2009-05-01

From Strain to Success: A Phenomenological Study of the Personal and Academic Pressures on African American Male Community College Students

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FROM STRAIN TO SUCCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE
PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC PRESSURES ON AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
University of San Diego

May 2009

Dissertation Committee

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ABSTRACT

For many African American college students, the challenges to achieve academic success are overwhelming. The disproportionate number of African American male students enrolled in the community college system is of substantial concern because community colleges have not traditionally been successful in producing African American male graduates and transfers at the same rate as their counterparts from other racial and gender groups. Moreover, the pressure for African American male students to choose between academic success and their cultural frame of reference often jeopardizes their chances of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. Consequently, African American males who choose the community college system as their primary path to economic and academic opportunity are often at a disadvantage.

This qualitative study examined the experiences of African American male community college students in the context of personal and academic counter-pressures on achievement. Findings suggested key academic, cultural, and social pressures African American men experience had a substantial effect on their academic progress. Since educational access and achievement are linked to economic well-being and social status, and since little is known about the experiences of African American male students in community colleges, this study explored male students' experiences and examined from their perspective how researchers, practitioners, and administrators can best facilitate their success.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my late Grandmother, Frankie A. Flakes. An amazing human being and friend, she continues to inspire me to serve, respect, and love my family, community, and society. She continues to bless me from above.

I would like to also dedicate this work to my beautiful and amazing nephew, Kristopher Daniel Mosby. It is my responsibility to be a good role model, uncle, and friend to him and I do so with pride and humility. His future is bright and I hope my work will inspire him.

To my parents, Charles and Brenda Robinson, my sister, Krista Mosby, and uncle and aunt, Stephen and Barbara Davis, thank you all for loving me unconditionally and always supporting my education and passion.

Throughout my journey, I have been fortunate to surround myself with amazing friends, mentors, and colleagues. Your support and presence in my life made this work a reality—many thanks.

And finally, to the men who participated in this study as well as the many brothers whose voice remains silent and hidden, thank you for standing proud and reminding me of the power and beauty that lies within the souls of all African American men. It is a privilege and honor to stand beside all of you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If black men seem to be losing ground today, it's that they're weary and wounded from
trying to thrive in a society that is determined they won't.
—Susan Taylor, author

When he spoke to me, he did not sound angry. The student was tired, sounded

tired, exhausted. I just finished a presentation on undergraduate and graduate college

admissions at a community college and a young African American man, around the age of

22 approached me. He thanked me for the presentation but asked "Do you really believe

in what you are saying?" I told him I believed in every word, restating that education is

the key to survival in society and for African American men, it is vital. He shook his head

and said "Man, I will never be successful, I never will be where you are, where *you* think

I should be." By this time, everyone had left the room and it was just us standing there,

eyes fixed on the other, and he was waiting, anticipating what I was going to say next.

I asked him, "Where do you think you should be? You have every right to succeed

academically. Look at your professors [one was in the room earlier who was African

American], look at me, look at Obama, do you not *see* them?" He was silent for what

seemed to be minutes, but after about 15 seconds, he looked at me, eyes fixed to mine and

said:

> Man, I see that you have made it but it's not possible for me. I'm a black man,
> hell, I'm a nigger in most people eyes. I barely make it to school. I hate this place.
> I'm here listening to you because my mom begged me. I can't do this, I can't be
> that person who succeeds. What you're saying is all good and all, but it's not my
> reality. I learned a long time ago who I was, and I was told who I was. . . . Obama,
> the cat is cool, but he made it. You think I'm going to have the fancy suits, hot

wife, all that education. I barely survive here. I don't even feel like I'm surviving, and no one cares.

We chatted a few more minutes and he left the room. Was I surprised by his honest and brutal words? I was not surprised. I was frustrated and angry that this young man felt he had no chance whatsoever to advance in anything. As he put it, he was "maintaining" to just survive. Unfortunately, this young man represents many African American males currently in our society. The drive to succeed academically and in society has been replaced with scarred feelings of hatred, frustration, and abandonment for these males. For these men, their voice in how they live their lives is nonexistent. Where did it go?

At the same time, our society has elected Barack Obama as our next president. An African American male who somehow kept his voice will soon be running our world for the next 4 years. He is educated, articulate, positive, hopeful, and a role model for everyone, in particular, African American males who feel they do not have to chance to achieve their own goals. However, Obama is not the answer, the savior for African American men.

To understand and discover the voice of African American men, we need to hear their stories in the literature. Obama's story is one of many but while his experiences are remarkable, it is not enough in trying to understand the struggles of the African American men. Scholars and literature fail to discuss the true stories of these men and label Obama as the symbol of hope for everyone. However, the lack of literature on African American males and their stories cannot connect Obama to these men simply because they share the same ethnicity. It is more about their families, responsibilities, careers, and educational

paths that have shaped who they have become. It is more about their feelings of

discrimination, low self-worth, embarrassment, and anger that set the path for their

choices made in life. Society will hear Obama's story because he is a figure known

throughout the world. Yet, for the many African American males who are the workers,

students, fathers, husbands, partners, those voices are consistently absent in our society.

Yes, Obama is "hope for America" but his story is not enough for African American men.

They need, much, much more than that.

Some might ask, was this story the reason you wanted to conduct this type of

research? This example was one of many stories I have heard throughout the years that

made it imperative to research African American male community college students and

begin to locate under years and layers of frustration, the voice and hope of these

individuals that lies dormant and weak in their hearts. This research strives to further the

diversity of higher education and begin to capture some understanding of a population

consistently drowning in all areas of educational attainment according to most standards

used to evaluate personal success.

Background to the Study

This study will focus on African American community college students but their

achievement gap begins at the elementary level and continues through college. The gap is

not limited to academic performance only but overrepresented in lower academic tracks

placement, lower participation in gifted programs and a higher incidence of special

education placement (Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997). They perform considerably lower

than Whites on standardized tests such as the Stanford Achievement Test and state

proficiency tests (College Board, 1993, Miller, 1995). By the time African American

students are in their senior year of high school, they are about 2 or more years behind

their peers in reading and mathematics (Berkeley Unified School District, 1985).

In college, African American students remain at a disadvantage in terms of

graduation and degree completion rates (Bush, 2004; Furr & Elling, 2002; Khumoetsile-

Taylor, 2004). Although universities have strived to diversify enrollment in terms of race

and ethnicity, retention of underrepresented students remains a major concern across all

higher education systems. This information presents a small representation of the barriers

and challenges African Americans face as they strive to enter college. And for those who

gain entry to institutions of higher education, there are additional challenges that must be

met to prevent attrition, alienation, and isolation (Cuyjet, 1997). Much more must be

done, on all educational fronts, to level the playing field and to ensure that once students

gain entry to a college or university, they have every opportunity to succeed.

The relative absence of African American students in higher education can be

attributed to specific factors inhibiting their presence and success. In his book *Black*

Students in Higher Education, Scully (1984) stated the following:

> Black students are having a very busy and difficult time on campuses throughout
> the country. Plagued by financial problems, difficulties in studies, personal social
> concerns, and racial identity problems, these students are experiencing stress in
> adapting to and reshaping their social and physical environment, sometimes with
> sympathetic assistance and sometimes without; and they are having to work
> through these problems in a process that did not originally take them into account.
> (p. ix)

Rising education costs, economic need for a skilled labor force, and the number of high

school graduates requiring remediation has directed students to the community college

system as the most accessible in terms of higher education and future career opportunities (Bush, 2004; Ehrenberg & Smith, 2002; Lathan, 2002). Traditionally, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color have enrolled in large numbers at community colleges due to proximity within communities, low student fees and an open admissions enrollment policy (Nettles, 1988; Lathan, 2002).

The California community college system serves more than 1.5 million students and represents the largest system of higher education in the world. Minority students comprise 25% of the total student population (Education Commission of the States, cited in National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). Specifically, African Americans comprise 11% of community college students nationwide (NCES, 2003). Moreover more African American students are enrolled in the California community college system than any other institution of higher education in the state (Bush, 2004; NCES, 2003; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001). When compared to Asian and White students, African American students attend community colleges at a greater proportion (Chenoweth, 1998; McCool, 1984; Nettles, 1988).

As of fall 2005, there were a total of 64,197 African American males enrolled in California institutions of higher education. Despite the high number of African American male students enrolled in 2-year institutions, there is still cause for concern about the matriculation of these students to 4-year institutions. While some minority students are more comfortable with seeking out academic and student services, they are very honest with the fact that other responsibilities such as full-time employment and the multiple roles they represent as spouse, parent and breadwinner take time away from accessing

these services (Feldman, 1993; Hagedorn et al., 2001). For many African American males, their situation is noteworthy because their lower socioeconomic status, when compared to other groups, adds an additional strain on the amount of time and resources these men can spend on their education (Hagedon et al., 2001). For these reasons, the risk of dropping out of school is great (Education Commission of the States [ECS], cited in Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2003). As the number of African American males remain high in community colleges, their challenges to succeed academically as a group intensify as well.

There is a substantial void of literature and research exploring the experience of African American students within the community college system (Bonner, 2001; Hagedorn et al., 2001; Hood, 1990; Lum, 2000). Based on extensive research, few theoretically based studies focused on African American community college students exist (Hagedorn et al., 2001; Jordan, 2008). Rresearch about African American college students currently exists, but often does not offer a qualitative perspective, failing to discuss the experiences and pressures of these students within higher education (Hood, 1990; Nora & Alberto, 1996). Research proposed here seeks to contribute to the knowledge base through discovering and understanding the complex nature of the African American male community college experience.

Problem Statement

For many African American college students, the challenges to succeed and maneuver through society culturally and academically are overwhelming. However, the disproportionate number of African American male students enrolled in the community

college system further compounds the issue. Community colleges have not been successful in producing students who persist, graduate, and transfer to 4-year institutions at the same rate as their counterparts from other racial and gender groups (NCES, 1996, 2006). Within the community college system, the additional pressures for African American male students to choose between academic success and their cultural frame of reference often jeopardize their chances of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. These males have to assimilate within two groups: the majority culture and minority culture (Stevens, 2006). However, for many of these men, trying to balance living within these two groups is problematic and challenging. Students feel that to succeed academically, they have to embrace one identity while abandoning their cultural identity. As a result, these students possess race less identities while pursuing their academics and struggle to achieve (Ogbu, 1992; Stevens, 2006). Consequently, since educational access and achievement is linked to economic well-being and social status, African American college students will fall further behind if achievement gaps continue to widen between all ethnic groups. We know very little, if any, of the experiences of African American community college students. A lack of qualitative research and literature fails to identify their issues or pressures leaving the community college system with no understanding on how to serve this population.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of African American male community college students in the context of personal and academic counter-pressures on achievement. Using a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to

discover the essence of experience as perceived by African American male community college students. In addition, the study will provide qualitative data highlighting challenges African Americans males face when trying to (a) transfer to a 4-year institution, (b) identify the constraints and pressures affecting the educational progress for African American males within the community college system, and (c) attempt to assimilate within their social and cultural communities.

