uphold the ethical standards throughout the entire duration of this study. To meet the VSU Educational Leadership Doctoral Program guidelines, I completed CITI training about research and ethics (Appendix F). I submitted an IRB approval form, showing how I followed the guidelines regarding the protection of human participants. I provided an informed consent form to each participant and obtained their signed approval before commencing the interviews (see Creswell, 2014). On the form, I introduced myself and identified my status as a student at VSU. Informed consent also included the study's purpose, participation benefits, type of the AA male participant involvement, risk to the AA male participant, participant confidentiality, right to withdraw at any time, and my contact information should any questions arise (see Creswell, 2014; Sarantakos, 2005). I ensured all AA male students understood why I was conducting this study before the

interviewing process began. I informed the participants that any negative remarks about me are outside the scope of study. Any comments about the college not addressed specifically within the interview questions were not outside the scope of the study.

To establish trust, I provided full transparency on all documents for review for each AA male participant, informing them of who had access to the data shared, stored, and evaluated. I discussed the approval process and the publication of outcomes. All transcripts, recordings, memos, and artifacts remained in my possession, with security locks on all devices to prevent outside access. When not in use, all digital files and hard copy data remained in a stored safe in my home. Upon completing the study, I transferred all data to a flash drive, storing it in a home safe. This data is personally stored until I receive IRB approval to remove all content. When this occurs, I will erase all content from the flash drive.

Summary

In this basic interpretive qualitative study, I captured the experiences of AA male graduates to determine which strategies, institutional factors, and teaching methods assisted in their success. Using blended sampling techniques, I interviewed four participants representing various degree programs to obtain a true account of the university. In my capacity as the principal researcher for this study, I ensured that all participants understood the scope and purpose before the interviewing process began. I followed Seidman's (2005) three-interview series framework to explore the AA male participants' life experiences with K-12 institutions, family dynamics, cultural views, and student attendance. The semi-structured interviews were face-to-face, in-depth inquiries that used open-ended questions, following a researcher-constructed interview protocol to

maintain consistency and focus. The three interviews' phases were 95 minutes each. I

transcribed the interview audio recordings, coded the data, and presented a detailed

description that showed multiple perspectives based on participants' experiences. Using

triangulation and member checking helped me validate the data. Ethical considerations

included assumptions about the context, consistency of personal statements, reflections

on my personal bias as an educator, data dissemination, and the researcher–participant

relationship.

Chapter IV

NARRATIVE RESULTS

Overview

African American (AA) males exhibit the lowest completion rates among all

students attending four-year universities (Perna & Jones, 2013; Seidman, 2012).

Alarmingly, two-thirds of AA male students fail to graduate, exerting significant impacts

on their economic potential, straining university resources, and undermining America's

competitiveness in the global economy (Snyder et al., 2016). The core objective of this

study was to identify the barriers encountered and strategies employed by AA male

students at a specific university in Georgia. Employing a basic interpretive design

incorporating phenomenological and narrative techniques, the study sought to uncover

the underlying factors contributing to the successful graduation of four AA male

graduates. The research methodology involved conducting both in-person and phone

interviews with the participants. However, due to the events surrounding the global

COVID-19 pandemic, interactions with the participants were restricted to phone

conversations, aligning with the health guidelines established by the Center for Disease

Control. After each interview, participants received their transcripts to review for

accuracy. This study was guided by the following research questions:

> R1. What were the life and academic career experiences of African American
>
> male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in
>
> Georgia?

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

I employed a combination of purposeful sampling techniques to select the AA male participants for this research (Patton, 2002). The AA male participants had earned degrees in various fields, including a Bachelor of Business Administration (B.B.A.) in Media Entrepreneurship, a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in Psychology, a B.S. in Pre-Med Psychology, and a B.B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. All degrees were conferred by the College of Arts & Sciences. My selection of AA male participants from diverse academic colleges aimed to assemble a representative sample of informative cases while optimizing my limited resources (Patton, 2002).

Following Seidman's three-interview series framework (2005), I conducted a comprehensive examination of the AA male participants' life histories, lived experiences, and the meaning they attributed to these experiences. The initial 90-minute interview required participants to furnish detailed accounts of their life journeys, encompassing their childhood, parental relationships, parental backgrounds, family values, and cultural perspectives. Subsequently, the second phase of interviews delved into their high school experiences, academic accomplishments, college selection processes, and application procedures. This phase also facilitated an exploration of the transitions experienced by these AA males as they moved from high school to college. In the third phase of interviews, I delved into their experiences while attending the university. From these interviews, I constructed narrative profiles that synthesized and summarized the

categories identified through analytic coding, offering enhanced clarity in presenting the overall results. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants, and they were referred to as John, Lynn, Timothy, and Dion. At the time of the interview process, their ages were 24, 22, 23, and 32, respectively.

<div align="center">Participant Profiles</div>

John

John came to my attention through a personal recommendation from a close friend, a professor at the university. Following a brief introduction over the phone, John readily shared his experiences as an AA male attending the selected site. At the time of our engagement, John was a rising senior, having been born in Virginia, during the fall of 1998. He entered this world as the paternal twin of his older brother, David, with a mere three-minute age gap between them. When inquiring about his parents, John held them in high regard, referring to them as "heroes." His father, originally hailing from Harlem, New York, boasted a noteworthy lineage as the grandson of famous African American educator. Despite his father's profession as a doctor and his atheist beliefs, John depicted him as a man who also served as his closest confidant, possessing a genuinely jovial spirit. At the tender age of thirteen, John's father imparted the art of financial investments to him—a skill that would later prove instrumental in his survival and subsequent success. John eloquently encapsulated his profound bond with his father through the following anecdote:

> Every night we would watch movies, or he would sit and watch me play video games. He introduced me to comic books. Everything I have now grown to love as an adult is because of my dad. I can say he set me up for success. At the age of

thirteen, I would go to my dad's closet and put on his penny loafers and suit and say, "I am ready to go to school."

John's mother hailed from Dayton, Ohio, where she spent her formative years. As the sole daughter of a renowned Civil Rights lawyer, she emerged as an accomplished scholar, earning her doctoral degree and assuming the role of an Episcopal Priest. Her life's mission revolved around the construction of a church, leading her to become a minister in Richmond, Virginia, during John's childhood. In addition to her church-related endeavors, John's mother played an active role in establishing community centers. Notably, one community center was situated in a city that grappled with the highest crime rate along the eastern coast. John, reflecting on his upbringing, shared his experiences within the community center:

Seeing my mom work in a Black community while living in a middle-class white community, it taught me not to judge, to be open-minded, to know when someone is running games. I saw the best of people and the worst of people. I had a spectrum of friends. Being part of both environments, I was more comfortable in the white community, but I was also raised to participate in organizations that put me around other middle-class African American families. I really had a full spectrum.

John was close with his twin brother and his dad's older sister from a previous marriage. John had a deep passion for art, chess, and video games. He held a great admiration for Barack Obama and frequently emulated him, whether it involved running for school president in the fifth grade or wearing a tie resembling one worn by Barack Obama. However, at the age of fifteen, John received a diagnosis of bacterial meningitis,

a condition that necessitated three brain surgeries. Reflecting on this challenging experience, he shared the following account:

> In terms of my education, it put a weight on it, but it wasn't a deterrent. My father used to say to me, "everybody's got a sob story. How are you gonna overcome yours?" That made me have to fight harder to obtain the goals I wanted.

With both parents engaged in demanding jobs, John attributed much of his upbringing and the valuable life lessons he still applies as an adult to his grandmother. He fondly recounted, "my grandmother really raised us. She was the one picking us up from school, ensuring we were well-fed, getting us to various events, and instilling discipline in us, all while my mother and father were at work." He attributed her unwavering support as the primary reason for his success in an all-white high school. Despite being an honors student, he characterized himself as both an "extravert and introvert," with a deep love for pop culture and a self-identification as a nerd. When prompted to describe his experience attending a predominantly White high school, John provided the following insights:

> It was not horrible. I am well-spoken and well read, so often I would get "oh you don't sound black" … I would often feel weird but would try not too much to think about it. It was a double-edged sword; being one of the only Black kids being into arts, I would get bigger roles, I would get most of the brown roles.

Influenced by both parents, both of whom hold advanced degrees, John emphasized that his mother, father, and grandmother played equally significant roles in motivating him to attend college and excel in high school. His mother constantly instilled in him the belief that he would "go to college," fostering his determination. Moreover,

she provided him with positive career aspirations, encouraging him to "pursue his passion." During his high school years, John initially aspired to become a lawyer, actively participating in mock trials. However, after becoming deeply involved in performing arts, he swiftly redirected his ambitions toward pursuing a degree in the arts. This led him to apply to universities in the South and along the East Coast, eventually enrolling in a university in Georgia to pursue a degree in film and television. Subsequently, following his time at his first selected university John's mentor recommended that he consider the selected research site. John heeded his mentor's advice and swiftly transferred, embarking on a journey to obtain a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in Media Entrepreneurship. Describing this transition as challenging, especially coming from his previous university, John elaborated further:

> A lot of the academic systems were new. It took me a while to take the reins on it. There were different buildings to get different things done as compared to University X. All the buildings are spread out. My previous college was not complicated. It was draining, I had to relearn things that I should have learned as a freshman.

John relished the freedom afforded by the university, allowing him to unleash his creativity. He held in high regard those faculty members who, in his words, "went out of their way" to help, a marked contrast from his previous experience at University X. John attributed much of his success to the faculty who not only supported him but also encouraged him to take the lead on various projects, instilling in him a sense of ownership over his creations. Engaging in diverse media projects not only enabled John

to establish meaningful connections with his peers but also fostered closer ties with faculty. Among his notable roles, he served as an intern at his mentor's radio station, serving as a sound engineer, and took charge of managing his mentor's social media accounts.

Furthermore, he embarked on the creation of a podcast. John's impeccable fashion sense and willingness to lend a helping hand rendered him highly popular among his peers, to the extent that professors from disciplines outside his own department frequently reached out to him, driven by curiosity about his ancestry. Over the course of the next two years, John strategically aligned himself with like-minded professionals sharing his field of expertise and interests. As he put it, connecting with individuals of this ilk played an instrumental role in his success. John exhibited highly discerning behavior selecting a network of students to align with, he noted the following:

> I found them aligning with my work goals. They contributed to my success in my matriculation. Faculty get to see what I am doing; they see it and want to add on to it. If I do good, it puts me in rooms and places where I can further succeed. It definitely makes it harder to complete classes, but it is well worth it.

Assimilating to University S came naturally to John. Being a natural competitor, he constantly strove to overachieve, becoming one of University S most sought-after students in his degree program. When asked why he sets such ambitious goals for himself, he shared his perspective about it:

A rising senior, John will graduate in May 2022. He attributed having an arduous work ethic and people skills to his success. When asked what pushed him to finish his degree, he shared the following perspective about achieving graduation:

To be able to go and create and do what I want to do on my own terms. Not achieving my goals is my fear. I want to set myself up the best way I can, and a degree will only help. It is important to my mother; I am already in it, and I might as well finish it.

Lynn

I first encountered Lynn as he stood in line with fellow graduates, awaiting entry into the stadium for the commencement ceremony. He appeared both focused and nervous, adjusting his gown as I approached. I extended my congratulations on his remarkable achievement and invited him to participate in this study. Lynn readily agreed, promptly providing his contact information, all the while offering apologies to those behind him for any delay. I expressed my gratitude for his willingness to volunteer and extended my best wishes as he proceeded to enter the stadium to receive his degree.

Born the summer of 1997, Lynn spent his formative years in St. Louis, Missouri, until the age of six. During this time, he bore witness to his parents' troubled relationship, characterized by his father's frequent departures and subsequent returns, perpetuating a cycle of absence. After enduring years of this tumultuous connection, Lynn's mother made the pivotal decision to relocate with her children—Lynn, his older sister, and his younger brother, all separated by a mere two years—to Lawrenceville, Georgia, in pursuit of a fresh start. This move meant leaving behind a large maternal extended family, comprised of aunts and cousins, who had served as Lynn's support system during his early years. Adjusting to his new life in Georgia proved to be a formidable challenge for Lynn, who candidly described himself as a "bully" during his elementary school years. He recounted the difficulties he encountered during that period:

Almost every day, I got into trouble. Up until about sixth grade, which was my last year being a problem child. I was a bully at school, hitting other kids. I damaged the school's property. I tried to get into a teacher's cabinet, so I remember breaking into it.

Life without his father presented its own set of challenges for Lynn. At a youthful age, he shouldered household responsibilities, especially because his mother suffered from seizures. In this trying situation, Lynn assumed a new role as her protector and caregiver while also tending to the needs of his siblings. Despite the adversity, Lynn retained his youthful optimism and nurtured dreams of pursuing a career as an engineer or architect. He envisioned a future where he could construct his own home and raise a family, finding joy in spending time with his brother and visiting his friends' homes for playdates. As a student, Lynn excelled particularly in band, math, and science, showcasing his academic prowess. His vibrant spirit extended to his participation in sports, including football and track. He reveled in the camaraderie of being part of a team and cherished the deep bonds he formed with his friends. Reflecting on his childhood, he shared his recollections:

I fought with my siblings, mostly my sister. … I loved riding bikes, playing video games. I played the trumpet and was in the band all the way through high school. … Originally, I picked up the clarinet, and I was good at it, but I liked the trumpet sounds; I love jazz music. I grew up middle class. It was basic; we lived in an apartment. … I never wanted for anything. My relationship with my parents made me more caring. As for my dad, I didn't want to be like my father… Seeing my mother hurt, I said to myself that I would not want to ever treat a woman like that.

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Lynn's childhood trauma led him to seek positive male role models to take his father's place. Some of his teachers would shape the man he would become. He remembered that time with detail:

I learned a lot from my track coach. He taught me to keep my head on straight— also, my history teacher. I had a problem with procrastination; he helped me focus a lot more to get things done. They were both male teachers, one White and one African American.