This study suggests that key academic, cultural, and social aspects of African American male students' community college experience have a substantial effect on their academic progress. The study will expand on these issues, identifying factors that hinder their academic success. Key themes such as isolation, alienation, societal pressures, connections to college and social community and institutional pressures will be explored. It must be noted that this study cannot be broadly generalizable to the population—a criticism of qualitative research. However, scholars argue that the power of this research lies in the ability to discover meaning and understanding of a situation, reflecting on the researcher's ability to illustrate or describe the corresponding phenomenon (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). General applicability will result from the set of methodological qualities of the study, and the rigor with which the study is constructed combating some of the criticisms of qualitative research as a "soft approach" and providing weak explanations (Morse, 1989; Stake, 1980). If researchers can provide a solid construction and rigorous study then conclusions can be made about the population studied (Yin, 1984, 1993, 1994). In the end, this study will provide recommendations for student affairs

administrators on how to foster an environment conducive to the success of African

American males.

Conceptual Framework

To try and explain the many challenges African American males face is quite

difficult. There are multiple and complex challenges these men face in not just education

but within society as a whole. This could explain why there is little literature surrounding

this phenomenon. It is necessary to map out a conceptual framework for people to begin

to understand what is happening socially, culturally, academically, and politically for

these African American men. This conceptual framework will be supported by social

reproduction theory, Bourdieu and Passeron's theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu &

Passeron, 1977) of cultural capital, Tinto's departure theory (1987), and African

American male student identity development. These theories support the conclusion that

societal influences alter and dictate the paths of African American men, often stripping

them of their power and voice to create a successful and even path to educational

attainment.

Social Reproduction Theory

To understand the causes of inequality in educational outcomes, attention must be

paid to the structural and cultural forces that shape students' educational paths.

Researchers have argued that educational outcomes center around areas of gender, race,

and class (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). One theory in particular,

reproduction theory, argues that lower-class youth are the victims of inequality in society

due to capitalist structures and forces, making them unable to maneuver through society

(Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The American

educational system, arguably, can be seen as a power that structures and assigns paths to

students depending on their class within society. Beginning in the school system, schools

train the wealthy to take the top places within the economy while forcing the poor to

remain powerless and within the low status of society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod,

1995). African Americans often are located within the lower status of society and as a

result, struggle to achieve academically and economically.

Schools are structured in such a way that it is quite difficult for students to be

unaffected by their academic and cultural surroundings. There are major structural

differences within schools. Many African American students that attend urban schools are

treated differently than suburban schools (MacLeod, 1995). Urban schools are often more

rigid and focus their energy and attention on controlling behavior and adhering to the

school rules. Suburban schools have a different mission, encouraging students to be more

expressive, have more academic choices, and less attention is paid to controlling students'

behavioral actions (MacLeod, 1995; Miron & Lauria, 1998). Urban schools, often

consisting of working-class families, understand that ultimately, respect to authority is

imperative for success in society. In contrast, suburban schools, consisting of middle-

class families, view authority as important but not detrimental for success and mobility.

These contrasting ideals and values are not represented within the various families, but

the schools' teachers, staff, and administrators as well (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Depending on the school and students, expectations from parents and administrators will

vary, and the children will be forced to adhere to a standard set by their educational system and community.

As a result, these standards, or tracks that students follow within school often dictates their position within society. Children from middle-class and wealthy families are positioned to occupy higher level positions within society, require little supervision, make independent decisions and internalize social norms (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, MacLeod, 1995). These individuals have acquired the power to understand and ascend to the highest income and status level possible. Quite the opposite, children from working-class families continue to struggle within schools. As a result, many children do not receive the same luxuries as the other group in terms of honest and trusting relationships with teachers and administrators; they often occupy the lowest paying jobs requiring little education. They will always be the worker and not the boss in their careers. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schools socialize and structures forces in such a way that parents pass down their status to their children, keeping many who wish to improve their status within society trapped. These pre-defined roles guarantee the continuation of a class society.

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital

Bourdieu and Passeron's theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) of cultural capital is central to understanding reproduction theory. Individuals within society acquire various abilities and skills. Socially, this cultural knowledge or lack of knowledge is transferred by parents/guardians to children. Cultural knowledge consists of skills, dress, style of interaction, and linguistic skills (Bourdieu, 1986; Mehan et al., 1996). Children of middle-class families acquire substantially different cultural capital than

children from working-class families, where many African American families reside (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Mehan et al., 1996; Perrakis, 2004). Children from middle-class families are afforded many opportunities due to relationships or connections to important social relationships (Lareau, 1989). Often called *social capital*, these benefits can be converted into various forms of capital and can be reproduced to benefit the individual (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 1989; Mehan et al., 1976). Coleman's (1988) theory on social capital argues that possessing social capital within the family as well as outside the family is highly influential in preventing high school dropouts. Social capital can be attained by reading books, visiting museums, attending concerts and lectures, practices where individuals assimilate within the dominant culture. These children are already accepted into this culture due to their parents' *membership*, rewarded of their cultural power by society, and possess the power to succeed successfully in school.

Children from working-class parents endure quite the opposite. Due to their economic status, geographical location, social class, and even race, these families often fail to possess the cultural and social capital needed to move up the hierarchical society chain (Bourdieu, 1986). This deficiency is reflected in all forms of education and employment (Bourdieu, 1986). Always at a disadvantage, children from this group become withdrawn and frustrated with their place in society, often dropping out of school and taking lower-paying jobs as a result (MacLeod, 1995). Unlike the other group of students, children from working-class families do not network together to increase their capital. These individuals come together and fail to advance beyond their social status,

sharing their social, economic and environmental problems that plague much of their commuities (Majors & Billson, 1992).

The inequality of these groups is clearly apparent in our academic system today. Schools define and dictate academic success and failure by embodying class interests and ideologies. For the privileged families, they are rewarded by the schools for their hard work and academic achievement. For the working-class families, the parents, who lack the academic knowledge and tools to connect and learn from their teachers, they are labeled uninterested in learning, allowing social inequality in schools (Bourdieu, 1977; Fields-Smith, 2005; Gutman, 2000; Majors & Billson, 1992; Mehan et al., 1996). Without this cultural capital, students fail to have control over their lives and futures and continue the spiral of educational disengagement.

Academic achievement, Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) argues, is directly connected to economic wealth. When students are academically successful, they position themselves to acquire the superior jobs and always position themselves for the best career opportunities. In many ways, these individuals are part of a club that due to their education and mobility within society will always benefit from the capital and become stronger through their social contacts and connections. Bourdieu and Passerson (1977) argue schools remain at the center of social reproduction and inequality:

> Surely, among all the solutions put forth throughout history to the problem of the transmission of power and privileges, there does not exist one that is better concealed, and therefore better adapted to societies which tend to reuse the most patent forms of the hereditary transmissions of power and privileges, than that solution which the educational system provides by contributing to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and by concealing, under an apparently neutral attitude, the fact that it fulfills this function. (p.178)

For many African American students, school often determines their success or failure for years to come. The structure of schools often promotes a belief that working-class students can never move to the dominant group, unable to achieve academic and in the future, economic success (Stanton-Salazar, Vásquez, & Mehan, 1996; Worth, 2002).

Structurally, schools are comprised, like other bureaucratic contexts (churches, governmental jobs) of "institutional agents"—powerful individuals due to their social networks and status within their organization, who ultimately can determine who will move within society and who will remain behind (Stanton-Salazar et al., 1996). The agents have the power to educate others about resources (job networking, academic assistance, tutoring) or withhold information vital to the success of the working-class. Ultimately, agents are the individuals and systems that will shape the lives of the working-class. Specifically within the school system, if agents use or misuse the cultural and social capital of others, they begin the process of strengthening class privilege and increasing social inequality. Without access to social networks, many underrepresented students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds have little power and little chance to attain any capital whatsoever.

Student Resistance and Accommodation

In schools, students are often perceived as the victims, powerless to the structures that surround their lives. In turn, students run the risk of abandoning academics and failing to achieve. Much of the literature of resistance theory supports this notion (Everhart, 1983; Fine, 1989; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989, 1994, 1995; Willis, 1977). Critics argue students resist stemming from their often lower socioeconomic, leading to

low self-esteem and withdrawal from their academics. However, other researchers label these critics as unaware of true student issues, arguing that these same researchers have not "probed the subjective experience of school life as disclosed by the students themselves" (Herr & Anderson, 1993, p. 2). Looking specifically at African American males, these same researchers do not privilege this group's student voice in trying to understand their challenges and experiences.

Contrary to beliefs from some researchers, these students are not passive players within the educational landscape. Their resistance or signs of resistance should not always be viewed as negative. Erickson (1984) and Ogbu (1992) discuss resistance theory as *the romanticization of nonconformity*. Both researchers argue that when students exhibit misbehavior, their actions should not always be labeled as resisting. A main criticism of resistance theory is the limited understanding of students' actions. Students from all backgrounds, weak or strong, engage in various behaviors that go far beyond opposition and resistance (Mehan et al., 1996). Student behaviors can be positive despite the social and economic conditions around them. The research of Mehan and colleagues showed that students from underrepresented groups participating in the Advancement Via Individual Determination program (AVID), filling out college applications, attending college, focused on their education from a positive perspective, not focusing on their past failures and challenges. Martin's research (2000) on African American students and mathematics showed how students did succeed despite these negative structural influences surrounding them at school. In short, underrepresented students' actions and behavior can be positive in the face of challenges. Students can be active participants in

shaping their academic identities (Giddens, 1984). In forming their identities, this desire

to succeed academically can develop into intent and students continue to become active

players in shaping their lives.

Tinto's Departure Theory

Some students are fortunate to possess the determination to persist and succeed in

face of academic and structural challenges. They exhibit practical awareness of their

limitations and challenges but achieve their goals instead of adopting self-destructive

behaviors (Giddens, 1984). Other students, however, feel powerless and alienated from

their community and become self-destructive in school and society. For many African

American males, dropout and unemployment rates are high; they represent the largest

incarcerated group, and feel they have failed in life (Majors & Billson, 1992). Their voice

has been stripped away by the discriminatory practices of schools and society (Miron,

1997).

Tinto's departure theory (1987) is the most frequently cited and debated

framework research on dropout, retention, and withdrawal. Tinto's model (1975) depicts

dropout decisions or consequences as the result of academic and social integration

factors; students must be academically and socially integrated in order for them to remain

at an institution. Tinto's model consists of five chronological oriented groups that explain

issues of attrition and possible solutions for students: pre-entry attributes,

goals/commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and goals/commitments

(Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1993) argues that four types of institutional

experience influence student departure: academic performance, faculty/staff interaction,

extracurricular activities, and peer group interactions. This integration has to be done in a classroom or other learning community (Peper, 2007). If students believe their *voice* will be ignored or silenced, they will retreat from that community and become outsiders to their environment.

However, his theory has been subject to much criticism (Tinto, 2006). White students were the basis of this theory, not addressing factors specifically pertaining to African American students, a major issue for institutions when trying to understand students of color (Tierney, 1992). The dominant values and cultures adopted by institutions are typically white and fail to indicate the unique challenges, culture, and values African Americans share (Bowers, 2007; Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000; Peper, 2007; Tierney, 1999). Critics argue Tinto's theory focuses strictly on *traditional* students and their mainstreaming into the dominant, accepted culture (Tinto, 1987; Tierney, 1999).

In defense of Tinto, his framework is useful when looking at African American students as a starting point (Bush, 2004; Perrakis, 2004,). While the validity of Tinto's theory to fully grasp the issue of student departure across racial and ethnic groups is still debatable (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), it does help institutions tackle the issue of retention on a larger institutional scale. Researching additional factors, such as financial considerations for college, socioeconomic status, faculty/student interactions, and student adjustment to college setting can add to the model and possibly address African American student retention issues. However, the lens in assessing the needs for African American college students and other students of color have to be refined and

reexamined if educators want to identify what methods work toward providing success for these non-traditional students.

Identity Development for African American Male College Students

Another source of frustration for African Americans is the balancing act in trying to achieve academically and gain acceptance by society, while maintaining membership in their own community. African American male students are often shunned by their peers creating a struggle between their personal and cultural identities (Cross, 1991, 1995; Erikson, 1980). In his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois (2007) argues the experience of African Americans as "hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development" (DuBois, 1903, pp. 130-131). DeBois further argues that all African Americans have to possess a *split identity* or double consciousness to maneuver in society and assume multiple identities, which has a negative impact on their development and growth:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for American has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simple wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed in his face. (DuBois, 1903, p. 4)

Erikson (1968) argues this split identity is necessary for African Americans to protect them from overwhelming challenges surrounding them in society. If they fail to adapt this coping mechanism, African American men will have to surrender their identity and regulate to a "reflective 'negative' recognition which surrounds them like an endless

recess of distorting mirrors" (Erikson, 1980, p. 302). For African American men, they will feel like an outsider and invisible within all cultural, social, and economical aspects of society.

Traditional student development theories and models (such as Kohlberg, Sandford, and Chickering) have tried to explain issues affecting all college students for years. However, a criticism of these theories is they fail to understand the complexities and sociocultural realities of underrepresented groups (Cheatham & Berg-Cross, 1992). Specifically, for African Americans residing on college campuses, applying these traditional theories and models will not adequately offer an understanding of the issues for this group: "African American student development is arguably distinct from student development in general and hence development of this cohort is not adequately accommodated in existing theories and models of student development" (p. 173). In order to understand both the healthy and unhealthy identity development of all minority groups, in particular African Americans, researchers must be prepared to hear the cultural, historical, educational, economical, and social realities of this groups.

Cross' Model of Nigrescence

One such model developed by William Cross (1991, 1995) provides a theoretical framework for the development of African American racial identity. Cross' model is the most widely used for understanding African American students (Burt & Halpin, 1998; Sellers et al., 1998; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). According to Cross, African American students must go through a process of growth and discovery in order to regain a positive African American racial identity. Moreover, for African American

students, cultural and racial identity has a direct impact on their student development

(Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Lang & Ford, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The

five stages of Cross' racial identity model are: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-

emersion, internalization, and commitment. Each stage details the characteristics

(behavioral and psychological) of African Americans based on their societal oppression

(Cross, 1991, 1995).

Cross has revised his theory encompassing the cultural, social, historical, and

psychological changes that has occurred since presenting the model in the 1970s. In

addition, the five stages have been reduced to four: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-

emersion, and internalization (Cross, 1995). In the pre-encounter stage, African

Americans identify with the dominant white culture and reject their own culture. In the

second state, African Americans endure experiences and begin to internalize their

attitudes toward society. Experiences are not necessarily negative but do impact people to

see that their view of the dominant culture has changed since the first stage (Cross, 1995).

The third stage, immersion-emersion is the most critical for African Americans

when defining their racial identity. In this phase, individuals possess anger, guilt, and

pride toward initially accepting a white frame of reference. At the same time, African

Americans are now prideful of understanding their own heritage and begin to accept their

history and the on-going societal challenges they will face. However, this stage is where

African Americans can either move to embrace their new identity or remain at this stage,

exhibiting deviant behaviors such as dropping out of school (Cross, 1995). The fourth

stage, internalization, occurs when African Americans are comfortable with their identity

and are ready to confront all forms of cultural oppression in society.

Banks' Theory on Ethnic Identity

In contrast to Cross, Banks' (1981) theory argues that ethnic identity development

is more cross-cultural than ethic specific. However, Banks' theory, which centers on ego

development, can be used to measure the interaction between African American and

White identity development; this theory is comprised of a series of stages in which

individuals perceive their own culture or ethnicity (Tomlinson, 1996). Importantly,

Banks' work challenges individuals to understand the ways in which they understand and

perceive their own cultural groups and other groups. The theory can be extremely useful

for helping individuals to eliminate possible hostility or distrust toward other groups and

develop an appreciation about one's culture and ultimately feel more appreciated and

comfortable within their culture (Tomlinson, 1995).

Contrary to theories that progress through a series of stages, Banks' theory posits

individuals will move back and forth across stages various times (Tomlinson, 1996). The

first stage is the ethnic psychological captivity stage in which the individual experiences

ethnic low-self esteem or self-rejection and believes negative ideologies about his/her

culture. As a result, the individual is motivated to become highly culturally assimilated

(Banks, 1988; Burt & Halpin, 1998; Tomlinson, 1996). The second stage is ethnic

encapsulation where the individual believes in ethnic exclusiveness and voluntary

separation. At this point, the individual sees his or her own group as superior to other

groups and feels that his or her life choices is threatened by other groups.

The third stage, ethnic identity, represents a major shift in which the individual possesses the ability to accept positive aspects of one's own ethnic group and the ability to clarify internal conflicts with this group. This stage emphasizes values clarification and moral development (Tomlinson, 1995, 1996). Stage four, bi-ethnicity, is when the individual possesses a healthy sense of ethnic identity of not just within their own race, but all races as well. The fifth stage, multi-ethnicity and reflective nationalism, occurs when the individual has become self-actualized and functions at meaningful levels within various ethnic environments. The individual now has an appreciation of values and beliefs from other cultures. The final stage, globalism and global competency is where the individual has now acquired positive ethnic, national, and global identifications, and the knowledge and commitment to function in all cultures (Banks, 1981; Burt & Halpin, 1998; Tomlinson, 1996).

Criticism of Identity Models

While there are other models applied to African American students (Baldwin, Duncan, & Bell, 1992; Gay, 1984; Jackson, 1976, 2001; Perry, 2003; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994) that help illustrate issues related to identity development, these theories do not apply to all African American college students. Moreover, there is no *quick fix* in trying to understand the African American experience. Helms and Cook (1999) caution that "information about a person's racial identity does not reveal anything about her or his cultural socialization, except perhaps how much the person values her or his socioracial group's traditional culture" (p. 98). However, additional research examining how the power and influence of culture on African American college students

and its influence on academic achievement is needed to build on these models if we truly want to understand the increasing struggles this population continues to face daily.

The multi-faceted critical framework discussed in this chapter captures one specific theme: status and race within all structures of society matters greatly for African American men. Without the power and agency to create positive educational paths, the political, cultural, structural, and academic forces will always stop these men from acceptance and membership in much of society. The inability to acquire their voice and ultimately their power in society will continue to negatively affect and limit the African American community.

Delimitations and Limitations

While a phenomenological study is the best approach to my research, I approached this study with a bit of caution. Creswell (2003, 2007) believes phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, as identified by the researcher. Thus, I needed to carefully choose participants if the goal was to provide the *essence* of the experience, and establish a common understanding among all participants. However, since I was solely conducting the research, having nine participants was manageable in terms of time and financial constraints.

There was a concern my personal bias would have an effect on the study as well. However, that was not the case for this study. As an African American male in higher education, I needed to make sure my feelings and attitudes did not affect the data. This was a challenge since I shared the same ethnicity and gender as the participants, and

conducted all the interviews. In the beginning when inviting students to participate and conducing preliminary discussions, it was imperative to have a clear set of goals and understanding for both the participants and myself. While the beliefs and desire to research this group of students was imperative to understand how African American male students function within this higher education system, my behavior and actions while interpreting the data did not skew the actual participants' responses.

And for the participants, there was an assumption that I had endured similar experiences because we share the same ethnicity and gender. However, while experiences possibly could be similar in some fashion, my educational background was completely different than all participants since I never attended a community college. In addition, my educational path from elementary school upward, and possession of social capital differed from those men interviewed. Consequently, I was concerned I would be viewed as an *outsider* and the responses could be skewed as a result. However, many steps were taken to ensure that the goals of this research were articulated and communicated effectively and ensured that data collected had been analyzed and summarized fairly to all parties involved. The data and results were trusted by everyone.

This study cannot be entirely generalizable when identifying pressures for African American college students as a whole. However, the research provides rich, detailed data that university faculty, staff, administrator, and fellow students can use to understand a perspective often absent in research and literature: the *story* of the African American male community college experience. While community colleges have been viewed as an *open door* to all students, African Americans continue to struggle within this system. This

research offers a story and lens to analyze this increasing problem and provides further discussion and possible solutions on how to address these barriers centering on African American male college students.

Significance of the Study

Research offering statistical information centering on African American college students currently exists. However, much of the existing literature focuses on the grave state of African American student achievement. Little is known about the students that are successful in spite of their challenges and barriers to succeed. Furthermore, there is a void of literature centering on African American community college students and their struggles to achieve success in the classroom. In short, little is truly known about the African American male community college experience from the mouths of the African American male.

Without their perspective, the experiences of African American men cannot be understood. The tendency to focus almost exclusively on the failures of these males is a debilitating feature of extant literature. African American men are not well represented within the higher education degree attainment landscape and without understanding, mentoring, and a solid educational foundation, they will become further absent. The hope of this dissertation is to showcase their stories of determination, success, and hope.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There's a lot of misery, hatred, disappointment . . . all that. I hate to talk about it . . .
but it's there.
—John Lee Hooker, blues singer

This review of literature will provide an overall framework to understand the

complexities and uniqueness of African American college student struggles. First, the

literature will outline Ogbu's ecological and Agnew's general strain theories. Second, the

literature will give a historical and present-day context of African American students

represented in higher education. Third, the review will give an historical and current

overview of the community college system. Fourth, the review will examine literature

that suggests Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) can be a viable model

for community college students when looking at student achievement and connection to

their specific higher educational community. The final section will discuss the academic

and social integration pressures African Americans face once in college.

Ecological Theory (Voluntary and Involuntary Minority Status)

John Ogbu's body of work, which spans more than two decades, has had a

substantial impact on scholarly research focused on the education of minorities in the

United States, particularly African Americans. Much research has focused on the school

experience of minority groups who have not been successful in school—primarily

nonimmigrants. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) argued that different patterns of adaptation in

school leading to differential school success for immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities

are due to different historical experiences, leading to different adaptive responses.

Minority groups have adapted into their various societies as either voluntary or involuntary groups (Gibson & Ogbu). Voluntary minorities were those who moved to their present societies seeking more economic well-being, better overall opportunities or greater political freedom (Ogbu, 1983). Immigrant minorities perceive their American economic situation as better than their homeland and develop survival strategies to cope with problems (Ogbu & Fordham, 1992). Their frame of reference is conditions at home, not the white majority in the United States. They perceive that they have the option to move back to their homeland if they are not successful (Ogbu, 1983, 1992, 2004). Ogbu (1978) argues all immigrant minorities interpret social barriers against them as temporary problems that can be solved through more education, hard work and time. Opimistic regarding future possibilities, they rationalize and adjust to prejudice and discrimination as the price to achieve the goals of their emigration (Gibson, 1991; Suarez-Orozco, 1991).