Lynn attended a high school in Roswell, Georgia, characterized by its racial diversity. Driven by his aspiration to become an engineer, he dedicated himself to his studies, striving to make his mother proud. As he approached high school graduation, Lynn delved into scholarship research, deciding to remain in-state to qualify for the HOPE Scholarship. Surveying the colleges near his home, he submitted applications to several universities within Georgia. Lynn held the distinction of being a first-generation college student, blazing a trail in his family as the first to pursue higher education. When asked about his motivation for attending college, he recounted, "I was contemplating taking a year off, but my mom offered her perspective, suggesting that if I postponed it, I might never return. Her influence prompted me to enroll immediately after high school."

In light of not receiving acceptance letters from his first or second choice institutions, Lynn chose to enroll at the university that ranked as his third preference. Initially undecided on a major, he abandoned his ambition of becoming an engineer and, instead, embarked on a journey into nursing, later transitioning to a psychology major. Lynn heavily relied on the guidance and support of his professors and university staff as he acclimated to the demands of college life. As a new student, he grappled with the

challenges of adapting to the academic rigors. Reflecting on this period, Lynn noted, "initially, I encountered difficulties in regularly checking our student announcement board. Since I seldom used a laptop, adapting to the practice of consistently checking announcements for both classes and student life proved to be a learning curve."

Lynn's living arrangements found him residing off-campus with his mother. To provide for his family, he opted out of participating in extracurricular clubs and organizations. Instead, he secured part-time employment at a family entertainment venue featuring video games, laser tag, and bowling. To navigate the transition to college life, Lynn sought solace in the companionship of friends from high school who also enrolled at the university, relying on both these familiar faces and newfound friends to help him navigate the challenges of this new chapter. In his pursuit of connection, Lynn intentionally aligned himself with individuals who shared his interests, highlighting, "I surrounded myself with people who resembled me and shared similar perspectives."

Lynn displayed a strong commitment to his studies, approaching his college experience with a level of dedication akin to managing a job, marked by proper time management and unwavering focus. To Lynn, his time at the university was transactional in nature—he attended the institution with the clear objective of obtaining a degree, and the university, in turn, offered the services and resources needed to achieve that goal.

Notably, Lynn expressed that he did not encounter instances of racism in his interactions with professors or staff. He stated, "I felt like I was regarded as an equal. I would attend class, take exams, and the environment was quite diverse. In my perception, the professors treated everyone on an equal footing."

Lynn found his motivation in the collective support system comprising professors, friends, and university staff. He leveraged these individuals as valuable resources, relying on them for guidance, direction, and as a sounding board for his ideas and concerns. Lynn attributed his success to his unwavering work ethic and thorough preparation, with a particular emphasis on his effective communication skills. He concluded our interview with this reflective insight:

> Here at University X, you have to think for yourself and do for yourself. I overcame challenges by asking questions, sought out counseling, preparing for class before class, testing my knowledge against my peers to see how I was measuring against my classmates. Working played an influential role; it helped me learn how to manage my time. I knew the struggles of African American people, so I knew that in order to be successful, I would have to work harder than my counterparts.

Timothy

Timothy, born in the spring of 1999, in Atlanta, Georgia, was primarily raised by his mother, grandmother, and uncle, who hailed from Chicago. Timothy's family dynamic was shaped by a brief love affair between his parents, which ended so quickly that Timothy never had the opportunity to meet or know his father. Reflecting on this absence, Timothy shared his perspective with me, painting a poignant picture of his father based on the limited information he possessed:

> I haven't had much interest just to find him. I'm saying that I've had so many other supportive family members including my mom by my side who were actually there. It would be something that I probably should seek out myself, but I

just felt like he doesn't really try to reach out to me, or at least I haven't known

that he's tried to reach out to me … But I've just been content with me and my

mom, I guess.

Growing up as an only child, Timothy was remarkably close with his mother. He described their relationship, displaying surety about his statements. He shared it thusly:

She's definitely very protective and I always think about this looking back how

she was playing both sides. All decisions were pretty much final … It felt a little

bit more restrictive and controlling when I guess I was seeing like most of my

friends.

During his childhood, Timothy was a reserved and introverted child with a strong affinity for technology. He admired his uncle, who was a musician, and it was his uncle who inspired him to take up playing the trumpet. Additionally, his uncle introduced him to the world of technology, including computers, phones, video games, and game design. Timothy's family lived in the Atlanta projects, specifically the Gilbert Garden Housing, where he resided with his mother, grandmother, and uncle. They remained in this environment until his mother was able to establish her career and save up to secure a new home for just the two of them in Sandy Springs, Georgia. When reflecting on his experience growing up in the Atlanta projects, Timothy shared his memories of that time:

I enjoyed living with my uncle. My grandma always had us doing cool things. We

used to play video games together. My uncle always made music with me. He

would show me his stuff, I had a good time there even though it wasn't like the

greatest living conditions-somehow, I still enjoyed it.

Education held a significant place in Timothy's family, particularly for his mother, who emphasized the importance of good grades as a top priority. She instilled in Timothy the value of academic achievement, and any slip in grades would result in punishment.

Leading by example, she demonstrated her commitment to self-improvement through education. She pursued further education by attending night school while Timothy was in middle and high school, eventually earning a bachelor's degree to pursue a career in counseling. She continued her educational journey by obtaining a master's degree for her chosen profession. During his childhood, Timothy's passion for a career in the field of computers began to take shape. He dabbled in music and graphic design as he experimented with his interests. However, pursuing this passion came with financial challenges, as he lacked the necessary resources to fully explore his chosen path. Timothy recalled the following memory:

> I used to want to be a computer science major because I loved technology … But I didn't feel I had the resources to do it. There was one computer in our household and that was my mom's that she would use for work. I didn't have access to the computer I could work on, play games, or go online. It forced me to move towards music and playing the trumpet and just being good at that and doing good in class.

During his high school years, Timothy was highly active in music. He participated in various music groups, including the regular band, marching band, and occasionally the jazz band. His circle of friends came from diverse backgrounds, but many of them shared his passion for music and were fellow members of these band groups. Timothy's decision about his future college goals was straightforward, thanks to the encouragement he

received from his mother, family, and friends who believed in his dream of pursuing a career in game design. His teachers also played a crucial role in supporting his interests, taking him on field trips that aligned with his passion for music. Additionally, he obtained an industry certification in a graphic design class, further solidifying his skills. When it came to selecting a college, Timothy considered factors such as location, major, and price. He made a deliberate choice about the university he attended. He explains sharing the following details:

> I chose it for myself. I knew I had a few friends that would be there. I liked where the location was, but I chose it so I could do everything I wanted to do. I applied for music and got into the music program. Once I got to orientation, I found out I could switch programs and I was still interested in computer science. So, I heard about computer science in the brand-new major game design. It was great because I was able to encompass graphic design, music, and computer science all into one major.

Timothy approached Freshman Orientation with enthusiasm. His dorm room was shared with two other AA males, creating a sense of camaraderie from the start. However, he faced challenges in staying on schedule and had difficulty arriving at his classes on time. Despite these initial obstacles, Timothy found support in the learning community that was designed to assist students like him in adjusting to the unfamiliar college environment. He offered the following scenario:

> There's a group of us that kind of really, like, clicked. It was like seven of us. We used to hang out a lot the first year. Going to class together because a lot of our

classes would be the same. At least for the first one or two semesters. That was cool. We still keep in contact every now and then.

Timothy enjoyed the hands-on learning experience. He took what he learned in the classroom and applied the theory into practice. He shared the following:

It helped me develop like all the stuff I learned in class. We have some pretty good computers that we could like build games and other like 3D modeling and all that stuff. They had resources which is cool. I had opportunities. I helped to do the graphics for the Esports tournament that the university holds twice a year in the fall and in the spring. I volunteered to help them make new t-shirts. … then as the semesters went on, I helped more doing splash screens and other graphics.

Timothy fully immersed himself in the university's culture by actively participating in extracurricular activities that aligned with his major. He became a member of the university's gaming club and club X, which provided him with the opportunity to collaborate with students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and personalities. Timothy's involvement in these clubs allowed him to connect with others who shared his common interests, and he felt an intense sense of belonging and camaraderie. Reflecting on his experience, he expressed, "I had a great time with everyone. We shared many interests, and it was easy to engage in conversations. We formed a close-knit group of friends, and we genuinely enjoyed each other's company."

Timothy received support from faculty within his department to complete projects during his junior and senior years. While he did not have a formal mentor, his experience working on department projects was self-guided. During his senior year, a few teachers approached him to collaborate on projects involving 3D modeling. These opportunities

provided Timothy with valuable experiences that contributed to his skill development. He recalled his interactions with faculty members who had a significant impact on his educational journey at the university:

> The Director of Operations at the Media Center, I helped him set up all our resources for the other students while learning and doing things with the resources we had myself. But being able to work under him gave me access to work on certain projects with a little bit more leniencies being that I work there. I was able to use more of the high-tech equipment without much issue. It shaped me, I took as much as I could from the school to be able to apply it and be able to take care of myself outside of school. I[was] honored to able to do projects for him and in return he was satisfied with projects I created on a commercial scale. Making those opportunities recur helped me develop my style.

Timothy encountered challenges related to finances and forming connections with peers who shared his interests. Due to the limited number of AA males in his department, he had difficulty finding a large group of like-minded individuals. However, he managed to build relationships with the few AA males in his degree program. Living on campus facilitated his access to special projects and necessary equipment. Throughout his four years at the university, he juggled time-sensitive projects with his coursework while residing on campus. To support his education, he took out the maximum amount of loans and engaged in work-study programs. The expenses associated with the tools required for his degree program posed a significant financial burden. Timothy articulated these challenges in the following manner:

The hardest thing was some of the later classes that were a part of some more expensive stuff. Which I was able to get just working and what not … It's not easy to afford some of the stuff we need for class. I took photography as well. I had to get a camera for that. So that was just a lot of cost. Things I wasn't really expecting to need to buy, I had to figure out a way to do it. Sometimes it would be difficult finding friends. The way that I kind of, like went through my classes. Like I had a group of friends at the beginning, with my freshman learning community, with my certain group of friends. But since I wasn't really taking the classes that they were taking our schedules were all over the place. I kind of grew away from them.

Timothy graduated with honors. He opened doors for himself and others. He followed in his mother's footsteps, completing his educational goals. When asked how he could navigate his studies while maintaining a high grade-point average, he shared his personal motivation to complete his degree:

I just wanted more. I wanted to design. I wanted to get a design job. I wanted to do something I was going to enjoy for the rest of my life. And if that meant going to college, well, I felt like I needed to go to college. But in hindsight, I guess I don't really have to, especially knowing now that there's so much stuff online. But I did feel like if I went to college, I would have some sort of structure in how I can learn what I want to do and more so like the connections that I can make for what I want to do something like that. For the most part, it's worth it. College may not get great on its own, but it just opens a lot more doors that you might not even have seen or have expected by not going at all.

Dion

Dion was born in the winter of 1990, in East Point, Georgia, and raised in Douglasville, Georgia, along with his parents and seven-year-old younger sister. His father worked as a warehouse supervisor, while his mother initially worked as a corrections officer before pursuing a career as a real estate agent. He described his family as "middle class," highlighting his mother's outgoing nature and active involvement in school-related activities such as parent-teacher conferences and the PTA. In contrast, his father played the role of the disciplinarian. Both of Dion's parents remained actively engaged in their church, with his father serving as a pastor and his mother as the First Lady. Dion himself participated in the youth choir and assisted with Bible study sessions every Sunday and Wednesday.

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood characterized by a mix of White and Black families, Dion engaged in various sports, initially trying his hand at multiple sports before focusing on baseball and track. He cherished spending time with his family, particularly during holidays, where he enjoyed decorating the house, visiting various family members' homes, and relishing the time spent with cousins and relatives. Dion's academic performance in school was consistently strong. He had a penchant for humor and often assumed leadership roles, taking honors classes, and relishing educational field trips, including out-of-state visits to museums. The idea of attending college was a common topic of discussion at home and in school, with teachers, friends, and family all contributing to these conversations. The following excerpt offers insight into these discussions:

They were supportive, we spoke about it naturally as the next step. I knew my

mom had graduated from college. I knew my aunts had graduated from college.

But they didn't have a traditional experience. My parents threw out the idea of me

staying at home and commuting to school. I wanted to live on campus. I wanted a

more traditional aspect of school and college life.

For Dion, pursuing a college education aligned with his career aspirations. It filled

him with excitement about the prospect of attending college and enjoying the associated

fun experiences. His expectations were shaped by the stories and anecdotes shared by

friends as well as portrayals in television and media. When it came to selecting a college,

Dion's primary criterion was the cost of tuition. His parents had conveyed their financial

limitations, making it clear that he would need to rely on scholarships and government

aid to finance his education.

Dion chose to major in psychology at the selected site. He was drawn to the

campus after touring it and appreciated the diversity he observed. However, he did harbor

some reservations about his choice. He expressed concerns about potentially getting lost

in the crowd and the heavy emphasis on independent learning, which he found

discouraging. As a first-year student everything was novel and unfamiliar for Dion.

During his first-year student orientation, his academic advisement team placed him in a

learning community where his dormmates were all AA males. He shared his initial

experiences of living in this dormitory setting:

I think it was twenty of us. We all stayed in the same dorm and on the same floor.

We all took at least the same classes pretty much that first semester … It probably

would have been cool if it was stretched out a little bit more, but I enjoyed the experience all as a whole.

During his time in the dormitory with other AA males, Dion found it challenging to connect with peers who shared similar interests. He struggled to establish a close-knit circle of friends that he could truly call his own. Dion candidly described the difficulties he encountered in trying to overcome these challenges:

I asked myself, where do I fit in? What do I enjoy doing? I had to ask myself these questions … I enjoyed being involved … so I did that. I did the whole homecoming thing in terms of running for Homecoming Court, and I enjoyed it

Finding friends was a slow process for Dion. He pledged to a fraternity called Alpha Phi Alpha with his best friend from high school. Reflecting on his experience of cultivating friendships, Dion shared the following:

I went against the grain in certain aspects. Sometimes people would ask me to go to clubs and I would say I'm not into it. I kind of like being to myself and I didn't want to be bothered, but I realized that is where bonds were created. To make friends I had to learn how to speak to people and build those relationships.