In contrast, involuntary minorities interpret the educational, economic, social, and political barriers against them differently. By definition, Ogbu (1983) defines involuntary minorities as "People who were brought into their present society through slavery, conquest or colonization. They usually resent the loss of their former freedom, and they perceive the social, political and economic barriers against them as part of their underserved oppression" (p. 9). Status mobility is not assumed by involuntary minority group members. They compare themselves to the dominant group which has more financial and social status power. In the eyes of involuntary minorities, education, hard work and effort will not ever overcome structural barriers against their progress (Ogbu, 1978).

Some African Americans, as an involuntary minority, take up this more pessimistic view of their possible mobility in American society. In many ways, they experience a loss of identity since they do not have a "homeland" and fail to view jobs as "better" than the situation of others like them in a foreign country (Gibson, 1991; Ogbu, 1983). And when viewing education as a means of getting ahead, African Americans realize that educational attainment does not always guarantee mobility with respect to jobs and working conditions adding additional disappointment and another barrier to overcome. African Americans feel that they can never be on the same "playing field" as whites in terms of social mobility and growth. Ogbu's work has created many debates in the area of minority education and involuntary status. Critics have challenged his theory arguing that other factors such as gender and age are neither represented nor evaluated in his research. More qualitative research is needed to see if other factors play a large role in academic engagement for African American students.

General Strain Theory

While Ogbu posits the argument that African Americans will never be part of the dominant group and continue to be victims of discriminatory practices in society, Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST) can be used to examine how African Americans use various coping strategies to deal with their adversity. Agnew (1992) defined strain as "negative relationships with others . . . in which the individual is not treated as he or she wants to be treated" (p. 48). Agnew argued three types of strain existed: failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of positively valued stimuli, and presentation of negative stimuli (Jang & Lyons, 2006). Any of these types of strains,

Agnew posited, would lead an individual to engage in negative behavior and elicit coping behaviors to alleviate these pressures and emotions.

Agnew redefined the strain concept from other traditional strain models (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Merton, 1938), incorporating conditional factors into the theory explaining why all strained individuals commit deviant acts in relation to strain. Agnew argued that an individual's internal and external factors (self-esteem and social control, respectively) condition the effects of strain and coping behavior, affecting the person's choice between conventional and deviant coping strategies (Jang & Lyons, 2006). Agnew's theory argues social support, from family and friends, as factors that lead individuals to choose a positive, healthier strategy than a deviant one. Social support is believed to buffer negative responses to strain, and ultimately deviant coping; it is believed social support and strain have negative relationships with each other (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002).

Agnew's GST work focused on the strain relating to crime and violent acts committed by individuals. However, his theory has rarely been applied to the African American population. GST can be of special relevance to African Americans who experience higher levels of strain due to racism, economic disadvantage, criminal victimization, and poor health than whites (Hagan & Peterson, 1995; Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). However, after searching literature trying to locate research linking GST and African Americans, only one study was located since Agnew introduced the theory (Jang & Johnson, 2003).

Jang and Johnson's research (2003) found that strain created inner and outer-directed emotions, leading to interpersonal aggression and drug use. The research further suggested African Americans are more likely than other groups to externalize their adversity based on the history of involuntary immigration and slavery as well as racial prejudice and discrimination (Hagan & Peterson, 1995; Neighbors, Jackson, Broman, & Thompson, 1996; Ogbu, 1992). Both theories discussed in this review argue that African Americans are more likely to experience anger than depression or anxiety in relation to strain; negative emotions are more likely to result in outer-deviant coping such as interpersonal aggression (Jang & Johnson, 2003). By creating a network, and establishing social and cultural capital in the process, individuals are more likely to integrate into mainstream culture. As a result, academic success can be achieved by exposing students to healthy role models and abandoning anti-school peer-group distractions (Ainsworth & Wiggan, 2006). GST recognizes the discriminatory practices African American face in society, but unlike Ogbu, the theory stresses the importance of creating a social network to confront these strains in a positive and healthy manner.

Jang and Lyons' (2006) quantitative study applied GST to African Americans by analyzing national survey data, finding that African Americans experience not only anger but depression and anxiety in response to problems in their significant others' lives as well as their own. While the research examined rarely studied inner-behavior, this study failed to offer any specific examples of when these strains or deviant behavior would occur. A recommendation is to have a qualitative study complement the data found in this

research, offering detailed personal accounts to help understand and convey the power

and influence of strain and its effect on this population.

African American Students in K-16 Education

Seventy-nine percent of African Americans aged 25 and over are high school

graduates, double the percentage in 1970 (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002).

Although the high school graduation rate has increased greatly over the past 30 years,

African Americans still trail white Americans in degree completion (Thompson, 1995).

African Americans also continue to earn lower grades and to drop out of school in larger

numbers than their white peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). As the dropouts get older,

unemployment statistics get worse; for example, b 1997 and 1999, African American

dropouts aged 20–24 years were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as were

white dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

At the same time, many African American students who remain in high school

continue to underachieve. For example, the Berkeley Unified School District's research

(1985) revealed that at the beginning of senior year, African American students were

about 2 or more years behind their peers in the core subjects of mathematics and reading.

Moreover, African Americans perform considerably lower than whites on standardized

tests such as the Stanford Achievement test and state proficiency tests (College Board,

1993; Miller, 1995). Not surprisingly, African American students lag behind other groups

in earning a bachelor's degree. King (1999) found that African American students

represented only 16% of all bachelor degrees earned in 1998, compared to 37% of Asian

Americans and 45% of white adults across all educational systems. More research is

needed to see if factors such as family responsibilities, gender, employment, and socioeconomic status (SES) would affect completion rates.

For those students who do achieve academically in high school, standardized testing challenges and college admission requirements are major barriers for African American students trying to attend college. As a result, African American college students are poorly represented across all college systems. Looking at California's educational system, it is comprised of 23 California State University campuses (CSU), 10 University of California campuses (UC), 113 Community Colleges, and numerous private institutions. For admission into the CSU system, students must meet a variety of subject and test requirements. Within the past 10 years, many CSU campuses have been given an "impacted" status, meaning that minimum requirements does not guarantee acceptance. Higher grade point averages and test scores are now required for admission. For example, San Diego State University (SDSU) averaged a 3.65 grade point average (GPA) and 1210 SAT test score, which was substantially higher than the 2.75 GPA and 900 minimum test score needed for entrance into the CSU system. System-wide, African American students accounted for 7% of the total population for the fall 2003 entering class, a drop from the previous 2 years, and a significant drop from 1996 where African American students comprised almost 10% of the total population in the CSU system (CSU, 2003).

As the number of applications increase yearly, the cutoff for admission spots continues to rise for campuses throughout the system. Grades and test scores solely determine admission in the CSU system. Stating ethnicity, the use of personal essays and letters of recommendation do not make a difference in the evaluation of students and are

not requested as part of the application process. This contradicts the mission of the CSU

system, which is to provide education to the top 33% percent of students graduating from

high school (CSU, 2003). Many campuses are admitting the top 25% students from high

school, leaving many students of color unable to obtain acceptance into a CSU campus.

For transfer students, the process is a bit more complex. Students have to possess

60 transferable units and meet general educational requirements for admission. To meet

the minimum eligibility, students have to possess a 2.0 GPA and successful completion in

the above referenced areas for admission into the CSU system. However, much like the

first-time freshmen requirements, impacted status is an issue. For many campuses, the

grade point average required is a 2.5 or higher. African American transfer students

accounted for 5.9% of the total number of transfers from community colleges in 2003

(CSU, 2003). This represents a 4-year continuous drop for African American students.

Compared to other ethnic groups, African American representation was much lower

compared to 13.7% of Asian Americans and 19.5% Mexican Americans who transferred

from California Community Colleges for fall 2003 (CSU).

Admission is extremely competitive to the University of California (UC) system,

which admits the top 12.5% of students graduating for high school. Unlike than the CSU

requirements, students are required to take the SAT I and three additional SAT subject

area tests. The minimum entering UC GPA is 2.8 for California residents. Due to the

selectivity of the campuses within the UC system, students must have much a higher GPA

and test scores for admission. African American students comprise the lowest admitted

group within the UC system. For fall 2004, African American students represented only

3% of the total UC population system-wide, far behind Asian Americans (34 percent),

Chicano/Latino (13%) and white students (37%), consistent with the continuous decline

of African Americans in the system throughout the past five years (University of

California [UC], 2004). Furthermore, 2.8% of African American public high school

graduates were UC eligible in fall 2003 (California Postsecondary Education Commission

[CPEC], 2005). While African American students are graduating from high school, they

often lack the high school academic preparation and advising needed for eligibility into

the UC system. One explanation of this deficiency is the poor selection of UC-approved

courses beginning in 9th grade, and confusion regarding the admission requirements of the

UC and CSU systems.

The transfer admissions process within the UC system is very unique because it

gives priority to students coming from a California community college over a student

trying to transfer from a 4-year public or private institution. Students are required to

complete 60 semester units with a grade point average of at least 2.4 and meet the

following criteria with a "C" grade or better. In addition, students have to check with their

specific UC campus to see if other additional admission requirements are required. The

UC system admits 7 out of every 10 students who submit the application, showing a high

acceptance rate. But African American college students represented only 3% out of

30,000 applications submitted for fall 2003 admission (UC, 2004). Since affirmative

action was banned in the UC system in 1998, along with increased fees and reduction in

outreach programs assisting minority and low-income students, many students are

reluctant to participate in the admission process (Maxwell, 2004).

Private colleges and universities have requirements specific to their campus. There is a great deal of flexibility for these campuses since many take a holistic approach to student applications. Many private institutions look at grades from the beginning of a student's tenure at the high school. Test scores are required for admission, usually the SAT I or ACT test. For transfer students, the admission process varies significantly by institution in terms of units required and grades. There is no published eligibility index scale to evaluate a student. Many campuses look at the progress of the student in terms of academics rather than focus on a certain amount of courses taken.

Letters of recommendation are required for admission. Letters are often from teachers, coaches, employers that speak to the student's ability to succeed at the specified institution. In addition, students are required to write a personal statement requesting a detailed writing sample. Admission directors and staff review the applications and students are evaluated in multiple areas. Some campuses require an on-campus interview as part of the admissions process.

Since these institutions are private, it is often difficult to get an ethnic breakdown. However, the presence of African Americans students in these types of institutions is often low. For example, the University of San Diego had approximately 7,200 applications for fall 2003 admission for which 3,700 students were admitted (University of San Diego [USD], 2004). The numbers of applications have increased by 1,200 applications within the past 10 years. Out of 3,700 freshmen students admitted, only 2% were African American students (USD). This same percentage has been consistent at USD for the past 15 years. In terms of transfer students, African American students

represented 4% of the total students admitted. As a result, there was a fall class of 14 and 17 African American students this past fall for freshmen and transfer students respectively out of approximately 4,000 (USD).

There are many barriers for African American college students as they matriculate to college, resulting in low representation in attendance and graduation rates. For community college students in particular, preparation for the major, in terms of meeting certain course prerequisites to transfer is a major hurdle for students to overcome. African American college students have to rely on solid counseling/advising in their community colleges to understand and register for the required courses. For the counselors/advisors, this represents a challenge since the issue of impaction is barely a decade old and continually evolving for administrators in the community college system, making it hard to adequately serve African American students.

<div align="center">The Community College System</div>

Lower academic performance and preparation limit their student choices to enter competitive 4-year institutions, directing them to the community college system to strengthen academic skills. Community colleges serve as access to education for citizens desiring training and schooling beyond secondary school (Bush, 2004; Irvin, 2007; Lemann, 1999). The community college system is accessible to students due to its open admissions policy. The only admission requirements are for individuals to be 18 years of age or possess a high school diploma or equivalency. The system provides communities with a variety of educational services, basic academic skills improvement, and transfer preparations for students to eventually attend public institutions within the states. In

particular, the California community colleges are designed for students to matriculate to

the California State University or University of California systems (Bush, 2004; Grigg,

1987; Lemann, 1999).

The American community college system was created out of a response from

higher education leaders to relieve public universities of lower-division preparation so

institutions could focus on research and professional development. In 1901, Joliet College

was the first community college to provide freshman and sophomore-level coursework, in

preparation to transfer to the 4-year institution (Irvin, 2007; Pope, 2006; Vaughan, 2000).

In addition, these colleges also provided academic advising, guidance counseling, and

other student service needs. Originally called *junior colleges*, the main focus of these

institutions was the transfer function. This system experienced a substantial increase in

number before the turn of the 20th century and in addition to preparing students for

transfer to 4-year institutions, the system provided a variety of other functions:

community service, remediation, vocational, technical, and continuing education (Cohen

& Brawer, 2003).

Providing educational access to all students has been the main goal of community

colleges. The system currently has over 1,600 institutions across all 50 states (American

Association of Community Colleges, 2002). Many community colleges are within a 30-

mile commute for their students and tuition/fee costs are substantially less than the fees of

4-year institutions (College Board, 2004). What is most significant to the issue of access

is the community college's open door policy. However, this particular policy has

presented the system with many challenges, mainly the task of remediating unprepared

students.

The creation of the community colleges was based on the *California Educational*

Master Plan. The plan, developed in 1960 by the state of California under the leadership

of Clark Kerr, President of the University of California, was an educational strategy

separating public higher education in the state into three distinct systems. One system was

the University of California, which admitted only the top 12% of graduating seniors in the

state. The second system was the California State University system, charged with

admitting the top 33% of the graduating seniors in the state (Lemann, 1999). The third

system was the California community college system, comprised of 108 colleges and

serves over 1.5 million students (CPEC, 2002). Lemann (1999) summarized Kerr's vision

of the community colleges as follows:

> Having analyzed the labor market, he believed about half of the state's young
> people could benefit economically from education beyond high school: the junior
> colleges were there to give a few people a second change, to remedy the
> inadequacies of high school, to siphon off students who might otherwise pressure
> the university to let them in, and, mainly to send the signal that the Master Plan
> gave everyone a chance to get more education if they wanted it. (p. 136)

While some educators throughout the country believed the master plan increased

educational opportunities, some critics argued the system was created to perpetuate social

and academic stratification (Grigg, 1987). Critics also viewed community colleges as a

weeding out process which enabled Clark's University of California system to remain the

elite public school system of higher education and maintain the high academic caliber of

students seeking admissions to the institution. Grigg (1987) and Bowles and Gintis

(1976) researched the economic disparities of students attending community colleges compared to their counterparts at 4-year institutions. Their study argued the community college students are set up for failure and serve as no more than holding tanks for students who could not afford to matriculate to 4-year colleges. This is detrimental for African American male students, who reside primarily in the community college system. Arguably, the system is not prepared or dedicated to produce students that will ultimately matriculate into institutions allowing students access to greater academic and economic opportunities. Consequently, African American males utilizing the community college as their only path to academic opportunity are positioned into a system that are the most ill-equipped to create this outcome (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Grigg, 1987; Hagedorn et al., 2001; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Rendon & Nora, 1994).

Given the large numbers of African American males in the community college system, the transfer function role has become increasingly important for students in achieving their baccalaureate degree. However, there has been a decline of students transferring to a 4-year institution leading to serious concerns of attrition. Many researchers have concluded that the shift of focus in the community college offering 4-year preparation to one that has strived to meet other non-academic needs (Clark, 1960, 1994; Monroe, 1977; Pincus, 1980). Rendon and Nora (1994) suggest the decline in transfer students can be attributed to (a) more emphasis and enrollment in vocational and technical programs, (b) growth of remedial education, (c) addition of continuing education, (d) increase of part-time students , and (e) increased competition from 4-year institutions for students who before saw community colleges as their only option. As a

result, over the past 30 years, students transferring have fallen from 30% to 18% (Dougherty, 1994; Nora & Rendon, 1998; Tinto, 1998). Approximately half of all minority students enrolled in higher education are in the community college system (Nora & Rendon, 1998). Compared to other racial and gender groups, African American male students do not graduate and transfer at the same rate (NCES, 1996). While 38% of white students who begin at a community college earn a degree or certificate within 6 years, only 26% of African American students (9% African American males) accomplish the same task (ECS, cited in Price, 2004). Pope (2006) and NCES (2002) reported that African Americans earned only 10.7% of all associate degrees awarded, compared to 72.3% for white students. African American men have earned 5% fewer associate degrees in the past 17 years, but 3% more African American men remained enrolled in community colleges 5 years after matriculating (Perrakis, 2008). The scarcity of African American male students in community colleges attempting to transfer to 4-year institutions and the shift in focus for community colleges has a significant impact on this group toward achieving racial, economic, and social equality.

Dicroce (2005) argues that African American students obtain bachelor degrees later in their 20s using the community college as an option, but the gap continues to widen in terms of degree attainment. While 38% of white students who begin at a community college earn a degree or certificate within 6 years, only 26% of African Americans accomplish the same task (ECS, cited in Price, 2004).Smith's qualitative study (2001) found that African American students' biggest obstacles to transfer to a 4-year institution were cost and financial responsibilities, not just for college, but overall family

responsibilities. In addition, institutional factors such as increased admissions selectivity and inability to successfully maneuver through the university system were identified as challenges to achieve degree attainment (Smith). However, Smith's data used in his research was collected for a different study altogether, responses for his protocol analyzed for his particular research question. Another limitation was this research was not a pure ethnographic study, which would allowed more in-depth analysis from the parents' perspective as well as from the students.

Another factor affecting the retention of African American male community college students is their feeling of alienation on college campuses (Ellis, 2002; Perrakis, 2008). Many students feel faculty and administrators do not understand nor seek out the contributions and cultures of people of color (McNairy, 1996). One way of addressing this issue is through the use of mentoring. In Opp's (2002) research, he looked at how to enhance program completion rates among students of color in community colleges. He posited constant interaction with faculty of color would help students feel connected as part of the university community. He offered suggestions such as students and faculty serving on university committees together which could create a collegial relationship between both parties. The campus climate must be welcoming and compatible to African American men to improve their opportunities for success in transferring. Community colleges can achieve this by creating programs focusing on diversifying campus climate. Examples of these programs are providing monies for minority student group operations, creating diverse orientations programs, and diversifying its curriculum (Clements, 2000).

Perrakis (2008) identified factors that promoted academic success among African American and white students in a urban community college district. Her study collected data from 5,000 surveys distributed from the University of Southern California and found that gender and racial differences did not directly influence student outcomes. However, academic preparedness was the consistent factor from both groups that students felt was imperative to their success. Perrakis' work supports the theory that African American male students have a better chance of succeeding academically if connected to their campus. Some recommendations from the study were to actively outreach to African American male students and create ways to make students feel connected to their campus. One example was to create interaction between faculty and peers in academic and non-academic settings (Perrakis, 2008). Theories surrounding retention must be continually developed and created to see how and if factors of race, class, gender play a role in African American male community college students. Brooks-Leonard (1991) discusses some of the continued challenges students face at community colleges while trying to succeed academically. In her article, "Demographic and Academic Factors Associated With First-to-Second-Term Retention in a Two-Year College," she asserts:

> The percentage of college students, however, who indeed transfer from two-year institutions to senior institutions, has declined in recent years to the point where perhaps only 12 to 13% of the total community college population transfer. As a result, two-year colleges have instead become centers of community based education, emphasizing continuing education, career training, remedial education, and distance learning. This situation does not lend itself to those factors found to be associated with retention and attainment of degree: residence on campus, high interaction with peer group, and full-time enrollment status. In fact, two year public colleges have experienced the lowest retention rates of all colleges and universities. (pp. 57-58)

Since low-income students and minorities comprise the majority of students enrolled in

community colleges, this same groups fails to transfer in significant numbers to other

higher educational systems, further decreasing their presence within the higher

educational student landscape.

While the community colleges comprise the largest number of African American

male students, the system has been criticized for not serving the educational, cultural, and

social needs of this population (Bush 2004; Nora & Rendon, 1990). Nora and Rendon

(2002) discuss the irony of the community college system's mission to serve African

American students as well as other minority and low-income students in their work:

> Perhaps no other institution of higher education has been as often embraced and
> disdained as the community college. Built on the zeal of equal opportunity and
> egalitarianism, two-year colleges were America's answer to the call for the
> opportunity to educate masses of people never before served by higher education.
> Initially, the concept appeared to work. Minorities, students from low social
> origins, and nontraditional students turned to community colleges and used them
> as vehicles by which to initiate upward career and social mobility. However today
> there is mounting evidence that the very students community colleges purported to
> best attend are now the students who appear to be least served. (p. 235)

It can be argued that the very system observed by African American college students as

the most accessible is not the most successful in transitioning their students into the next

phase of their higher education journey.

Research has primarily focused on the African American population in the 4-year

system (Pruitt, 1987) instead of the community college system where research is sparse.

However, the community college is a system that possesses unique characteristics when

compared to other higher education systems (Hagedorn et al., 2001). When compared to

4-year settings, full-time versus part-time status, day and evening attendance, and parental

education are examples of unique challenges that rarely impact students in 4-year settings (Feldman, 1993; Hagedorn et al.). With the large presence in the California community college system of African American men, one can argue this group has been, and will continue to be, the most negatively affected in the area of academic achievement. If administrators and campuses fail to seek out understanding of this particular population, the needs of these students will remain overlooked and diminished their opportunities for academic success.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Many African American students throughout the country also attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) as another higher education system option immediately after high school or transferring from a community college. In addition, there exists numerous historically black community colleges located primarily in the southern and eastern part of the United States that provide a significant transfer population line to HBCUs (Provasnik & Shafer, 2004). Historically, the creation of HBCUs for African American students was in response to a time in which racial segregation and exclusion of African American students from formal education existed (Brown & Freeman, 2004). HBCUs have been quite significant in the graduation rates of African American students, compared to the other higher education systems. Oliver and Oliver's research (1996) revealed while HBCUs comprise only 4% of the nation's institutions of higher education, they enroll 20% of African American students and produce 40% of all bachelor's degrees earned by African Americans. On a graduate and professional level, HBCUs produced 75% of all African American Ph.D.'s, 75% of all army officers, 80% of all federal judges,

and 85% of all (Dervarcis, 2002; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Research has shown HBCUs have a long-standing tradition of preparing students for social, economic, and political success, while serving as the primary educator of African American students. Despite its successes, the HBCU system is constantly criticized by educators from other higher education systems, questioning the style of academic learning and support provided for their students.