Dion continued to foster relationships with other AA males on campus by actively participating in various organizations and initiatives. He became a member of an organization club X, served as an ambassador to the university's student council, and took on a mentoring role within the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity for his younger brothers. Dion also contributed to his community through a work-study program with the AmeriCorps group, where he served as a tutor to different schools. Additionally, he held a position in the university's Office of the President as a student executive assistant. He intentionally

sought out individuals who exhibited success on campus and shared similar values,

explaining that he "gravitated towards people who were like-minded." While Dion did

not encounter overt racism within or around the university, he did experience subtle

microaggressions. He believed that some staff members may have been unaware of these

microaggressions, but others were conscious of them. To illustrate, he provided an

example of what he had observed:

> I had an experience where one of the advisors that I kept in close contact with of
>
> an organization I was heavily involved with at the university most recently made
>
> a joke. I guess he was trying to make a joke about Rashard Brooks. And I live off
>
> the exit-the same exit that the Wendy's was on-when everything transpired. So,
>
> the guy was like, I know you live in that area … I can grab you some Wendy's if
>
> you'd like. The way he said it was like he was making a joke about what had just
>
> transpired.

Dion felt most supported by AA professors. That encouragement stayed with him

and motivated him. He described the relationship that most impacted his experience as a

student:

> Professor Jane Doe was my psychology professor for two, maybe three classes.
>
> She was also the professor I did study abroad with. That was the start of
>
> international travel and just opening the scope of my eyes to that whole world.
>
> She further encouraged me to say, "you can do this, you can do this."

Dion appeared indifferent when discussing his relationships with professors who

were not African American. He characterized them as available but not particularly

interested in his personal development compared to his relationships with AA professors.

He did not interpret these interactions as racist but rather as transactional relationships. The extracurricular activities and the supportive, meaningful relationships he forged with specific professors at the university played a crucial role in his academic journey. These relationships were instrumental in helping him reach his graduation goals. Dion's active involvement in extracurricular activities kept him engaged on campus, and he relied on various support services, including the financial aid office and counseling office, to thrive in his college experience. He shared his experience with utilizing the counseling support staff:

> I was overwhelmed and kind of felt like days where I didn't like doing it at all. I had a tough semester crossing. I failed for the first time, failed a class, and I was really kind of down on it. I knew there were services that were available, and I found out we were already paying for it, so I was like okay cool. I do feel pledging a fraternity helped me later in life than it did now. It helped me have a release in that moment. Now it's ingrained in my mind to know that is a helpful thing to do ongoing.

Dion credited his graduation to a combination of finding the right resources and connecting with like-minded individuals who provided encouragement and assistance when necessary. For example, to secure grants, he emphasized the importance of being persistent, having ongoing conversations, and ensuring clarity in communication with the financial aid office. Dion believed that the financial resources he received were indeed beneficial. He elaborated on how his determination to achieve his graduation goal was a shared drive among his peers and supporters:

I was passionate about starting. I didn't really think of it as an option to just stop. After my Junior year, I was like yeah, I want to finish. Any pathway to success, whatever that was going to look like, was going to incorporate me having my degree. I think having my fraternity brothers seeing them graduate, you don't want to be left behind.

Summary

This chapter presented the narrative outcomes of the interviews conducted with the successful AA male participants in this study. The interview transcripts were condensed into narrative profiles, which were constructed based on the data uncovered during the analysis process. The study included four willing AA male research participants who courageously shared their perspectives and experiences. They provided insights into their personal backgrounds, academic journeys, and the significance they attached to their experiences. Additionally, they candidly discussed the challenges they encountered during their time at the university and the strategies they employed to effectively navigate the academic and social demands they faced. It is noteworthy that all participants achieved their goal of earning bachelor's degrees in their respective fields. The data collected, analyzed, and synthesized in this chapter remained pertinent to the research questions. The subsequent chapter will delve into the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts.

Chapter V

THEMATIC RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Overview

This basic interpretive study, which involves qualitative research, has allowed me to determine (a) how African American (AA) males interpret experiences, (b) how AA males construct their worlds, and (c) what factors influenced their experiences. Each participant's narrative accounts for their experiences in the following programs: Media Entrepreneurship, Psychology, Pre-Med Psychology, and Interdisciplinary Studies Game Design & Development. This chapter provides results and themes based on shared experiences discovered throughout the data analysis process. Recorded interviews and transcript data served as the predominate means of acquiring data. Throughout this study, I engaged in narrative storytelling to provide an alternative perspective as well as a phenomenological interviewing style to interview four AA male graduates. I asked them to freely discuss their childhood, their academic experiences in the K-12 education system, and their academic experiences as undergraduate students attending a university in Georgia.

Data Analysis

I adopted Seidman's (2006) three-interview series framework to examine the participants' life history, lived experiences, and reflections on the meaning of their experiences. Each interview was 95 minutes on average. Once I gathered my data, I transcribed the data. At the end of all interviews, I documented my findings by writing

memos to capture the data. I compared the participant transcripts, looking for shared traits and disparities throughout the data collection process. Upon the first transcript review, I undertook coding my memos. I drew from Hahn's (2008) Coding of Terms to interpret my data using his pyramid structure as a guide. I used initial coding to understand the data from the participants' transcripts. I cross-checked my codes while reviewing the memos. Table 2 gives an example of codes used to identify similarities and differences in the participants.

Table 2

List of Initial Codes

Code	Code Description
PR	Personal Resilience: Participants' self-reflections, personality development over time, and description sharing of how they overcame challenges to pursue their degree
GS	Goal Setting: Participants' creation of plans, identification of dreams, and execution of goals
PI	Parental Influence: Participants' parental involvement in the household, parental modeling, and how the parents are perceived through the lens of the participants
CI	Community Influence: Teachers K-12, their guidance, interactions, and modeling
GD	Group Dynamic: Participants' group associations, whom they identified as friends, and who supported them during college
GE	Group Experiences: Participants' reflections of experiences with students while attending the university
AS	Academic Support: Participants' reflections of experiences with staff
FS	Faculty Support: Participants' reflections of experiences with faculty

I began consolidating the raw data to create focused coding during the second phase review of the transcripts and memos. I finalized my coding during the third phase

to determine thematic coding, which helped to illustrate relationships. For instance, Personal Resilience (PR) was initially defined as follows: "Participants' self-reflections, personality development over time, and description sharing of how they overcame challenges to pursue their degree." I clustered and categorized the data according to the initial codes listed in Table 2. Themes resulted from the categories. I developed the theme of Personal Resilience because there were several clusters found within the PR-related transcript excerpts that contained passages from all participants. Table 3 summarizes this important process. Examples of words that translated into the theme of Personal Resilience were "hard worker," "focused on my education," "spent most of my time working on my studies," "finish college," "get in, get out," and "make sure I got through the classes."

Table 3

Example of Theme Development

Theme	Response Cluster
Personal Resilience	John: "I don't think its talent; I am a hard worker."
	Lynn: "I focused on my education of becoming an engineer. So, I spent most of my time working on my studies."
	Timothy: "I just wanted to be able to finish college. I made it my plan: get in, get out."
	Dion: "Put my head down and make sure I got through the classes."

This method proved useful when reviewing and interpreting audio files and interview transcripts. To validate my data, I used triangulation and member checking. These findings resulted in four overall themes: Personal Resilience, Parental Influence,

Group Affiliation, and Academic Support. These key themes are discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

<div align="center">Themes</div>

Personal Resilience

In this theme, I examined the academic pursuits of AA males with a focus on their journey toward graduation. My aim was to gain insights into their career interests, the factors motivating those choices, and strategies they employed to overcome obstacles hindering their goal attainment. To comprehend the AA male perspective, it was essential not only to consider the external influences shaping their behaviors but also to delve into their individual identities. To provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the narratives shared by the AA male participants, I incorporated Critical Race Theory (CRT), African American Male Theory (AAMT), and Tinto's Student Departure Theory. These theoretical lenses allowed for a multifaceted analysis of their experiences.

The data revealed a common thread among the participants, demonstrating their use of personal resilience to surmount challenges on their educational journeys. During their formative years, all four African American male participants encountered personal adversities. Drawing from Tinto's Student Departure Theory, they acknowledged the influence of their unique characteristics, including academic preparedness, socioeconomic background, and personal attributes, as motivating factors in their pursuit of higher education. For instance, John's early diagnosis of bacterial meningitis, resulting from contaminated stadium water during middle school marching band practice, led to three brain surgeries and a subsequent speech impediment. This experience significantly

shaped his character and educational aspirations. His involvement in theater, where he improved his speech, inspired a change in his career path, igniting his passion for the entertainment industry. Moreover, Critical Race Theory illuminated the participants' resilience through the lens of intersectionality. Each participant's gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and disabilities contributed to their unique encounters with oppression. Lynn, for instance, faced the responsibility of caring for his mother and sister due to his mother's recurring seizures, stemming from health issues. This role placed immense pressure on him, leading to expressions of anger in school. Timothy's upbringing in a single-parent household with limited financial resources resulted in personal sacrifices and abandonment issues due to the absence of a relationship with his father. Dion, aiming to be the first in his family to attend college, navigated grand expectations and limited role models.

These examples align with the core tenet of the African American Male Theory, emphasizing the resilience exhibited by AA males. Despite the challenges they confronted, these individuals leveraged their self-identity as AA males, drawing strength from their culture, spirituality, and prevailing social conditions to pursue their educational objectives and achieve favorable outcomes.

All four participants understood how education would positively impact their future if they obtained a degree. They all aligned with Astin's (1999) student involvement model. Astin (1999) theorized that student participation in extracurricular activities on campus was a result of several factors: (1) investment of physical and mental effort; (2) involvement requiring a continuous effort; (3) involvement that has both quantitative and qualitative attributes; (4) how they are learning in relation to quality and quantity; and (5)

student involvement will increase only if it has a purpose to align with their studies. Astin (1999) also theorized that student involvement links learning as a physical investment. This investment requires psychological energy.

The participants did not see their obstacles as challenges preventing them from succeeding. They used these situations to develop self-awareness and understand their strengths and weaknesses. John refused to use his diagnosis as a crutch. Instead, he sought ways to improve the obstacle of having a speech impediment by transitioning from playing with the band to performing in theater to working on his speaking. John's experience in the theater gave him direction and clarity on how he wanted to pursue his goals. He shared, "I wanted to learn, I wanted to succeed. I wanted to make art and put art into the world." When John sought to pursue a career in art, he could assess roadblocks and produce ways to pivot just as he had when he was a child. He reflected on his experiences:

> I didn't want to be a high school dropout. My grandmother didn't graduate from high school, so she had to work. So, when she died, my brother and I doubled down on it to finish. We are gonna at least finish high school. Neither one of us ever really wants to drop out. I wanted to be an actor, then I realized Atlanta is becoming a huge film and television center, so I said let me go to college, get a degree in the arts and while I am here, I can really act. It happened. I knew having a degree would put in rooms that I normally wouldn't be able to get into.

When John experienced his trauma as a youth, he took that time to reflect on his life and life goals. During that time, he witnessed his twin brother being reclusive, often

performing poorly in school and lashing out to his parents. At this time, he also witnessed his mother and father's strained relationship, all while feeling pressured to perform as a good twin. John admired his grandmother. He depended on her for moral support throughout his youth, looking up to her as a guide to navigate a broken household. When he lost his grandmother, John's reaction was to place himself in a forward position to achieve results and to complete an education. Education was a task that his grandmother prioritized. For John, completing high school to matriculate to college paid tribute to his grandmother. It paid back all the love she poured on him during his troubled times as a youth and his most challenging time when he endured his trauma.

For Lynn, getting good grades was easy to achieve. He understood he had to make a personal investment to do the work and push through the challenges. He shared the following reflection:

I overcame the challenges by asking questions, sought out counseling, preparing for class before the class and testing my knowledge against my peers to see how I was measuring against my classmates. Working played a significant role, it helped me learn how to manage my time. I knew the struggles of African American people, so I knew in order to be successful I would have to work harder than my counterparts. Being able to push myself and understand, I had to work harder to achieve my goals.

Timothy had a passion for computers as a child. He also had a desire to leave home and experience going to college. He was drawn to the fun, the challenge of classes, and the opportunity to gain more computer experience. Timothy played to his strengths, using strategy to navigate and pursue his degree. His path aligns with Astin's (1999)

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theory of student participation because of the effort made to be actively involved in extracurricular activities. Timothy utilized computer class projects, club participation, and interest-based social circles to learn more as a student. He spent his physical and mental energy on developing his skills with computers. His student involvement reflected his work. He saw the benefits because he was able to produce tangible results through his work projects. He was able to see grade-based results and skills-based improvement by exerting his physical and mental energy working with computers. He made the following statement when he was interviewed:

> I just knew that I needed to work, and I needed to graduate college. So, I definitely tried to find jobs that I could align like my other courses and whatnot. So, when I worked for the technology department I got to learn more about technology, not as much as I hoped, but I was able to use that time working in that department to earn money and I had time to focus on my class work.

Dion did not have a single interest. His interests were vast, and they were based on need, fit, and availability. Dion's continuum was his job, his fraternity, his community service, and his dedication to working on himself, personally seeking help using student support therapy groups. Every year, Dion became engulfed in the university culture to keep his interest fulfilled. He found a sense of belonging in his fraternity, a sense of purpose working with the youth, and an opportunity to engage his competitive nature by running for a place in the homecoming court. For Dion, his efforts align with Astin's (1999) student involvement theory since his involvement transpires along a continuum. He reflected about it during his interview series:

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I had to ask myself these questions. "What do I enjoy doing? Being involved."

And just kind of functioning in my own lane and so I did that. I started - I, you

know, did the whole homecoming thing in terms of running for Homecoming

Court. I did that and I enjoyed it. I like the idea of being able to create my lane. I

was really involved. I was in the ambassador program - like the president of the

university ambassador program. Also doing social things like homecoming. And I

did that a couple years in college and, you know, the fraternity. I definitely

enjoyed and getting the opportunity to be around and understand - hearing people

from diverse backgrounds.

Parental Influence

The AA male participants in this study shared profound insights into the pivotal

role played by their parents and family members in shaping their perspectives on higher

education and personal development. They attributed their desire to pursue college to the

unwavering encouragement, motivation, and unwavering support received from their

parents. Numerous studies spanning several decades have consistently underscored the

positive impact of parental involvement on children's academic performance (Deplanty et

al., 2007; Feuerstein, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). For instance, Toldson et al.'s

research in 2009 corroborated this assertion, demonstrating that social modeling within

the home environment can significantly cultivate children's interest in pursuing higher

education.

The results of this study illuminate the multifaceted factors within African

American families that significantly contribute to the development of these young men.

Elements such as family structure, sibling placement, cultural heritage, family legacies,

economic status, and spiritual beliefs all emerged as influential forces in the participants'

journeys. Notably, the participants identified that their families' cultural and spiritual

values were intrinsically linked to their choices regarding college and career paths. These

familial connections played a pivotal role in nurturing their critical consciousness

concerning long-term aspirations and future endeavors. Within the familial context,

education was a recurring and emphasized topic of discussion, with all parents expressing

a fervent desire for their children to attain a better life through education. Education was

not just encouraged but positioned as a top priority. Going to college was a central goal

for all participants, driven by the conviction that it represented both a pathway to upward

social mobility and a strategic investment in their future. This collective perspective

underscores the profound impact of family support and the multifaceted motivations

driving these participants toward higher education. It illuminates their recognition of

college not merely as an educational pursuit but to enhance their lives and contribute to

their future success.

John's relationship with his mother, father, and grandmother proved influential

when he was considering the college path. Both parents were extraordinarily successful.

John grew up in an upper-middle-class background with a rich cultural heritage. John, as

a descendant of a famous educator, was born into a family with a rich legacy of education

and professional achievement. John noted that his encouragement from his parents came

in diverse ways. John saw his parents as "heroes." His dad was his best friend. In John's

eyes, his success came from the lessons his father taught him. When asked what the most

impactful advice was, he shared this memory: "My father used to say to me 'everybody's

got a sob story, how are you gonna overcome yours?'"

Furthermore, researchers found that if the parents believe their children will be high academic achievers, the children will in return share that same belief about themselves (Hughes et al., 2006). Coles (2006) stated that 90% of African American families provide powerful support to their children through their emotional connection. John's mother and grandmother had the largest influence, and both were direct in their intentions concerning John's pursuit of a college degree. John shared his mother's and grandmother's approaches when he stated the following: "My mother was like you're going to college. My grandmother was a champion too. It was always you're going to college; it was the norm. My mother influenced me."

An AA male's escalation of academic achievement is influenced by his social environment and cultural experiences. As a result, the AA male's identity is defined by the school's culture and his home environment (Cuyjet, 2006; Whiting & Carter, 2006). For instance, Timothy grew up watching his mother hold multiple jobs and make several career changes before pursuing her college degree. Timothy recalled days of doing his homework on his mother's laptop and sharing internet time to complete his work. After he was done, he watched her complete her college homework. Coming from public housing, he witnessed his mother set educational goals and achieve them while he was pursuing his K-12 education. Timothy had a unique perspective growing up. He witnessed his mother's journey as a part-time college student, which left a lasting impact on him. Observing her dedication and determination, he was inspired to consider attending her alma mater. In their household, the pursuit of a college degree was not just a priority, but a value instilled deeply by his mother. Reflecting on this, Timothy shared his realization:

Education was important, especially for my mom. Definitely bringing home good

grades was like number one. I was definitely afraid to tell her if I did get a bad

grade or something. She was in college while I was around, and I remember going

to college with her. So, I guess, I just felt like oh, that's the thing I should be

doing. … It was kind of expected because she also kind of expected it. She was

like yeah after high school, you go to college and then from there you need to be

XYZ. My mom was definitely like …You need to get your education so you can

do something big.

Growing up in a single-parent household, Lynn's mother did not have a college

degree. By watching his mother's journey and taking on different jobs to make a living,

Lynn gained more clarity on the importance of pursuing a degree. Education was

important in his household. His mother constantly encouraged him to pursue a degree to

have a career path that he enjoyed, but she also supported the idea of him joining the

military or learning a trade. He candidly remarked about her support:

She taught us everything we know. I know I can go to her for advice or anything I

need. I know she always will have my best interest at heart. I feel like my mother

definitely wanted me to go to college. There was definitely a push there, but she

would have supported me in any direction that I wanted to go. But there was

definitely a push for me to go to college … Since she didn't go to college, she

wanted us to pursue an education.

Hatchett and Jackson (1993) noted that African American families have a record

of creating bonds through parental involvement in school activities, often providing

physical and emotional support for their children. This research supports this study's

findings because all four participants' parental involvement situations impacted their academic achievement. Dion recalled that his mother's influence in the school PTA helped him create better relationships with his teachers in K-12. He spoke about her dedication to his studies, showing up to assist with field trips, school fundraisers, and school sports. Dion's father did not hold a college degree, but his mother did. Dion was influenced by his extended family as well. It was not a pressured conversation when he spoke with his aunts and witnessed his cousins attend college. His experience discussing college with them was subtle. When asked about the way college was talked about in his household, Dion provided the following statement:

> It was - not necessarily you have to go to college. It was more so a thing of - ok, that's the next step, right? They definitely supported it, but it wasn't them saying you have to go to college. You better go to college. I mean, it was something that was discussed, but it wasn't like if you don't do this, you're a failure … And my family asking, "what do you want to do?" And you know … having that conversation of, "what does it take?" They were incredibly supportive …We spoke about, naturally, the next step. I knew my mom had graduated from college. I knew my aunts had graduated from college. I knew my immediate family - even outside of immediate. So, they didn't have a traditional collegiate experience, but I knew I wanted a more traditional experience.

Group Affiliation

For AA males, early engagement in extracurricular activities upon starting their studies has been shown to significantly enhance their chances of academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Simmons, 2013). Active participation in extracurricular

pursuits not only allows AA males to maintain a strong connection to their cultural roots but also fosters a sense of social inclusivity on campus (Simmons, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008). It is important to note that feelings of not fully assimilating into the school culture have been a contributing factor to the challenges faced by some AA males, which, in turn, can negatively impact their ability and motivation to persist in college (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) further posited that the underrepresentation of AA males in higher education could exacerbate feelings of isolation both within the classroom and across the campus. In this interpretive study, all four of our research participants linked their increased involvement on campus and the expansion of their social networks to improved retention rates at a university in Georgia. When John was asked about his experiences within his social network, he articulated the following statement:

> There is an African proverb, if you want to go fast go alone, if you want to far go together. You have to surround yourself with a community that is invested in you and then you have to give it back. Someone will do XYZ for you and you have to do 123 for them.

John, Timothy, Lynn, and Dion cultivated relationships with their peers, but each acknowledged that their strongest connections were formed with other AA males. These relationships proved pivotal to their success in college. Having peers who shared similar interests, attended the same classes, or hailed from comparable backgrounds provided these participants with a safe space to evaluate their academic progress and strategize for overcoming systemic barriers encountered as AA males. Each of them adopted a distinct strategy for nurturing these connections. John aligned himself with "like-minded professionals" who shared his ambitions and interests, believing that his network would

reflect his future net worth. Engaging in activities such as podcasting, stage playwriting, and collaborative projects within his department, he worked diligently to support his mentor, a faculty member. John served as a marketing intern, assisted with his mentor's radio show, managed the mentor's social media presence, and undertook various tasks to strengthen their relationship. In John's view, he was "a rainbow fish seeking other rainbow fish in a sea of tuna."

Lynn encountered challenges assimilating into the university's culture and sought participation in campus activities to integrate into the campus community. He naturally gravitated toward other AA males who shared common experiences and perspectives. He attributed his success to these relationships, stating, "Seeing them progress and pursue their degrees provided me with a supportive village that understood the challenges I faced." Timothy, on the other hand, actively sought out other AA males but recognized the limited presence of AA males in his department. Consequently, his approach mirrored John's, involving the identification of peers with shared interests and collaborative engagement in projects that captured his enthusiasm. Timothy described his experience with these peers, highlighting the following:

I definitely tried to find people that share the same interests as me in and outside of class. Whether that be like clubs or whatnot or just people were around the same areas that I was in a lot. I would try to connect with them, you know, collaborate. Whether it be on certain projects inside or outside of class. Just more like talking, hang out and whatnot.

Dion faced challenges in establishing friendships, primarily because of his introverted personality, which inclined him towards solitude. Upon entering the

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university as a first-year student, he lacked a defined set of interests. Although Dion possessed a curiosity about the opportunities for involvement in campus life, he grappled with uncertainty regarding where and how to initiate his journey. He candidly expressed his apprehensions about finding his place within the university's culture, and this unease even led him to contemplate leaving the university in favor of attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). In his own words, he provided the following context:

> Finding a place. And I say, find a place in that – where do I belong? And a friend group. And how to maneuver from the aspect of – not the work aspect of the college, but more so the – maybe some of the social aspects. Yeah so, to a certain extent. There were some things, but there were sometimes where it was just like I felt – very I feel different than, you know, some of other guys. Because it will be like – you know, the first-year people turned into party promoters. It got kind of played out and I was like "Ok." But a lot of people are doing it…. Or people were like really hard gamers, and I wasn't really into that either… And so, yeah, then you had the people that was really, really scholastic, and I wasn't necessarily that either…. You know, so it was like, "where do I fit in?"

Dion's narrative lends support to the assertions made by Brooks et al. (2013) and various other researchers who advocate for state-sponsored student programs with a specific focus on AA males as the most effective means of retention. Among the research participants, Dion stood as the sole individual to become a member of a fraternity. However, all of them regarded their relationships with fellow AA males as enduring brotherhoods when compared to their associations with non-minority peers.

During his sophomore and junior years, Dion took the step of joining one of the university's AA male initiatives and subsequently pledged to the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. When asked about his choice of this fraternity, he shared the following perspective:

Because for a while I wanted an older brother. So, I kind of saw them and they ended up being Alphas. It just so happened those people who were taking interest ended up being Alphas. But I saw them as like, ok cool, older brothers. They were taking an interest in my success and kind of helping me through the matriculation of college. For some – in some sessions – with some relationships that was the case. But in other relationships, it was like ok, this person is doing well – seems to be doing well. Like one of my pyrophytes, they were about to do an internship on Wall Street. And I just was like oh wow, they're doing a lot of wonderful things…. And just started talking to him more and more. And he ended up kind of just taking me under his wing and just, you know, helping out.

Anumba (2015) stated it is an institution's responsibility to provide support for minorities, offering assistance for cultural beliefs and practices. She advised teachers, professors, and administrators to create an atmosphere of inclusivity, offering opportunities for students to connect with similar backgrounds, to network, and to fellowship with one another. She concluded that the amount of connection opportunities for AA males has a direct, positive impact on their college experience. Dion stated that being placed in learning communities that were specifically grouped with other AA males offered a network support system. This system proved essential to navigating the campus, resources, and academic rigor. These learning communities were designed to orient

students to dorm life, student life, and university culture. They were also created to support students who needed academic support through peer-to-peer guidance. This resulted in both research participants forming bonds with other AA males.

The findings from this study are further supported by studies from Morrison and Silverman (2012), and Tinto (1993). They stated that social integration increases persistence in degree completion. For instance, Dion described his experience participating in a learning community:

> My freshman learning community was all Black men. So we were, all you know, first time, you know, traditional, incoming students – incoming first-year student and all Black men across. I think it was like 20 of us. We all stayed in the same dorm and on the same floor. So, and we all took – at least that first semester – we all took the same classes pretty much. So, that was good. It was a great experience and that I wish I had – I wish we probably could have spent – you know – I like the community aspect and that aspect of what we experienced that first semester. I probably would have been cool if it was stretched out a little bit more and also if maybe there were a few more people that I had some more in common with. But, you know, I enjoyed the experience all as a whole.

Timothy did not belong to an exclusively African American (AA) male cohort, as Dion did. Nevertheless, he emphasized the value of this experience in contributing to his success, primarily because it fostered the sense of community, he found essential during his university tenure. When asked to elaborate on his experience, he articulated the following thoughts:

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I guess probably my freshman learning community really helped. Yes, yes, the

freshmen learning community. So, the interesting thing about my freshman

learning community was. As it was – since my major was Interdisciplinary

Studies with a focus in game design development – the IDS was comprised of a

whole bunch of other majors including like global studies, political issues, and

stuff like that. I had fun with them. We had shared a lot of interests. It was easy to

talk to them. And we just pretty much became a pretty good friend group. We all

enjoyed each other's time.

Tolliver and Miller (2018) support the findings in this study when they state that

(a) students must surround themselves with individuals who have lofty expectations for

them and (b) social networks are very personal and individualized. All four participants

were motivated through learning communities, departmental peer groups, and a collective

group of faculty members within their degree program who developed them, uplifted

them, and made them better students for improved retention.

Academic Support

African American (AA) males have encountered racism and discrimination,

factors that have manifested as early educational challenges leading to diminished

academic performance (Fredrick & Eccles, 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Notably,

Garibaldi's research in 2007 found that AA males exhibited early academic struggles,

often resulting in expulsions, suspensions, and a higher likelihood of being placed in

special education programs. While these findings underscore the influence of racism and

discrimination as formidable hurdles for AA males, the interviews conducted in this

study uncovered a nuanced perspective. They revealed that these challenges did not

inevitably translate into low academic performance or a dearth of support. Interestingly, all four participants expressed a sense of being well-supported throughout their K-12 educational journeys. Timothy, Lynn, and Dion pursued advanced coursework, while John, although not enrolled in advanced classes, consistently maintained above-average grades throughout his high school years. Lynn went on to provide a detailed account of his interactions with his teachers:

> I learned a lot from my track coach. He taught me to keep my head on straight.
> Also, my history teacher, I had a problem with procrastination… He taught me…
> helped me focus a lot more to get things done.