Homogenous Education

HBCUs must continually rise to the many challenges threatening their very existence. Critics have suggested HBCUs are a homogenous environment consisting almost entirely of all African American students which fails to provide a well-rounded educational foundation. Further criticism suggests HBCUs segregate students, reverting to past history of separating students by race (Jones, 2004). Politically, this twist has shifted the focus of desegregating predominately white institutions of higher education to a focus on desegregating African American colleges. As a result, HBCUs are increasing criticized about their relevance to society.

Critics also claim there is an increase of African American students who attend predominately white institutions (PWI), therefore questioning the existence of HBCUs. These students attending PWIs are attempting to assimilate and embrace a diverse culture, which critics argue is unlike the HBCU campuses (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995). Research on HBCUs suggests students who matriculate at those campuses have backgrounds different from those students who attend predominately white institutions. African Americans attending HBCUs tend to have lower GPAs and SAT scores

compared to African Americans attending PWIs (Allen, 1987; Kim & Conrad, 2006). PWIs often have greater student and academic services offered to African American students, but many students are less likely to feel the institution attended has responded to their needs (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994). HBCUs, on the other hand, provide a more collegial and supportive learning environment (higher representation of African American students and faculty than PWIs), resulting in stronger academic growth and retention for African American, and in particular male students (Allen, 1987; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Davis, 1994; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Ross, 2003).

Fleming's landmark study (1985) supports the argument that African American men on HBCU campuses are more successful due to the supporting environment. After studying 3,000 African American students, Fleming found African American males possessed stronger self-esteem and confidence in their education on HBCU campuses, versus at PWI where feelings of unhappiness and isolation existed. Strong faculty involvement and strong social support networks are two major factors that can assist in degree completions and academic persistence for African American male students at HBCUs (Nettles, 1988; Ross, 2003; Perrakis, 2004).

Retention

Similar to other higher education systems, HBCUs struggle with retention of African American students. This increasing problem highlights the issue that no system nationally has been overwhelming successful educating African American students. The national average retention rate of African American students is 45% within 5 years, compared to 57% for white students (Chenoweth, 1999). At HBCUs, 5-year graduation

rates vary from 30% to 70% (Chenoweth). However, little research exists on the impact

of HBCUs on academic success as reflected in undergraduate degree completion by

African American students (Hickson, 2002). Another research gap is the lack of

information on student outcomes and how potential factors (student/leadership

involvement, mentoring programs, financial aid, loan debt) can influence student

outcomes (Galloway & Swail, 1999; Kim & Conrad, 2006). Galloway and Swail's

research (1999) argued that academic preparation, readiness for college, maturity, social

awareness, ability to get along, and the myriad of other developmental issues all have

some impact on a student's ability to persist at HBCUs. While the mission of the HBCU

system is to serve populations of students whose backgrounds may make it difficult to

succeed, these same academic and financial barriers exist in other higher education

systems, threatening the success of male African American college students.

Some HBCUs have been successful in addressing retention issues while

maintaining high graduation rates. Spelman College is one of the most successful colleges

in graduating African American students in the HBCU community, with 72% of its

freshman class finishing within 6 years (Chenoweth, 1999). Spelman created a Big Sister

program and the administration established a partnership with the Learning Resources

Center offering academic advice, peer tutoring and study technique workshops.

Spelman's efforts are spearheaded by faculty and current students, creating a mission to

serve anyone who wants to improve (Chenoweth).

However, many students in HBCUs leave school due to financial constraints

(failure to pay tuition, spending expenses). Most students at HBCUs come from families

with little financial resources. Currently, 75-85% of the student body at HBCUs is on

financial aid, using forms of work study and student loans to cover tuition costs

(Chenoweth, 1999). For many students, the financial constraints are overwhelming,

resulting in students going to school part-time while working full-time. In some cases,

students leave college altogether, increasing the likelihood of never returning to complete

the degree.

Faculty involvement and mentoring for African American males has a positive

impact on African American student achievement (Davis, 1994). Astin's research (1993,

1999) argued faculty-student interaction represented the most significant aspect of a

student's undergraduate development and institutional commitment, second only to the

peer group. Additional research focusing on African American faculty involvement and

mentoring African American students is needed, not just at HBCUs but all institutions.

The presence of HBCUs in higher education offers another perspective into the

challenges African American students face as well as positive outcomes related to

retention, academic achievement, and interpersonal relationships. Davis (1994) argues

that the greater success of HBCUs in educating African American men is connected to

institutional support. However, more qualitative research is needed to gain a better

understanding of this support in the areas of leadership, athletics, and Greek

organizations, seeing if the abovementioned factors have a significant effect on

graduation rates for African American students and feeling connected to their academic

community (Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Students who enter both the community

college system and HBCU system often are lower in college preparedness compared to

students entering 4-year institutions (Allen, 1987). However, adopting the mission of HBCUs in making African American males feel *wanted* on their campus through establishing strong faculty ties, student involvement, and positive peer interaction can serve as a model for community colleges on how to create an environment conducive to African American male achievement (Jalomo, 2000; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995).

Sources of Challenge and Support within Higher Education

Once African American students enter college they are exposed to many types of cultural, academic, and social challenges and support from their university communities. This section will discuss the challenges these men face from the standpoint of gender differences, participation in university athletic programs, family pressures, and academic and social integration pressures. These experiences showcases the numerous difficulties African American men experience in college as they try and balance their priorities and attempt to become part of their university communities.

Gender Differences

To understand the challenges African American college students face requires discussing their differences by gender. There are many difficulties encountered by African American men in college that are not experienced by African American women (Cuyjet, 1997). The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) examined responses from over 6,000 African American men and women and showed varying differences in questions concerning grades and course learning. Maintained by the Postsecondary Research and Planning at Indiana University, the questionnaire showed that men were not as prepared for tests as much as the women but were more social

within campus life (Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, & Pace, 1997). Women were most focused on obtaining good grades and less concerned about feeling connected with the campus community. Women consistently took notes in class, asked questions of the professor, and attended office hours (Kuh et al., 1997). Men were quite the opposite, instead spending time at the athletic facilities (Cuyjet, 1997). The priorities of academics are strikingly different and have far-reaching effects not just limited to degree completion.

The survey discussed helps give perspective to the alarming differences between African American men and women and its effects on education. However, on a larger scale, the higher number of women graduating compared to the low number of males has a dramatic effect on the socialization of both groups on college campuses (King, 1999). The proportion of men to women among African Americans is skewed more than any of the other ethnic groups in society ("College Enrollment," 2005-2006). Many campuses nationwide possess a greater number of African American females than males. For example, Dillard University in 2004 reported 74% of its black student body was female, compared to 26% males (Cuyjet, 1997; Foston, 2004). The low representation of African American males in colleges also affects the ability for men and women within the same race to date. Interracial dating is prevalent and has increased on college campuses throughout the years (Hughes, 2003). It should not be assumed in this research that African American women would only want to date African American males and vice versa. However, studies show that African American women still desire to pursue African American men for intimate relationships (Porter & Bronzaft, 1995).

The gender imbalance of African Americans on college campuses creates difficulty for community building as well. Women are forced to not date, date outside their race, or date individuals outside of their institution—which may not be diverse as well. For the women, they are now competing with other women in the community for the same small groups of *established* African American men (King, 1999). After college, their dating and relationship building experiences women endured will continue as they move upward in society (Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). The availability of African American men at their educational level as partners will continue to become sparse and only exacerbate the gap within race.

African American Male Athletes

For many African American male athletes, the path to success is through the athletic track. However, students believe that putting forth substantial efforts on the playing field and not in the classroom are set up for disappointing academic results. The basketball court, football field, track has steadily become a make-believe classroom where men believe they will be successful if they excel athletically, not academically (Messer, 2006; Schulman & Bowen, 2001). Athletes endure long practices, workouts, and substantial traveling to compete across the country. Most African American male athletes choose to make athletics their priority in life. However, their priority on the playing field does not translate higher graduation rates. Campbell (2004) reported that out of the NCAA basketball tournament in March 2004, only half of the players on all the teams combined graduated. Since the majority of the players on college basketball teams are

African American, they represent the largest group of male students not obtaining a

bachelor's degree (Towers, 2004).

As a result, African American males are highly represented in dropout rates.

African Americans males comprise the largest group of students withdrawing from an

institution (Brice, 1992; Towers, 2004). Compared to white male athletes at 62.5%, only

48% of African American male athletes graduate (National Collegiate Athletic

Association [NCAA], 2004). As described earlier, a leading cause of high dropout rates

are academic variables: lack of test preparation, absences, lack of priority for school in

addition to the inordinate amount of time spent being a student athlete (Brice, 1992;

Hyatt, 2001; Leach & Conners, 1984). For many African American students, athletics

becomes an inviting choice to achieve success; however, this success is often false and

short-lived leaving many male students at the end of their academic and athletic careers

without a formal education or athletic career they so desperately wanted to achieve in

college. Few African American male student athletes are academically and socially

prepared when they arrive on campus (Clark & Parette, 2002). Many of these students

were very popular and athletic stars in high school, but often come to college surprised

and frustrated because they are seen as "dumb jocks" or not academically strong by

faculty, administrators, and fellow students, often leaving them feeling isolated and

possessing low self-esteem (Funk, 1991). This "blind pursuit of attainment in sport is

having a devastating effect on the black community" (Schulman & Bowen, 2001, p. 126)

and only adds to the mounting struggles African American males face in an environment

that claims to want them succeed.

Family Pressures

Familial support for African American male athletes can play a major role in their academic success. Families are often supportive of their sons when they attend college due to their athletic ability. These positive attitudes and encouragement give the athletes a sense of pride and self-confidence on campus (Basinger, 2002; Busseri, 2006; Figler & Figler, 1991; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998). Many students feel their families support them not just on the playing field but in the classroom as well. Hyatt (2001) argues active parental involvement for athletes in attending college fairs, meeting with coaches and school officials can assist their children in making healthy decisions about their academic progress and future. Like families with students who are not athletes in college, healthy parental involvement and support is paramount in the academic and social development of these men.

However, families can also create undue pressures and challenges for their African American sons to graduate college. Families often create stress for their children by encouraging a future athletic career as an end goal to attain. Consequently, African American male athletes create an often false sense of hope and develop unrealistic expectations and realities about an athletic career post-college (Edwards, 1984). Parental pressures, along with the portrayal of the fantasy life of professional athletes on television, create undue stress on the student to succeed athletically, not academically, at all costs. This stress is compounded with the pressures they endure from coaches, travel schedules for games, and to succeed academically—not to earn high grades necessarily, but to make the minimum amount of grades needed to be able to compete academically

(Gerdy, 2000). Funk (1991) conducted a study of black families and found that they are four times likely than white families to think that their children's involvement in athletics can lead to an athletic professional career. This false sense of hope for these men trying to be the next Lebron James, Kobe Bryant, or Michael Jordan negatively dominates their thinking in the classroom where academics should be the focus. In some cases, many students leave college early to play professional sports giving up their ability to obtain an education.