> John received assistance from his theater teacher. He expressed fond gratitude for

the coaching he received from his theater teacher to improve his speech impediment. Timothy detailed his experience of faculty encouraging him to attend college. They saw his interest in computers. As a result, they placed him in classes that played to his strengths, offered participation in field trips, and provided resources on how to apply to college. Dion shared this experience when asked if being an AA male shaped his experience with faculty in high school:

> It would definitely – I would say it shaped it in terms of teachers having their eyes
> on you. To see how you maneuver basically through high school. Some teachers
> were more caring, but it definitely felt like people were watching. I say that
> because – I think that our class, and maybe a couple classes before, were some of
> the first larger influxes of Black students in the school. So, I definitely think that
> the teachers were starting to pay attention more as larger groups of Black men,
> specifically Black men, were at the school.

Furthermore, it became evident that teachers throughout the K-12 educational journey significantly influenced the academic success of all the research participants. Faculty members and academic support services emerged as invaluable resources in their educational trajectories. While K-12 faculty members did not necessarily serve as the primary influencers in shaping their career paths, they functioned as important mentors and resources when needed. All participants expressed gratitude for the diverse experiences they encountered in their classrooms, which contributed to their growth. For instance, Lynn fondly recalled his middle school experience, stating, "In middle school, there were several teachers who truly inspired and motivated me to develop a passion for math and science." The research participants exhibited a level of self-awareness about their interests from an early age, each harboring goals and career aspirations that prominently featured attending college. These aspirations were often rooted in familial influences, and faculty members played a pivotal role in helping them gain clarity on the paths to pursue their educational objectives.

During their tenure at the university, all four research participants actively engaged faculty mentoring and student support services to bolster their academic pursuits. This study aligns with the seven principles of student engagement delineated by Chickering and Gamson (1987): cooperation, engaged learning, student-faculty contact, academic effort towards tasks, faculty feedback, diverse experiences, and lofty expectations. In their experience at the university, all four AA male students directly interacted with faculty, engaged in active learning environments, received timely feedback, and benefited from diverse experiences. They unanimously acknowledged the instrumental role that faculty played in their personal and academic development, often

involving them in projects and extracurricular assignments to nurture their skill sets.

Timothy shared a poignant memory of his interactions with faculty:

> He was the Director of Operations… so I would work with him a lot. Especially
> that last year working as a work-study student, basically helping him set up all of
> our resources for the other students – while learning and doing things with the
> resources that we had myself. But being able to work under him gave me access
> to work on certain projects with a little bit more leniencies being that I work there.
> I was able to use some more of the like higher equipment stuff without much
> issue. Like we even learned about like laser cutting and stuff like that because we
> have like a construction room. So being able to work with him and have him like
> show me certain things around and just being able to have access to certain areas
> was very helpful.

For John, there was a more personal connection. He saw his faculty as mentors.
He used his ability to foster relationships to his advantage. His mentor, a faculty member,
recommended that he transfer to the university. Their relationship had a profound impact
on John's development within the program. John saw his mentor as a father figure. He
connected with his mentor's values and beliefs. He appreciated how the faculty guided
him, offering opportunities to be placed in rooms that allowed him to thrive and
challenge his ideals. He shared his experience with mentors:

> I have had a few of them, of course John Doe that's the cake because he brought
> me here. My relationship with him led to all these good things because I can
> always talk to John Doe about it. I owe a lot to John Doe. Everybody on the
> university department team, they have all had a role in shaping my experience.

They have had a role in everything that I have done. It has only enhanced it. It has been super positive. With John Doe, it has informed me more as a Black male. He taught me lessons I will carry for the rest of my life. He has put me around other Black men who will be truthful to me, and John Doe will be truthful to me like a parent. John Doe taught me how to operate as an African American male. Jane Doe, she showed me kindness as an African American woman. Professor John Doe, who is white, he has been my champion, mentioning my name in rooms that I would not have had access to. I think it comes from me being from a diverse circle where I understand everybody. I know the vernacular that everybody speaks. I proved myself in circles.

Although AA males have underperformed academically when compared to other minority and non-minority students, their level of engagement shows a positive connection to their academic experiences (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Strayhorn, 2012). Based on my observations, both Lynn and Dion were most impacted by student support services in college and relationships with AA faculty. Out of the four AA male participants, Lynn was the only research participant to utilize the Academic Advisement Department for all four years, referring to the department as influential. Lynn found academic support services, such as tutoring, vital to his success. He attributed these resources to helping him navigate his studies. The other research participants viewed academic support services as more transactional. They did not attribute the academic service department to have high value; instead, they each spoke of the financial aid department, the cafeteria dining hall, the cafeteria staff, the janitorial staff in their dorms, and the counseling services as departments that had an impact on their success. The

research participants shared that these staff members were groups of people who provided emotional support. They provided resources that were crucial to their survival, advice in times of need, feedback to get them back on track, or a safe space to be heard when they needed someone to talk to about their lives.

Dion and Lynn were both inspired by the faculty, but they both detailed their relationship with white faculty as more transactional. Both participants attributed their success to their relationships with minority faculty. Lynn shared the following experience with white faculty:

My organic chemistry professor and all of my psychology professors did provide assistance, but I was never taken under their wing because I guess I never really showed I was invested. But they did give me resources for events or opportunities.

Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) posited that previous retention models had placed disproportionate emphasis on social factors that contributed minimally to a student's overall college experience. They contended that student attrition from college was predominantly attributable to academic challenges, while the commencement and successful completion of graduation were contingent upon a student's dedication to the university. The findings of this study corroborate this theory. Through their engagement with AA professors, both Lynn and Dion had the opportunity to witness minority faculty members exemplifying a profound commitment to the university and a genuine dedication to their personal development. These relationships with minority faculty emerged as pivotal factors in their academic progress. Both participants emphasized that AA professors created an environment where they felt secure and understood,

transcending the transactional nature of some academic interactions. Lynn and Dion offered enthusiastic accounts of their connections with faculty, highlighting how these professors expanded their horizons by exposing them to new career prospects. Lynn shared a reflective perspective on his favorite minority professor:

> I was supported by an African American Studies professor; he always had his door open. He gave us the heads up of how operated. He would give me resources and help me improve my writing style. It would definitely be that professor; I was better because of him. Because he was an African American male and there weren't that many teaching there, he taught us that if we wanted to make a change, we had to be the ones to make it happen. You have to pull yourself up by the bootstraps, you have to go for what you want and not just talk about it but be about it.

<p align="center">Findings and Context</p>

Research Question 1

> R1: What were the life and academic career experiences of African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

The AA males in this study shared several commonalities, particularly in their religious and spiritual belief systems. They all had strong family orientations and possessed a deep understanding of their ancestry and culture. Despite these commonalities, they also had unique experiences and backgrounds that influenced their journeys. All four AA males encountered systemic barriers and experienced some form of microaggressions during their childhoods. They grew up in racially mixed neighborhoods

<p align="center">114</p>

that ranged from upper-middle-class to lower-middle-class. While John and Dion both

grew up in households with both parents present, their reflections on their experiences

differed. John held his mother and father in high regard but credited his grandmother as

the primary caregiver who had the most significant impact throughout his life. He

explained, "My grandmother really raised us. She was picking us up from school, feeding

us, getting us to events, disciplining us while my mother and father worked."

On the other hand, Dion perceived his parents as being more involved in his

upbringing. He described his family as "middle class," with his mother actively

participating in parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, and other related activities.

His father played the role of the disciplinarian in the family. In terms of socioeconomic

background, John was raised in an upper-middle-class environment, enjoying financial

privilege and recognition as a descendant of a famous educator. In contrast, Dion grew up

in a lower-middle-class household, leading a more modest lifestyle.

Religion played an essential role in the lives of the participants, with both John's

mother and Dion's father serving as pastors in their respective churches. The participants

attributed their religious upbringing as having a major influence on their values and

moral compasses. They were actively involved in their churches and expressed a

commitment to continuing the tradition of raising their future children as Christians.

Timothy and Lynn, in contrast, were raised in single-parent households, with their

mothers as their primary caregivers. Lynn witnessed the tumultuous on-and-off

relationship between his mother and father. His father's abandonment had a profound

impact on him, leading to feelings of volatility. Reflecting on his childhood, Lynn shared

his past experiences:

Almost every day, I got into trouble. Up until about sixth grade, which was my last year being a problem child. I was a bully at school, hitting other kids. I damaged property. I tried to get into a teacher's cabinet, so I remember breaking into it.

Timothy was raised by his mother while living with his grandmother and uncle as a young child. He never knew his father and did not have a relationship with anyone on his father's side of the family. Growing up, Timothy did not ask about his dad or seek a relationship with him. When asked about his father, he reacted differently to his circumstances than Lynn. He shared the following:

I haven't had much interest just to find him. I'm saying that I've had so many other supportive family members, including my mom by my side, who were actually there. It would be something that I probably should seek out myself, but I just felt like he doesn't really try to reach out to me, or at least I haven't known that he's tried to reach out to me. … But I've just been content with me and my mom, I guess.

John, Dion, and Lynn all grew up with siblings, while Timothy was the only child. However, Timothy considered his extended cousins as close as brothers. Each participant had a unique family structure that influenced their upbringing and experiences. John, as a middle child, had a twin brother and a much older half-sister. He described his relationship with his twin as strained, largely due to their parents making them compete against each other for their affection. Lynn, another middle child, had a volatile relationship with his older sister and recalled constant fighting throughout their childhood. He felt closer to his friends than his siblings. Dion, as the older brother in his

family, often resented his younger sister, who received preferential treatment as the baby of the family. He faced challenges trying to meet the expectations associated with being the older son, while his sister received more leniency and lavish gifts.

Regarding their parents' academic achievements, there was variation among the participants. John's mother and father both held advanced degrees. In contrast, Lynn's mother did not attend college, and Timothy's mother pursued higher education later in life while working professionally. Dion's father did not have a degree, but his mother earned one later in her career. The participants' parents and extended relatives emphasized the importance of attending college and obtaining a degree, which had a positive impact on their academic performance in K–12 institutions. They all enjoyed extracurricular activities that required critical thinking and group collaboration. Each participant described themselves as curious, open, and comfortable exploring their potential in the classroom.

In high school, all participants began to shape their career goals, identified their desired universities, and selected their majors. For example, John initially aimed to become a lawyer, participating in mock trials in high school. However, his involvement in the performing arts redirected his career aspirations towards pursuing a degree in the arts. He initially attended one university to obtain a degree in film and television but later transferred to another university to pursue a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in Media Entrepreneurship, following his mentor's recommendation. This transfer presented its own set of challenges for John:

A lot of the academic systems were new. It took me a while to take the reins on it. There were different buildings to get different things done as compared to

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University X. All the buildings are spread out. My previous college was not complicated. It was draining. I had to relearn things that I should have learned as a freshman.

Lynn was focused on becoming an engineer. He worked hard to excel in his high school studies, hoping to one day make his mother proud. Nearing high school graduation, Lynn researched scholarships. He decided to stay in-state to qualify for the HOPE Scholarship. After receiving rejections from his first two choices, he elected to attend his third-choice school. Having abandoned the idea of becoming an engineer, Lynn did not initially declare a major; however, he soon opted to pursue Nursing before changing his major to Psychology.

As a child, Timothy knew he wanted to pursue a computer career. He would experiment with music and graphic design throughout his childhood. Although his passion grew, he faced the burden of lacking the financial resources to pursue it. Timothy shared the following memory:

> I used to want to be a computer science major because I loved technology … but I didn't feel I had the resources to do it. There was one computer in our household, and that was my mom's that she would use for work. I didn't have access to the computer I could work on, play games, or go online. It forced me to move toward music and playing the trumpet and just being good at that and doing good in class.

Goal-based college decisions came easy to Timothy. His mother, family, and friends encouraged him to attend college to pursue his dreams of a career in Game Design, and his teachers took him on field trips focused on his music passion. He

obtained an industry certification in graphic design. Attending the university was also

Timothy's third choice, as he explained:

> I chose University X for myself. I knew I had a few friends that would be there. I
>
> liked where the location was, but I chose it so I could do everything I wanted to
>
> do. I applied for music and got into the music program. Once I got to orientation, I
>
> found out I could switch programs, and I was still interested in computer science.
>
> So, I heard about computer science in the brand-new major [in] game design. It
>
> was great because I was able to encompass graphic design, music, and computer
>
> science all into one major.

Going to college made sense for Dion's career goals. He was excited about

attending college because he anticipated the fun he would have. His expectations were

based on what his friends shared and what he saw on television. When selecting a

college, Dion narrowed his search based on tuition cost, as his parents did not have much

money for him to attend college. Dion matriculated into the university and chose to major

in Psychology. He liked the location after touring the campus and appreciated the

diversity.

Moreover, all participants were determined to complete their degrees. John's

transition was slightly less of an adjustment because he was a transfer student. Also, John

had a faculty mentor, providing insight into the program before he attended. He took

advantage of the strong relationship with his mentor to gain access to other faculty

members. Navigating the campus was also familiar to John because his family had made

several trips to Georgia, throughout his youth and spent time around the campus. His

family history of being a descendant of a famous educator drew attention from other

faculty members, giving him more access to different colleges within the university. During John's time at the university, faculty members encouraged him to work on various projects, and John's popularity among the faculty made him highly popular on campus. His project work increased his notoriety, and John became more selective in his senior year about whom he cultivated relationships with over time and what projects to complete. He shared this perspective:

I found faculty aligning with my work goals. They contributed to my success in my matriculation. Faculty gets to see what I am doing; they see it and want to add on to it. If I do good, it puts me in rooms and places where I can further succeed. It definitely makes it harder to complete classes, but it is well worth it.