The pressures on black male athletes from families to succeed athletically can also be understood from a socioeconomic level. The NCAA produced a report in 1989 that revealed half of all black football and basketball players came from the lowest income levels. The mean annual household income for students was $17,500 (American Institutes, 1989). For most families, the only parental figure was the mother; fathers were often absent in their sons' lives (Messer, 2006). However, many fathers who were present, along with the mothers, did not have formal education and were regulated to unskilled labor (American Institutes; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Sperber, 2000). Families saw their sons as a means for financial survival for the entire family. This pressure to provide financial stability often resulted in students leaving college to pursue an athletic career (Towers, 2004). This opportunity is often short-lived since not all athletes that become professional are successful and often are cut from teams, leaving families returning to the low income ranks and their sons uneducated (Edwards, 1984; Sperber, 2000). For students, athletic ability represents both a gift and curse. African American males have an opportunity to achieve an education due to their academic ability, but

because of the demanding athletic responsibilities on campus (which often pays tuition),

they are forced to choose between athletics or experiencing the total college experience.

Research has shown many students are forced to choose athletics which does not allow

them to integrate in college academically, form social networks, and ultimately persist in

their college experience (Edwards, 1984; Sperber, 2000, Tinto, 1993).

Academic and Social Integration Pressures

Another challenge to degree completion for all African American college students

is the struggle to preserve their cultural and racial identity. Ogbu (2004) believes the

struggle is due to their collective identity, defined as *people's sense of who they are, their*

we-feeling or belonging (p. 32). Collective identity is influenced by dominant culture that

treats African Americans as members of a collective rather than individuals (Castile and

Kushner, 1981; DeVos, 1995; Smith, 1995; Spicer, 1967). Two sets of factors comprise

the collective identity of an oppressed minority group: status problems and minority

response to status problems (Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Jang and Lyons, 2006; Ogbu,

2004).

Some African Americans feel they can never be accepted by the dominant group,

nor escape from their membership in the oppressed group. To deal with the pressure to

succeed, they have developed coping mechanisms to shield them from peer criticism and

ostracism (Blau, 2003; DeVos, 1995; Suarez-Orozco, 1991; Tyson, 2006). However,

these coping strategies challenge the very nature of collective identity and often create

conflicts for these individuals in areas such as education (Mickelson, 1990). One often

discussed and debated coping strategy is termed *acting white* by some (adopting serious

academic attitudes, having white friends, talking *proper*, not using slang for example). Some African American students use this mechanism as a way to gain acceptance into the dominant culture and finish school (Ogbu, 1992; McWhorter, 2000; Weissert 1999).

Historically, African Americans as slaves worked in two different worlds when given a particular situation; they acted, thought, and reacted depending on where they found themselves (Ogbu, 2004). In the African American community, they were comfortable speaking colloquially with one another but they could not do the same in the white community. In the white environment, African Americans talked as white people expected and required (Becknell, 1987). African Americans had no choice but to behave this way; talking and behaving white was a survival tactic. Whites wanted African Americans to behave and talk based on their perception of their speech and cultural behavior (Ogbu, 2004).

After emancipation, the burden of acting white still existed. However, for African Americans, there was still pressure to comply. Instead of acting white for safety, African Americans now had to act white for social mobility and acceptance into the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1991). African Americans had to accept white culture and adopt it as their own, but the reverse was not true. Moreover, after assimilating into white culture in society or education, African Americans still were not accepted as equals by whites.

Despite moving past slavery and emancipation, African Americans struggle with the pressures of acting white currently in society. Many African Americans believe they must choose between academic success and maintaining their minority cultural frame of reference and identity; they perceive this as their only choice. That is not a choice that

arises for the voluntary immigrants (Petroni, 1970). African Americans strive to be accepted in both their own culture and the dominant group but feel they will compromise their identity in the process.

Academically successful African American students are often criticized by their peers (Petroni, 1970; Mickelson, 1990; Perry, 2003). Gibson and Ogbu (1991) argue that involuntary minority students who involuntarily adopt attitudes conducive to school success or academic success are often accused by their peers of acting like the enemy. They are accused of "selling out" and acting like "Uncle Toms," being disloyal to the group and run the risk of being isolated from their peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Petroni, 1970). In Ogbu's (1999) qualitative study of students and their parents in Oakland, California, he found using standard English was a strong signifier of acting white. This was viewed as pretentious, in the eyes of parents, since no African American person could really talk this proper. Talking white would classify you as *uppity* (Ogbu).

Ogbu's qualitative study of Shaker Heights (2003) revealed some African Americans would shun fellow African American students if they chose to have white friends, form study groups with white members, or took advancement placement classes. As African Americans students became more involved in school, they became increasing culturally distant from their community. The rejection from their own community caused many students to disengage from their coursework. It should be noted that the students did not reject their racial identity or culture but tried to merge both cultures (academic and cultural) in their daily lives, which for some proved to be unsuccessful (Ogbu).

Becknell's (1987) qualitative research shows the community pressures and feelings against African Americans viewed as talking white. To *talk proper* in the community meant denying one's identity. In the research, attending college and making friends that are not African American were viewed as stripping away their students' identities (Becknell). These pressures have caused individuals to suffer from self-doubts, alienation, guilt, and paranoia (Luster, 1992).

Other *acting white* behaviors are not limited to academics but extend to culture and physical appearance. Becknell (1987) described some African Americans trying to assimilate by dying their hair to look blonde or straightening their hair with chemicals because their hair was viewed as "bad." African Americans are criticized for joining white churches and distancing themselves from their people. Moving outside of a predominately African American community is subject to criticism because the community views the individuals as not involved and connected with the community (Ogbu & Simons, 1988).

Summary

This literature review gives an overview of the numerous challenges African Americans, in particular, African American males continue to face in society. While this review attempts to explain the struggles of these men through articles and policy briefs, there is one significant piece missing: the voice of these men. These men can never be understood, or truly appreciated if they are not given the opportunity to talk. This review argues the need to build on literature and include the perspectives of African American males so that educators can have a better understanding of their issues at hand. For

educators and administrators, those individuals in power wanting to help this population, it requires being sensitized to the inequity African American males face and strive to remove these barriers so that these men can be successful academically.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

There is no greater agony that baring an untold story inside you.

—Maya Angelou

Phenomenological research is dedicated to capturing the in-depth structured life experiences of participants, which entails obtaining the conscious descriptive experiences of events from the first-person point of view. According to Morgan (2000), phenomenology seeks to reveal how human awareness is implicated in the production of social action, social situations, and social worlds (Morgan, 2000; Richards, 2007). This study strove to understand the experience of African American community college students in the context of personal and academic counter-pressures on achievement. The study helped to explain why certain African American males have been able to overcome obstacles of poverty, single parent households, and for some, inner-city education to obtain academic success. To understand these *lived experiences* (Creswell, 2007), the research used a phenomenological methodology focusing on the commonality experienced by these college students. In order to explicate the experiences of male African American community college students, the following research questions framed the study:

1. How do interactions with family and peers influence, if at all, male African American Community College students to succeed academically?

2. How do non-academic responsibilities (family, work) for male African

   American Community College students affect, if at all, their academic

   experience?

3. How do male African American students interact with their university and

   peer communities, if at all? Are these communities ever in conflict with the

   other?

This approach provided the best and most detailed *stories* from the participants

(Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; van Manren, 1990). The

literature review discussed in detail the challenges, strains, and pressures African

Americans males face in education and society. This phenomenological study closely

examined African Americans, in this case community college students, seeing if their

experiences complimented or conflicted one another. According to Merriam (2001),

characteristics of qualitative research included the use of methods that were interactive,

interpretive, used inductive data analysis, holistically explored social phenomena, and

involved developing a rapport with the participants. A goal of this phenomenological

study was to "reduce individuals with a phenomenon to a description of the universal

essence, being able to grasp the 'very nature of the thing'" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

This research interpreted the participants' perspective and how meanings, actions, and

events were shaped by their lived experiences.

This qualitative approach included in-depth interviews that provided information

and insight not necessarily obvious or noticeable. According to Creswell (2003), "These

interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in

number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants" (p. 188). Leedy and Ormrod (2001) determined that interviews could be flexible and, if conducted correctly, yield interesting information. Although interviews based on memory can be inaccurate, they presented a picture of how participants perceive situations and circumstances. The qualitative approach also impacted the role of the researcher.

Researcher's Role

In this phenomenological research, I was a primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2001). The information obtained expanded to nonverbal responses such as facial expressions and body language. I was responsive to the context under study and adapted to certain circumstances and environments giving the researcher a chance to maximize opportunities to collect data and important information.

Two significant threats to qualitative research, as delineated by Locke (2000), were researcher bias and the effect of the researcher on the setting or on the participants. It was imperative that I identified biases, values, and personal interests about the research topic. There were many issues to consider to ensure the validity of the study, including description, interpretation, researcher bias, and reactivity. The use of tape recordings provided an accurate description of what was said. I conducted member checking to make certain that responses were accurately.

I clarified any personal biases and conducted all interviews in an appropriate setting where the participants were comfortable, where the environment was illuminated with proper lighting, and to the liking of the participants. This was needed to avoid researcher bias. According to Merriam (2001), "The researcher must be sensitive to the

context and all the variables within it, including the physical setting, the people, the overt and covert agendas, and the nonverbal behavior" (p. 21). I was sensitive and intuitive to the information being obtained.

The following section outlines protocol procedures in contacting the community colleges to solicit participation. The background of the community college district will be presented and the reasoning behind the selection of this particular district. The criteria for selection of students, as well as the methods to obtain data through interviews will also be explained in this section. Additional areas in this section discuss the analysis and coding of data procedures.

Background of Study and Participants

The Pacific Community College district is located in California. The city is regarded as being one of the largest cities in the United Status. The district is comprised of three community colleges located throughout the city, with each campus being no more than 20 minutes from the other. Southern Community College, Middle Community College, and Northern Community College comprise the district and have a combined enrollment of over 120,000 students each year. All three colleges offer certification programs preparing students for entry-level jobs in the workforce. Associate degrees are offered in the arts and sciences programs for students wishing to transfer to 4-year colleges and universities. The Always Learning Education campus offers noncredit basic skills classes, life skills classes, and vocational classes at multiple sites throughout the city that serves over 99,000 students each year. Military personnel benefit from the district's offerings as over 58,000 individuals are able to take courses at military bases.

The district office is within 15 minutes of each campus, located in the central part of the city. The chancellor serves as the District's Chief executive officer and oversees the daily operations of all district, college, military, and center programs. In carrying out the policies, the chancellor works with the five-member Board of Trustees who is locally elected and serves on a rotating basis. Elections are held every other election year and trustees are elected to serve for 4 years. In addition to the board members, three students also serve as members.

The district follows a "shared governance" model in which faculty, students, and staff provides input into key budget and policy issues. The district prides themselves on being an excellent academic institution, financially sound, and dedicated to serving the needs of students, faculty, and staff. The rich history of the district and the large amounts of students served yearly made this district an ideal one to use as the focus of the study. While the district is one of the largest community college districts in the state, I wanted to see if this district does struggle (like other community college districts) to adequately serve the needs of all students within the community from the eyes of African American male community college students.

The district has 2,300 full-time faculty, 1,758 adjunct faculty, and 1,102 professional and support staff. As of spring 2007, there were 88,664 students enrolled in the system. As of fall 2006, African American accounted for 8.4% total student enrollment in the district. For each community college specifically, African Americans represented 13.2% student enrollment at South Community College, 6.2% at Middle

Community College, and 5.2% at North Community College. African American male

community college students in this district will be interviewed

Data Collection and Analysis Process

· This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the

University of San Diego on October 17, 2008. Once I received approval, I contacted each

community college transfer center and counseling centers for assistance in contacting

students and putting up flyers inviting interested students to an informational meeting

discussing the research. In addition, I met with the Vice Chancellor for Student Services

for the district and asked for assistance. The Chancellor's office sent out a letter to

African American male students requesting for assistance (I wrote the letter). Interested

students contacted me (those who participated and/or those received the letter) using the

telephone number or email listed on letter (Appendix A). As a follow-up, prospective

participants were emailed an invitation as well (Appendix B). I met with each participant

at a mutually agreed upon location for privacy concerns. The signed consent was obtained

before data collection and a copy was given to each participant (Appendix C).