Lynn had a different approach to his university experience compared to the other participants. He lived off-campus and worked part-time at an entertainment venue. For Lynn, attending the university had a transactional perspective; his primary focus was on completing classes and assignments rather than actively building relationships and participating in campus activities. This approach contrasted with the other participants' campus experiences. Unlike the other participants, Lynn did not live on campus or engage in extracurricular activities such as fraternities, sports, or clubs. Instead, he utilized campus resources like tutoring to support his academic progress and relied on peer support from coworkers who also attended the university.

Tinto (1993) argued that higher education institutions function as socializing organizations that can influence individuals' values, personality needs, and social roles or identities. As first-year students, both Timothy and Dion were placed in learning communities with other AA males. These learning communities offered general

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education classes on a set schedule, facilitating connections and bonds among students. However, after their first year, both Timothy and Dion found it challenging to connect with other AA males and make friends within this context. In response, they shifted their focus toward pursuing passion projects and surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals. Timothy began working on projects related to his major, and he shared his experiences with me:

> I helped to do the graphics for the Esports tournament that University X holds twice a year, in the fall and in the spring. I volunteered to help them make new t-shirts … then as the semesters went on, I helped more, doing splash screens and other graphics.

Timothy immersed himself in the university's culture by participating in extracurricular activities. Dion pursued community service activities, joining the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity with his best friend from high school. He was active on campus, serving as a member of the X organization and an ambassador on the President's Student Council. He also worked as a student executive assistant in the President's Office. Timothy and Dion used their relationships with faculty and active participation in extracurricular activities to reach their educational goals.

All four AA male participants had positive life and academic experiences. Despite facing challenges, each of the AA male participants demonstrated personal growth and a refined perspective on life goals and priorities. They all grew up in nurturing environments surrounded by family, friends, and dedicated teachers throughout their academic journeys. These influential figures played a significant role in shaping their religious beliefs, career aspirations, and core values. Education held immense value for

all four participants, instilled both by their families and exemplified in the classroom. While they encountered challenges and were pushed academically, they consistently felt supported, valued, and received equitable opportunities to excel and achieve their educational goals.

Research Question 2

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

All four participants struggled to assimilate into the campus culture, meet classroom expectations, and develop relationships with non-minority faculty when first attending the university. Coming from another university, John found the change challenging. He explained the challenges he faced:

A lot of the academic systems were new. It took me a while to take the reins on it. There were different buildings to get different things done as compared to University X. All the buildings are spread out. My previous college was not complicated. It was draining. I had to relearn things that I should have learned as a freshman.

For Lynn, adjusting to using class tools was a challenge. He knew he had to work extremely hard to achieve his goals. He reflected on his experiences:

Originally, I did have a problem with checking our student announcement board. I rarely used a laptop, so it was a learning curve to constantly check announcements for your classes and student life. The way the campus was set up, you had to know where certain places are. You had to weave through streets to access certain classes. Some of the places didn't even have a sign to notify you where to go.

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Navigating the campus was a challenge. Learning and not getting spoon-fed, that no one is there to hold your hand, and that you are being treated like everyone else. In high school, I was offered more assistance. Here at University X, you must think for yourself and do for yourself. I knew the struggles of African American people, so I knew in order to be successful, I would have to work harder than my counterparts. Being able to push myself and understand, I had to work harder to achieve my goals.

Timothy also struggled to stay on schedule with his classes. Managing his classes proved especially difficult for him. He admitted this during his interview series:

There are definitely tough classes. I guess one of my biggest issues... I guess overall was procrastination in terms of getting one project in when I had, like, another project that I really needed to do that was more important.

For Dion, college culture was the challenge. He struggled to find his place among the other students, and being active in the learning community did not produce a connection with his peers. He had problems finding common interests, often questioning his identity and whether University X was the best place to pursue his degree. He identified his challenge as follows:

Finding a place. And I say, find a place in that—where do I belong? And a friend group. And how to maneuver from the aspect of—not the work aspect of the college, but more so the—maybe some of the social aspects.…There were sometimes where it was just like I felt—very I feel different than, you know, some of the other guys. Because it will be like—you know, freshman year, people turned into party promoters. It got kind of played out, and I was like… "ok." But

a lot of people are doing it. Or people were, like, really hard gamers, and I wasn't really into that either. And so, yeah, then you had the people that were really, really scholastic, and I wasn't necessarily that either. You know, so it was like.. "Where do I fit in?"

While attending the university, all four AA male participants used faculty mentoring and student support services to assist them with their studies. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified seven principles of student engagement: student–faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, academic effort or time on task, prompt feedback to students, lofty expectations, and diversity experiences. Two of the participants noted there was a lack of AA faculty representation in their programs. All participants sought out relationships with AA faculty, often having to find mentoring from AA faculty who were not in their programs. Lynn shared his experience with an AA faculty member:

> I was supported by an African American Studies professor; he always had his door open. He gave us the heads up of how University X operated. He would give me resources and help me improve my writing style. I was better because of him. Because he was an African American male and there wasn't [*sic*] that many teachers there, he taught us that if we wanted to make a change, we had to be the ones to make it happen. You must pull yourself up by the bootstraps. You must go for what you want and not just talk about it but be about it.

All four AA male participants had interactions with AA faculty members while completing their courses. John had a close relationship with his mentor, who was also an

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AA male faculty member in his degree program throughout his time at the university. He reflected on his relationship with his AA mentor:

> My relationship with John Doe takes the cake. He brought me in here. My relationship with John Doe led to all these good things, even if he didn't have direct involvement. … I can always go talk to John Doe about things. Like, is this a good decision? Is this a bad decision? John Doe is one of my greatest champions, and I owe a lot to John Doe.

Dion and Lynn both indicated that their interactions with non-minority professors had a limited impact on their journey toward graduation. They did not report experiencing microaggressions in the classroom by faculty or by classmates. They felt faculty and classmates treated them fairly and equally. However, their relationships with non-minority faculty members were described as more transactional in nature. Dion elaborated on his experiences with non-minority faculty, expressing that these relationships did not develop naturally. Here are his thoughts in more detail:

> I definitely had to go get it if you will. And I say "go get it" in terms of meeting with them. Building the relationship. It wasn't just, "I see you, and I know you're going to— … I see potential in you" kind of thing. It wasn't … just like that. It was, "ok, I'm gonna sit at the front of the class or toward the front of the classroom."

Dion expressed that he noticed a difference in the way he was treated by his African American (AA) faculty members. He observed that AA faculty members displayed a greater level of interest in his scholarly development. Dion shared a positive experience he had with one of his AA faculty members:

Jane Doe, she was my psychology professor for two, maybe three classes. She was also the professor I did study abroad with. That was the start of international travel and just opening the scope of my eyes to that whole world. She further encouraged me to say, "you can do this, you can do this."

Throughout their academic journey, all four AA male participants encountered numerous barriers, each demanding their perseverance and adaptation. When all four AA male participants initially enrolled at the university, they embarked on their academic journeys with a sense of uncertainty. They grappled with questions about what to expect in terms of university culture, how to assimilate into this new academic environment, and what was specifically expected of them as scholars pursuing their degrees. Navigating this unfamiliar territory as new students proved to be a significant challenge, one that required a process of trial and error.

Over time, as they familiarized themselves with the university's norms and cultural intricacies, they gradually adapted to these conventions, particularly within the classroom setting. However, establishing meaningful relationships with non-minority faculty members presented another obstacle. Often, these relationships were not cultivated mutually, and the participants had to navigate this dynamic with care. It's noteworthy that all four participants highlighted the crucial role played by their advocates. These advocates were predominantly either African American (AA) faculty members who took a personal stake in their academic development or non-minority faculty who recognized and utilized the participants' unique skills and talents for their mutual advancement.

      R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed

their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

      According to African American Male Theory, African culture, consciousness, and

biology have a continuity and continuation that influence the experiences of AA boys and

men (Bush & Bush, 2013). The AAMT posits that AA males are born with an innate

desire for self-determination and an unlimited capacity for morality and intelligence. For

instance, John graduated in May 2022. He attributed his success to having an arduous

work ethic and people skills. When asked what pushed him to finish his degree, he shared

the following perspective:

> To be able to go and create and do what I want to do on my own terms. Not
>
> achieving my goals is my fear. I want to set myself up the best way I can, and a
>
> degree will only help. It is important to my mother; I am already in it, and I might
>
> as well finish it.

      Lynn was motivated by his professors, friends, and academic support staff. He

utilized them for resources, direction, guidance, and support while also using them as a

sounding board. Lynn succeeded through demanding work and preparation, priding

himself on his communication skills. He concluded our interview with this reflection:

> Here at University X, you have to think for yourself and do for yourself. I
>
> overcame challenges by asking questions, seeking out counseling, preparing for
>
> class before class, testing my knowledge against my peers to see how I was
>
> measuring against my classmates. Working played an influential role; it helped
>
> me learn how to manage my time. I knew the struggles of African American

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people, so I knew that in order to be successful, I would have to work harder than my counterparts.

Timothy graduated with honors. He felt the arduous work was worth it. When asked how he could navigate his studies while maintaining a high-grade point average, he shared his motivation to complete his degree:

> I just wanted more. I wanted to design. I wanted to get a design job. I wanted to do something I was going to enjoy for the rest of my life. And if that meant going to college, well, I felt like I needed to go to college. But in hindsight, I guess I don't really have to, especially knowing now that there's so much stuff online. But I did feel like if I went to college, I would have some sort of structure in how I can learn what I want to do and more so like the connections that I can make for what I want to do something like that. For the most part, it's definitely worth it. College may not get great on its own, but it just opens a lot more doors that you might not even have seen or have expected by not going at all.

Dion attributed graduating to finding the right resources and connecting with like-minded people who encouraged him and helped when needed. He had a significant drive to complete the goal. He candidly shared his thoughts and feelings about his degree experience:

> I was passionate about starting. I didn't really think of it as an option to just stop. After my junior year, I was like, yeah, I want to finish. Any pathway to success, whatever that was going to look like, was going to incorporate me having my degree. I think having my fraternity brothers, seeing them graduate—you don't want to be left behind.

All four participants demonstrated remarkable personal resilience, allowing them to overcome various challenging obstacles and achieve commendable results in their academic journeys. Their determination and drive were evident as they navigated their paths to success. One common thread among these participants was their strategic approach to achieving their goals. They leveraged the academic resources available on campus, recognizing the value of these tools. These resources became instrumental in their academic pursuits, empowering them to excel in their classes and participating in extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the participants actively utilized support services offered by the institution. These services played a vital role in helping them navigate the complexities of academia and enhance their overall campus experience. Seeking guidance from faculty members, whether in the form of mentorship or academic assistance, was a cornerstone of their approach. This collaboration with educators not only enriched their academic performance but also fostered meaningful connections within the academic community.

In addition to seeking guidance from faculty, the participants found solace and encouragement from their peers. Their peer groups served as pillars of emotional and social support, enabling them to stay focused on their studies. These fellow students offered companionship that often served as a valuable measuring tool for gauging individual progress. Moreover, these peer relationships extended beyond academics, evolving into enduring connections that would persist long after they completed their degrees. The overarching strategy adopted by the AA males was a multifaceted one. It encompassed the utilization of campus resources, reliance on peer groups and faculty for unwavering support, and the effective deployment of their existing talents and skills to

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propel themselves toward the goal of graduation. The AA male collective experiences

serve as a testament to the transformative power of resilience, resourcefulness, and a

powerful sense of community in achieving academic success.

Summary

    The thematic results and discussions presented in this chapter were derived from

data collected in my basic interpretive study. To investigate the strategies, institutional

factors contributing to the academic success of AA males, I recruited four participants

representing various undergraduate degree programs. My probing aimed to uncover their

academic challenges, utilization of student support services, and the motivational factors

driving their involvement in extracurricular activities. Additionally, I gathered

information regarding their relationships with faculty, university support staff, and

friendships. After data collection, I transcribed the interviews and documented my

findings through written memos. Comparing the transcribed recordings, I sought both

commonalities and differences in the participants' narratives. In analyzing the data

provided by the AA male participants, I employed Critical Race Theory (CRT), African

American Male Theory (AAMT), and Tinto's Student Departure Theory for conceptual

guidance. Furthermore, I drew from Hahn's (2008) Coding of Terms, utilizing his

pyramid structure as a framework to understand the data. To validate my data, I

employed triangulation and member checking. The analytical process culminated in the

identification of four overarching themes: Personal Resilience, Parental Influence, Group

Affiliation, and Academic Support.

    The first theme, "Personal Resilience," delved into the AA males' relentless

pursuit of academic matriculation. The data illustrated that each participant harnessed

personal resilience as a formidable tool to surmount obstacles obstructing their educational goals. Despite facing various personal challenges during their formative years, all four participants understood the transformative potential of education and its profound impact on their prospects. The second theme, "Parental Influence," delved into the participants' familial backgrounds, childhood experiences, and adolescence. The findings underscored that the participants attributed their desire to pursue higher education to their parents' unwavering encouragement, motivation, and support.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the significance of their family's cultural and spiritual values as influential factors guiding decisions regarding future endeavors, long-term goals, career choices, college majors, and university selections. Education emerged as a paramount priority within their families, serving as a crucial vehicle for achieving their aspirations. The pursuit of a college education loomed large for all AA male participants, who viewed it as an avenue for both self-improvement and upward social mobility.

The third theme, "Group Affiliation," emphasized the pivotal role of campus involvement and social networks in the university retention of all four AA male participants. While they maintained relationships with their peers, each participant acknowledged forging stronger bonds with other AA males. Their individual strategies for cultivating diverse peer relationships varied. The fourth and final theme, "Academic Support," illuminated the profound influence of teachers during the K-12 school years on the academic success of the research participants. Family played a pivotal role in shaping their life goals, college decisions, and career aspirations. While K-12 faculty did not necessarily direct their career trajectories, they served as valuable resources and mentors

when needed. The participants expressed appreciation for the broad range of experiences, awareness, and support they encountered throughout their educational journeys, both in K-12 and at the university level. They benefited from direct faculty engagement, active learning environments, timely feedback, and diverse experiences during their university tenure. All four AA male participants unanimously attested to the indispensable role of faculty members in their personal and academic development, ultimately contributing to their graduation.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSIONS, INTERPRETATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

In this chapter, I will address my findings, address the research questions, outline limitations, and provide recommendations for future studies. The core focus of this study was to identify the obstacles faced and the strategies employed by African American (AA) male students at a specific university in Georgia. To address my research questions, I adopted a qualitative, basic interpretive approach, which was well-suited for exploring and comprehending the unique experiences of successful AA male graduates. The overarching themes that became evident from the data analysis underscored the significance of faculty engagement, peer support, family encouragement, and an active learning community in facilitating their graduation from a university in Georgia.

The following research questions guided this study:

R1. What were the life and academic career experiences of African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

In this basic interpretive study, I examined the strategies, institutional factors, and teaching methods that assisted AA males in achieving degree completion. I used a

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combination of purposeful sampling to select four participants from various degree programs to provide an account of their experiences. In my capacity as the principal researcher, I fulfilled the roles of interviewer, observer, and data analyst. I employed Seidman's (2005) three-interview series to delve into the participants' life histories, lived experiences, and reflections on the meaning of their experiences. The first interview phase offered an opportunity to gain insight into the participants' families, childhood experiences, school experiences, and sense of community. The second interview provided insight into the participants' high school experiences and their relationships with their teachers. The third interview shed light on their experiences.

I engaged in discussions to uncover the AA male participants academic obstacles, their utilization of student support services, and their motivations for participating in extracurricular activities. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, while others were conducted over the phone. All interviews consisted of open-ended, in-depth inquiries to maintain focus for both the AA male participants and me. On average, each interview lasted 95 minutes. After each interview, I transcribed the recordings and wrote memos to document my observations. Throughout the data collection procedure, I compared the interview transcripts to identify similarities and differences. During the preliminary transcript review, I initiated the coding process through memo writing. In the examination of the lives and college experiences of four AA males who graduated, I drew upon Hahn's (2008) coding of terms to analyze my data, utilizing his pyramid structure as a guide. I engaged in initial coding to deconstruct the data from the interviews that were transcribed, and the memos created from the interviews. Subsequently deriving themes from additional codes and categories that emerged from the data.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

In this section I will illustrate how the research questions and themes are aligned. I present the overall research findings for the study.

Overall Research Findings

The four AA male participants in this study grew up in different home environments but had similar experiences and core values. First, the AA male participants all communicated examples of parental influence throughout their childhood, teenage years, and college years. The AA males' parents and family members were critical in shaping their thoughts about college and identifying who they wanted to become. The AA male participants identified their parents' encouragement, motivation, and support as contributing to their desire to attend college and achieve matriculation.

Secondly, all four AA male participants attributed their retention to their campus involvement and social networks. They discussed actively participating in their learning communities, which included assigned cohorts that shared their characteristics and schedules, enabling them to quickly assimilate into the university's culture. They elaborated on how their extracurricular activities had a formative impact on them and provided them with insights to define their career goals. They shared how pursuing their passions in clubs or serving as student ambassadors had given them purpose and motivation to stay on the path to graduation. This finding supports the significance of early engagement in the fabric of campus life for AA males' persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Simmons, 2013). Among this population, campus involvement and social networks provide the social and cultural capital necessary for success on PWI or HBCU campuses (Simmons, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008).

Thirdly, faculty mentoring played a vital role in the participants' success. They noted that elementary, junior high, and high school teachers influenced their academic achievements positively. Faculty members and academic support services proved valuable resources during their university journey. Although K–12 faculty members did not significantly impact the participants' career trajectories, they served as resources or mentors when needed. All participants expressed their appreciation for the diverse experiences they had in their classrooms and the support and guidance they received from their K–12 faculty.

While attending the university, all AA male participants utilized faculty mentoring and student support services to aid them in their studies. They each had direct contact with faculty, engaged in active learning environments, received prompt feedback, and maintained close interactions with faculty and administrators. Some participants gravitated toward AA faculty to expand their mentor network, while others found support from faculty in their specific degree programs. They all emphasized the pivotal role played by faculty in their personal development and academic growth. Faculty members made them better students, and this support was another significant factor contributing to their successful graduation.

Fourth, each AA male participant employed personal resilience to overcome obstacles and achieve their educational goals. All four faced personal challenges during childhood and recognized the positive impact of earning a degree on their future. Instead of viewing obstacles as hindrances to their success, they used these situations to develop self-awareness and understand their strengths and weaknesses. While at the university, they harnessed their talents to surmount challenges because they passionately believed

they could achieve their goals. When confronted with an obstacle, they relied on their network, family, or faculty for assistance in problem-solving, thereby moving closer to their objectives. These challenges were not defined by academic demands, completing assignments, attending classes, or comprehending the material. Rather, they encompassed adapting to the university's culture, determining their career paths, and shaping their identities as AA males.

Overall, the study's findings indicated the importance of developing AA males in the K–12 grades. All four participants had received opportunities to take advanced classes or participate in extracurricular activities that piqued their interest. This development during their childhood was crucial to the development of the confidence to succeed when pursuing a college degree. Based on the study's findings, AA male development is not easily concentrated within one area, such as sports or academics. There is a range of experiences that speak to the individual AA male. Improving AA male graduation rates requires a holistic approach that involves (a) incorporating their culture and uniqueness while providing an atmosphere that challenges them; (b) allowing them room to grow; and (c) encouraging them to become active contributors to their communities and society.

Research Questions Summary

R1: What were the life and academic career experiences of African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

All four AA male participants had positive life and academic experiences. Despite facing challenges, each of the AA male participants demonstrated personal growth and a

refined perspective on life goals and priorities. They all grew up in nurturing environments surrounded by family, friends, and dedicated teachers throughout their academic journeys. These influential figures played a significant role in shaping their religious beliefs, career aspirations, and core values. Education held immense value for all four participants, instilled both by their families and exemplified in the classroom. While they encountered challenges and were pushed academically, they consistently felt supported, valued, and received equitable opportunities to excel and achieve their educational goals.

R2. What barriers, if any, were encountered by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

Throughout their academic journey, all four AA male participants encountered numerous barriers, each demanding their perseverance and adaptation. When all four AA male participants initially enrolled at the university, they embarked on their academic journeys with a sense of uncertainty. They grappled with questions about what to expect in terms of university culture, how to assimilate into this new academic environment, and what was specifically expected of them as scholars pursuing their degrees. Navigating this unfamiliar territory as new students proved to be a significant challenge, one that required a process of trial and error.

Over time, as they familiarized themselves with the university's norms and cultural intricacies, they gradually adapted to these conventions, particularly within the classroom setting. However, establishing meaningful relationships with non-minority faculty members presented another obstacle. Often, these relationships were not cultivated mutually, and the participants had to navigate this dynamic with care. It is

noteworthy that all four participants highlighted the crucial role played by their advocates. These advocates were predominantly either African American (AA) faculty members who took a personal stake in their academic development or non-minority faculty who recognized and utilized the participants' unique skills and talents for their mutual advancement.

R3. What strategies were used by African American male students who completed their degrees at a four-year degree institution in Georgia?

All four participants demonstrated remarkable personal resilience, allowing them to overcome various challenging obstacles and ultimately achieve commendable results in their academic journeys. Their determination and drive were evident as they navigated their paths to success. One common thread among these participants was their strategic approach to achieving their goals. They leveraged the academic resources available on campus, recognizing the value of these tools. These resources became instrumental in their academic pursuits, empowering them to excel in their classes and participating in extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the participants actively utilized support services offered by the institution. These services played a vital role in helping them navigate the complexities of academia and enhance their overall campus experience. Seeking guidance from faculty members, whether in the form of mentorship or academic assistance, was a cornerstone of their approach. This collaboration with educators not only enriched their academic performance but also fostered meaningful connections within the academic community.

In addition to seeking guidance from faculty, the participants found solace and encouragement from their peers. Their peer groups served as pillars of emotional and

social support, enabling them to stay focused on their studies. These fellow students offered companionship that often served as a valuable measuring tool for gauging individual progress. Moreover, these peer relationships extended beyond academics, evolving into enduring connections that would persist long after they completed their degrees. The overarching strategy adopted by the AA males was a multifaceted one. It encompassed the utilization of campus resources, reliance on peer groups and faculty for unwavering support, and the effective deployment of their existing talents and skills to propel themselves toward the goal of graduation. The AA male collective experiences serve as a testament to the transformative power of resilience, resourcefulness, and a keen sense of community in achieving academic success.

Conclusions

I interviewed four AA males who graduated from University X. My aim was to learn about the barriers they faced while attending the selected research site and to understand their strategies to complete their degree requirements. The study yielded four prominent themes: personal resilience, parental influence, group affiliation, and academic support. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, the participants shared common family values deeply rooted in Christianity. These shared values placed family, God, and parental approval at the forefront, serving as motivations for their academic excellence. They fondly remembered and admired those who had invested in their education throughout their elementary, middle, and high school years. They not only identified their career goals but also had clear paths towards achieving their degrees, choosing colleges that aligned with their financial, geographical, or degree program needs.

Furthermore, all AA male participants faced challenges adapting to university culture and meeting the demands of their classes when they first entered the university. While they each took different paths to acclimatize, one common thread was their reliance on peers for emotional support. Their AA male peer groups played a pivotal role in helping them align with the university's culture, track their progress, and navigate the challenges they encountered. Through these bonds with other AA males, they developed self-awareness and grew more confident in navigating life as university students at University X. Faculty mentors were also identified as crucial to their success, often providing a valuable sounding board and accessible guidance for unfamiliar opportunities.

When considering the potential barriers, they might have faced, the participants highlighted four that were particularly relevant to their experiences: (1) adjusting to the campus culture, (2) assimilating to new class schedules, (3) navigating the campus during their initial months, and (4) discovering their voices and passions. It is important to recognize that AA males are not a monolithic group, and assumptions about their identities often stem from institutional biases and systemic barriers rooted in racism. This study underscores the notion that, with the right support and guidance, AA males can effectively manage the demands of rigorous college life, excel, and emerge as esteemed representatives and leaders on campus. All four AA male participants discussed how they ventured beyond their comfort zones and stretched themselves, demonstrating remarkable self-resilience to overcome financial, adaptation, and support challenges and graduate.

Research Implications

African American (AA) males have historically faced significant challenges in higher education due to systemic racism and oppression (Hall, 2017). These racial barriers have diminished AA males' overall college readiness and reduced their chances for success in postsecondary education, resulting in an academic achievement gap between AA males and their White peers (Gardenhire & Cerna, 2016). Noguera (2008) emphasized the urgency of addressing this issue with the following statement:

> We must address this issue with urgency and treat it as an American problem, rather than a problem that only those who directly experience it should be concerned about. The continued failure of so many men not only increases the likelihood that they'll end up in prison, permanently unemployed, or dead at an early age but also risks our society accepting such conditions as normal. As that begins to occur, all of us are endangered (p. 12).

Studying the degree experiences of the AA male cohort could help reduce the risk of exacerbating existing inequities in higher education and the workforce (Nettles, 2018). Although this study's focus was on AA males who have successfully matriculated, the findings have broader implications. Further research could explore whether extending learning communities throughout an AA male's college tenure, not just during the first year, could have a greater impact on academic success. The lack of a sense of belonging contributes to academic and social challenges for some AA males, adversely affecting their ability and desire to remain in college (Strayhorn, 2012). The underrepresentation of AA males in higher education may result in experiences of estrangement, marginalization, and isolation both within and beyond the classroom.

All four AA male participants noted that campus involvement and social networks influenced their decision to remain at the university. John, Timothy, Lynn, and Dion had relationships with their peers, but each admitted to building tighter connections with other AA males, which proved vital to their success in college. Having peers who shared similar interests, took the same classes, or had similar backgrounds provided a safe space to assess their performance in class and measure their progress. Furthermore, AA male peers offered a support system of individuals who understood the systemic barriers that AA males faced as a whole. As the participants entered their junior year, they naturally gravitated toward peers who were also AA males.

African American (AA) males typically have the lowest matriculation rates when compared to other significant subgroups today (Hall, 2017). According to Hall (2017) racism's manifestations are entrenched in the American collective consciousness, manifesting itself through practices and policies within higher education institutions. There is a lack of representation, support structures, and studies that offer insight into the development of AA males beyond their first two years of college. Support is vital throughout AA males' college tenure.

Policy Implications

In this passage, I discuss the policy implications of the study's findings. AA males have the lowest completion rate among all students attending 4-year universities. Two-thirds of these AA male students do not graduate, impacting their economic potential, reducing university resources, and lessening America's capacity to compete on a world stage. This study's narratives could lead to improvements to federal and state higher education initiatives aimed at increasing graduation rates of AA male students.

School administrators and faculty might also use this study to improve student engagement, student retention, and faculty mentoring. Tinto (1993) reported findings like this study, which suggested that higher levels of social integration indicated increased persistence. Students often sustain social integration through faculty interactions, peer interactions, intellectual activities, and social activities (Simmons, 2013). There is an opportunity to increase retention by creating more learning-based communities beyond freshman orientations. All institutions should consider a continuous peer cohort support design that enhances the AA male college campus experience. Group support should include financial literacy awareness, mental health check-ins, and resources that expand the college experience, such as community service, study-abroad opportunities, clubs, or student government. Colleges' AA male support designs should also give the student an AA male faculty mentor. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted that student support services served as a gateway, often bridging the gap in academic achievement and social inclusion for AA males. In addition, AA males who actively participated in the campus social environment during their freshman and sophomore years exhibited a higher likelihood of persisting toward graduation. Support from peer communities and faculty of African American descent could increase social inclusion and offer support when AA males face challenges in matriculating, retention, and graduating.

This study could benefit admissions and recruitment counselors when considering recruitment strategies and orientations for enrolling AA male students. Informing AA males of available communities for learning support could enhance interest and ease AA males' reservations about adjusting to the school's culture. There is an additional opportunity to align existing students or alumni who are also AA male high school

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prospects to offer a connection among peers. AA male students could benefit from this study by learning about successful, evidence-based methods of degree completion. Reading the participants' narratives about their life experiences could offer other AA males' perspective, connectivity to their experiences, common ground, and shared aspirations. These four men's narratives offer insights into overcoming challenges, strategizing to achieve success, and adapting to a university's culture.

Limitations

In this section, I discuss the research limitations and implications of enhancing the AA male college experience to increase matriculation, retention, and graduation. In this basic interpretive qualitative study, I captured the narratives of four AA males from various degree programs to determine which strategies, institutional factors, and teaching methods assisted in their success. Collaborating with the participants, I learned about their childhoods, families, K–12 experiences, and college experiences while attending the selected research site. Drawing on my background as a higher education student service professional and being a first-generation college graduate, I hope this study provides insight to improve matriculation, retention, and graduation rates for all AA males aspiring to obtain a college degree. I am aware that my interaction with the participants could have prompted them to discuss numerous topics on a larger scale and present other issues on a smaller scale.

Data collection spanned one year. I employed various purposeful sampling techniques to select a sample for this research. The chosen participants provided information-rich cases that allowed for the most effective use of our limited resources. Study data were constrained by a single region and the small sample size of four students

from one university. In other words, the sample size was too small to establish statistical generalizability. The findings were specific to the experiences and needs of the participants and were relevant for situations involving four men who identified themselves as part of the AA male subgroup. The results did not apply to AA women, Whites, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, or other subgroups who might meet the criteria of this study. Additionally, I did not evaluate students attending 2-year institutions or those pursuing graduate or doctoral degrees.

The work presented in this study represents only a fraction of the experiences of AA males attending college across the United States. I did not research AA males who identified as part of the homosexual, bisexual, transgender, queer, or pansexual communities. I also did not study AA males with military experience. AA males from U.S. territories, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands, or those whose parents were not of AA descent, were also excluded from this study. Future scholars examining African Americans in these, or other excluded categories could gain a broader perspective on the AA male experience. As I did extend the interviews to include other relevant individuals, such as university faculty, administrators, peers, or family members, I did not triangulate the AA males' perceptions of their experiences with those of other stakeholders.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

In this study, I explored the lives of four AA males who graduated from University X. Using a qualitative approach, I researched their childhood, family, culture, high school, and college experiences. Based on the study's findings, there are several recommendations for future research. Scholars could conduct a basic qualitative interpretive study to explore the AA male experience with different AA male

demographics. For example, researchers could consider AA males who also belong to the LGBTQIA+ community, have non-Christian religious affiliations, attend HBCUs, have military experience, attend graduate programs, are pursuing dual majors, do not come from AA descent, are entering college after age 30, are married with children, have criminal records, are working full time while attending school, are single fathers, have obtained an associate's degree, attend 2-year institutions, attend prestigious Ivy League institutions, or identify as biracial. Multiple perspectives are needed to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

This study's participants all attended University X. Future scholars could select several universities with high AA male graduation rates. A comparative analysis might reveal differences across regions or between a PWI and an HBCU. This study's focus was on the experiences of AA males. Researchers could duplicate this study by examining other underrepresented groups with low matriculation rates. Additional qualitative studies could address AA faculty who mentor AA males or AA administrators who provide academic support services, identifying best practices and strategies to increase matriculation rates.

As an AA woman and first-generation college graduate, I encourage all AA males to share their stories. In raising their voices, AA male students could tell society they are not monolithic but instead diverse, rich in tapestry, and abundant in gifts and talents that could impact society for the better and, in time, change the world. Sharing the stories of AA males could lead to eradicating the systemic barriers facing so many others. The study's findings has the potential to be advantageous to universities, colleges, and K–12 educators who seek to improve graduation rates for AA males.

When I started my doctoral program, one of my professors told me to think seriously about what I wanted to add to the body of literature read worldwide. How did I want to add value to existing scholarly works? What will be my contribution that impacts society? Throughout the years, I have seen AA males lose their lives to the systemic barriers in America. Along with many Americans, I have cried watching horrific stories of police brutality. I became outraged reading about the school-to-prison pipeline in urban communities. I have also felt hopelessness as I have witnessed and encountered systemic racism while working in higher education. Studying these research participants has given me insight into the systemic barriers that exist. The shift from inequality to equality that has occurred is evident in each of the four participants. This study offered them a voice, a platform, and an opportunity to say to the world, "I did this. I overcame this, and you can do it, too." These participants' narratives are a limitless gift to others on the road to self-discovery. At the end of every interview, I asked, "How did you achieve degree completion?" Here, I present the responses as a conclusion to this study to remind the reader how special each participant is.

John:

> To be able to go and create and do what I want to do on my own terms. Which will eventually lead to something memorable, which will hopefully lead to something that will inspire change. I don't want to die without contributing to the world. And I don't want to live in misery. Not achieving my goals is my fear. I want to set myself up the best way I can, and a degree will only help. It is important to my mother; I am already in it, and I might as well finish it. When my mother was running her development center, she saw what it can lead to not

having a degree can do. It's a, "hey, do this so you can make your mother happy. It will self-serve you in the long run, and it will lead to an infinite amount of possibilities." There is an African proverb I like: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." You have to surround yourself with a community that is invested in you, and then you have to give it back. Someone will do XYZ for you, and you have to do 123 for them.

Lynn:

Here at University X, you have to think for yourself and do for yourself. I overcame challenges by asking questions, seeking out counseling, preparing for class before class, testing my knowledge against my peers to see how I was measuring against my classmates. Working played an influential role; it helped me learn how to manage my time. I knew the struggles of African American people, so I knew that in order to be successful, I would have to work harder than my counterparts.

Timothy:

I feel like there is something for you at University X, regardless of your field. They've got business. They've got computer science. Computer information. We've got art. We've got, I mean, it's just like all the corners of all the colleges. It's still worth it. For the most part, it's definitely worth it. You learn a lot more. Because sometimes college isn't for everyone, especially if you can make it without it. But if you do feel that you're worried, like you're not going to make it, or you have some concerns on how you're going to do it. I feel like college— being able to get through and finish college will help you kind of steer you in the

direction that you want to go. So, it's like, it may not be, like, college may not just

be great on its own, but it just opens a lot more doors that you might not even

have even seen or have expected by not going at all.

Dion:

Being in spaces where you feel there's a place for you. That you feel celebrated.

You feel welcomed, or you experience those things. Not even just feel those

things, but you experience those things—is where success oftentimes resides.

Black people being celebrated is more than just for, you know, the flashing light,

flashing neon lights. It's because when that happens, you know, their success in

college, which then flows over into them pursuing and taking on certain roles

opportunities, jobs—whatever that looks like, entrepreneurship, whatever that

looks like. And then also the economy benefits it. So, it's a whole trickle-down

effect.

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Appendix A

Dissertation Qualifying Questionnaire

Dissertation Qualifying Questionnaire

Contact Information	
Name:	
Phone:	
Email:	
Student Profile	
Major/Degree:	
Extra-Curricular Activities:	
Academic Support (List):	
Types of Academic Support:	
Mentor(s):	
Fraternity:	
Work During School:	
Scholarships:	
Hometown:	
Age:	
Current Work Status:	

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 Jasmine McMillan at jasmcmillan@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 B

Letter of Consent to Participate

Letter of Consent to Participate

Dear X Participant:

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "Against All Odds: An Interpretive Qualitative Exploration of African American Males' Life Experiences and Strategies for College Graduation Attainment," which is being conducted by which is being conducted by Jasmine McMillan, under the supervision of Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu a faculty member at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to identify barriers encountered and strategies used by African American (AA) male students attending an identified Georgia four-year state university with the highest four-year university degree completion rate for African American (AA) male students among all four-year state universities in Georgia. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about narratives that can influence improvements to existing federal and state higher education initiatives aimed at increasing graduation rates of AA male students. School administrators and faculty may also use this study to improve student engagement, student retention, and faculty mentoring. Admissions and recruitment counselors may benefit from this study when considering recruitment strategies and orientations when enrolling the AA male student. AA male students may benefit from this study by learning about methods that have proven to be successful in degree completion.

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately **3 hours.** The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be 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 Jasmine McMillan at jasmcmillan@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 C

Research Statement: Consent to Participate

Research Statement: Consent to Participate

Informed Consent: Before commencing this research, I am required to seek your consent for your participation. As primary researcher I will carefully review the informed consent form with you. If you are willing to participate, I ask that you state your full name, the current date, and affirm, "I have attentively reviewed the informed consent, and I willing consent to take the part in this study." Please be aware this consent will be recorded using an audio recording device for documentation purposes.

Research Statement: You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "Against All Odds: An Interpretive Qualitative Exploration of African American Males' Life Experiences and Strategies for College Graduation Attainment," which is being conducted by which is being conducted by Jasmine McMillan, under the supervision of Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu a faculty member at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to identify barriers encountered and strategies used by African American (AA) male students attending a university in Georgia. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately **3 hours.** The interviews will be audio taped in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be 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.

Confidentiality: The details you provide will be held in strict confidence, all interviews will be securely maintained on a password protected computer and accessible only me the primary researcher for a total of 3 years after the study is completed. All digital files will be kept on a storage device held in a locked storage cabinet. To ensure your privacy is protected you will be assigned a pseudonym known to you, I the primary researcher, and my supervising chair.

Description of the interview process: The semi-structured interviews will be sit-down meetings in person or virtual via phone using open-ended questions. The allotted time for each interview was 95 minutes. All interviews will be distanced to three to seven days apart, give you the participant time to consider what was discussed in the previous interview. The date, time, and location is based on the participants schedule. All transcripts of the interview will be emailed to the participants to validate the information.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jasmine McMillan at jasmcmillan@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

IRB Protocol Exemption Report

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

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03840-2019

Responsible Researcher: Jasmine McMillan

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu

Co-Investigator(s): n/a

Project Title: *Against All Odds: An Interpretive Qualitative Exploration of African American Males' Life Experiences and Strategies for College Graduation Attainment.*

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 data (emails, survey data, participant lists, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Research Statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of the interview recording. The final transcription includes the reading of the statement and the participant's confirmation to participate.*
- *Exempt protocols prohibit the collection and/or storage of audio recordings. All recordings must be deleted immediately from recording devices.*

☒ *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   12.06.2019

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

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

Appendix E

Dissertation Interview Questions

Dissertation Interview Questions

<u>Round 1</u>

When and where were you born? Where did you grow up?

What is your ethnic background?

Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from? Have you ever been there? What was that experience like?

What were your parents like when you were a child?

Did you get into trouble? What was the worst thing you did? Do you have any siblings? What were they like growing up? How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you happy? What is your best memory of childhood? Worst?

How would you describe a perfect day when you were young? What did you think your life would be like when you were older? Do you have any favorite stories from your childhood?

Did you enjoy school?

Were your elementary, middle school, and high school's populations diverse? What kind of student were you?

What are your best memories of grade school/high school/college/graduate school? Worst memories?

Was there a teacher or teachers who had a particularly strong influence on your life? Tell me about them.

Do you have any favorite stories from school? What is your definition of "culture?"

How do you define "family?"

Who holds the most "status" in your family? Why? How do you define success?

Do you consider your parents to be successful? How important is education in your family?

Do you actively participate in an organized religion? How important is religion in your family? Why?

If religion is important in your family, do you plan to pass this on to your children? Why or why not?

Are the roles of men and women specifically defined in your family? If so, what are they?

What is considered most disrespectful in your culture? What is considered most respectful in your culture?

What would you say is, from your perspective, the most commonly held misconception about people of your culture?

Have you ever experienced racism? In what form?

In your opinion, what can be done about racism and prejudice? Do young people today have a sense of culture?

Have you ever felt excluded based on your gender or culture? Do you remember excluding others based on Culture or Gender?

Is there anything you would like others to know that we have not included here about you or your culture?
Thank you - is there anything else you would like to share?

Round 2

How did being an African American male shape your experience in high school?

How did your family members influence your decision to attend college?

How did your friends influence your decision to attend college? What factors

motivated you to graduate from high school?

Why did you decide to attend college?

What type of support did you receive when applying to college? What factors did you

consider when selecting a college?

What were your top three colleges? What factors made them your top three? What

were your top influences in selecting a college?

Why did you select X University? How did you select your major?

What factors played a role in your decision in selecting your major?

As an African American male what were your expectations, goals, or hopes when

planning to attend X University?

As an African American male what reservations did you have about attending X

University?

Round 3

Describe your experience attending freshman orientation.

As an African American male what were your first challenges to assimilate to a
college setting? How did you overcome those challenges?

What did you love about attending X University? What did you hate about attending

X University?

How did you assimilate to the university's culture?

How did you feel you were viewed by others on campus as an African American
male during your college years by students, staff, faculty?

Did you experience racism while attending X University? If you did, how did that
shape your experience?

What groups did you assimilate with throughout your college years? Why did you select that group as your group of friends?

What extra- curricular activities did you participate in while attend X University?

What factors influenced your decision in selecting extra-curricular activities while attending X University?

How did the extracurricular activities contribute to your success of matriculation?

As an African American male did you feel supported by faculty in the areas of mentorship, career guidance, or becoming active on campus?

Discuss a key relationship with faculty that had an impact on your experience while attending X University. How did that relationship shape your experience as an African American male attending X University?

As an African American male how did you overcome feelings of isolation during your four years at X University?

As an African American male in what ways do you believe you were supported by staff while attending X University?

What college resources proved to be beneficial in helping you graduate?

As an African American male what were your toughest challenges as a student? How did you overcome them?

As an African American male what were the driving factors that lead you to achieve matriculation?

What personal talents did you use to successfully graduate from X University?

Is there anything else you want to share about your experience in attending X University?

Appendix F

CITI Certificate

CITI Certificate

This is to certify that:

Jasmine McMillan

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
IRB Basic
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Valdosta State University

Completion Date 12-May-2019
Expiration Date 11-May-2022
Record ID 31584915

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

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Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wa19de2d7-ad3b-41ac-817a-953723808252-31584915