With permission from each informant, a follow-up interview was made for

clarification and validation of themes during data analysis. Additional interviews lasted

up to 60 minutes. I utilized the transcribed interviews and identified the essential themes

expressed by the participants. Once the themes of the various transcripts were identified,

the text was interpreted to move the language to a more universal level of abstraction

while at the same time remaining faithful to the participant's experience. I had a detailed

four-phase process to acquire data for the research.

Phase 1: Met with Faculty and Administrators at Community Colleges to Discuss

Research

I contacted key administrators at the community colleges where I planned to conduct my research as well as met with administrators at the chancellor's office. I discussed my idea with community college administrators and asked for support with communication from their offices. I gave administrators a rough outline of what I hoped to accomplish and asked for feedback and ideas of how to begin the recruiting process. I was able to communicate with all community college presidents in the district and was provided full support for my research.

I spoke with various student services officers and their staff at the community colleges informing them of my research. Having these preliminary talks with staff and administrators gave me an understanding of how each campus works in terms of protocol when communicating with their students. Each campus had a different style of communication and my main individual contacts varied by campus and department.

Phase 2: Initial Selections/Interviews

After obtaining IRB approval, I followed up my preliminary meetings with key staff and administrators at the community colleges. Students were invited to an informational session about the study on campus via email, phone calling, and signup opportunities at the transfer and counseling centers. In addition, there were letters mailed from the chancellor's office asking for participation. Students qualified for the study if they (a) were intending to transfer to a 4-year institution, (b) have attended community college for at least one semester and earned at least 15 units, (c) agreed to meeting

multiple times during the year, and (d) are male. After receiving information from students willing to participate, an initial in-person meeting was conducted individually with each student to go over the purpose of the study and to confirm participation. At this point, the appropriate consent forms was discussed and signed by participants and a meeting time (1 hour) was scheduled to conduct the study (consent form located in Appendix A).

While the goal was to have between four and six students interviewed, I needed to have more students identified and agree to participate in case of participant dropout. The goal was to have two to three additional participants as part of the study. If someone did drop out of the study, having other participants prevent the study from being postponed, while securing those individuals who agreed to participate from the beginning. In the end, I had nine participants for the study

Phase 3: Conduct Interviews

Before interviews began, a pilot interview was given to ensure that the interview questions were addressing the research questions. This also identified any areas needing re-working (questions, logistics) for a successful interview to occur. A colleague stood in as a participant.

After conducting a successful pilot interview, I was able to secure interviews based on a variety of communication with students. First, a letter was sent to all African American male community college students by the district office. I wrote and signed the letter. The letter was then put on official district letterhead and mailed out requesting participation and detailing the purpose of my research. The letter gave my contact

information (cell phone, email) if they had any questions or wanted to participate. I also worked with each counseling or transfer center at all the community colleges to communicate and solicit participation from their students. I received many more emails than phone calls. Overall students were quite interested in my research and asked questions concerning time commitment and scheduling. To be consistent, I resent them information about my research and what I was requesting of them in terms of participating. I also asked for their contact information, whatever they felt comfortable giving me. Two email addresses and a phone number was preferred so they could be reached in case of an emergency or change in time.

When ready, interviews were conducted on the students' campus in a reserved meeting room. Overall 11 students agreed to participate in the study. Via email or phone, I secured meeting times with each student. Afterwards, I was able to reserve meeting times at all campuses. Each meeting room was a classroom or conference room that was private and secure. When I obtained the room locations, I emailed the student and texted their cell phones (if available) with the room location and time for the meeting on their campus. Twenty-four hours before the scheduled interview, I gave them a reminder email and text. One student dropped out of the study due to time constraints and one failed to call me back. In the end, I had nine students participating. All students were interviewed on their campuses. One student agreed to interview at my house since the campus was closed due to holiday break. I offered to meet at a library or coffee shop if he felt more comfortable, but he was comfortable meeting at my house on a Sunday. My house was private and quiet for the interview.

Before the beginning of the interviews, I went over the consent form information and again clarified the nature of this research, why the interview would be tape-recorded, and how their responses would be used in the study. After agreement, I thanked them for agreeing to participate and asked for them to share what they felt comfortable in sharing. I asked if they needed any water and let them tell me when they wanted to begin.

Interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes. The participants' ages ranged from 20-51. I asked questions to the participants and they responded while being tape recorded. If needed, follow-up meetings were scheduled. At this time, I went over the purpose of the study, the consent form, how the interview would be conducted and confirmed participation one last time. The interview began with a few background questions for data-keeping purposes. These questions asked for such things as total class units completed and length of attendance.

In addition, open-ended questions and semi-structured questions probed for more detailed answers, inquiring about their daily schedule (work, school), responsibilities outside of school, and how school connections (clubs, organizations) affect their ability to succeed academically, if at all. All interview questions (Appendix D) were grounded in the conceptual framework discussed earlier in the literature review. As discussed earlier, questions guided the interview.

The nine participants consisted of full and part-time students. Ages ranged from 20-51 years old. Each community college was represented at least by two students interviewed for the study. However, some students took courses at multiple campuses within the district but clearly identified with one campus as their primary campus of

attending. Table 1 gives the breakdown of participants by age and student status.

Pseudonyms were used to protect student identities.

Table 1. *Participant demographic information*

Participant	Age	Student type	Field of Study
David	24	full time	Undeclared
Joseph	20	full time	Undeclared
Connor	31	part time	Kinesiology
Erik	21	part time	Music
Steve	21	part time	Pre-Law
Michael	21	full time	Kinesiology
Chris	46	part time	Architecture
Nate	51	full time	Computer Science
Alex	34	part time	History

Phase 4: Coding and Analysis

After all interviews concluded, data were read and analyzed, and notes were made

from initial coding. Responses were captured via tape recorder and minimal notes were

taken during the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim

using a transcription service. The goal was to interpret the data and identify key themes

derived from the participants' statements and then group into their sections to discuss in

the dissertation (Polkinghorne, 1989; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). These sections either

encompassed similar or different themes from participants that helped explain the

phenomenon researched and prevented overlapping and repetition (van Manren, 1990).

The analysis strived to describe the *what* and *how* concerning the students' experience through the use of textual and structural descriptions respectively (Creswell, 2007). After analyzing the data, identifying meanings and themes, the end result was to present a detailed phenomenological descriptive study, explaining the strains and pressures male African American community college students face daily.

<center>Student Participants and Their Interactions</center>

In the beginning, some of the participants seemed a bit nervous. Initially for some, their answers were short, answering only in a few words to my questions. I observed most of the younger students were the most nervous while the older students (40s and 50s) were talkative from the beginning. However, the younger students got more comfortable as the interview progressed and then gave rich, detailed answers. The older students continued to be consistent with their responses, at times, asking me if they were "talking too much." Many of the younger students' tone were quite soft when responding to my questions. This was quite different from the older students. The change in tone might be attributed to being tape recorded but even their tone became stronger during the interview sessions.

Students were very respectful and apologized if they said a word or phrase they felt was disrespectful or rude. This only happened a few times. Eye contact was strong by most of the students, looking directly at me when listening to the question posed or giving a response. A few times, some students looked away or into the window to respond but never seem distracted. Often students laughed during the interviews and made jokes, becoming more comfortable as the interviews continued. However, emotions would go

back and forth. Some students began the interviews laughing and then became emotional and even crying in some cases. Other students became angry (not with me) but with their responses and took a few moments to compose themselves. A few students shook their heads in amazement because of their responses—their feelings of sadness and grief could not offer a verbal explanation.

At times, it was difficult to sit there and watch these students experience a wide range in emotions in such a relatively short period of time. I had tissue available prior to the interview (as well as water) if students needed a break to compose or rest. A few times, students took a few seconds but kept on talking. At the end of the interviews, I thanked them for their time and turned the tape recorder off. Students seemed relaxed, excited about this research, and thankful they were part of it. Each student thanked me for letting them be a part of this research and asked why I chose this topic. After this interview, our non-taped conversation lasted about 15 minutes or so per student. Many of the students remarked how relieved they were to "get this off their chest" and have a place where they could talk about their frustrations. I thanked them again for their participation and gave each student a $25 Visa gift card and thank you card. My original letter/communication to students did not indicate a gift since I did not want to alter their responses and validity of the study. I ended the conversation informing them I would next continue interviewing students and then write up my findings for the dissertation after the new year. If there were any questions, they could feel free to contact me. I would be contacting them to go over responses and make sure the information was captured

correctly. Three main influences: cultural forces, academic forces, and sociological and political forces served as themes and framed the findings for the study.

Validity and Reliability

Researchers conducting qualitative studies are most concerned with issues of bias, honesty, credibility, and authenticity (Creswell, 2003). I screened participants to make sure they would provide truthful information in their responses. The technique of member checking ensured the accuracy and the validity of the participants' discourse. Verification instead of validity was used, placing heavy emphasis on the trustworthiness of the researcher (Creswell, 2003). I used bracketing to lessen researcher bias as a means of being aware of presuppositions and approaching interviews in an open manner (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of the researcher was to examine and set aside any biases that can change the way data was collected and interpreted (Creswell). This method enabled the researcher to bring to light as many aspects of the meaning as possible (Stones, 1988).

Summary

The chapter identified the methodology used to conduct this research. This chapter included the background of the study and participants, the process of data collection, interview protocol, and the approaches used to analyze the data. The benefits of using a phenomological study were discussed as well as the instrumental part the researcher played in the study. The significance of the population was illustrated and the researcher identified all the actions to ensure procedures were practices in an appropriate and confidential manner. Practices included obtaining informed consent from the

participants and reporting all facets of the research. The next chapter reports the findings

from the data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me,
certainly, but I am also, much more than that. So are we all.

—James Baldwin

This chapter will begin describing each community college within the district,

serving as a backdrop for viewing the findings of the study. The second section will

discuss the student participants and their interactions with the researcher. The final

section will restate the conceptual framework and how the findings were organized by the

identified themes captured through interviews.

Southern Community College

Southern Community College is located on a 60-acre campus in the downtown

portion of the city. This immediate area of town is surrounded by a neighboring high

school and a few fast-food restaurants. Public transportation is across from the college

which many students use or walk to campus. Surrounding the campus are some older

buildings, a few boarded up. Homeless people walk the streets around campus and many

of them you can see when you enter campus. The area is quite different 5 minutes down

the street to another part of downtown: a collection of restaurants, shopping boutiques

and malls, and high-rise condo living. Athletic Park, home of the local professional

baseball team is within a short drive and walking distance. In this area, housing (for rent

or purchase) is quite expensive and the area has been revitalized extensively, attracting

high-end consumers and tourists.

The college offers more than 100 majors, 115 certificate programs, and 1,500 classes. A total of 17,437 students attend Southern Community College. The majority of them (49%) are between the ages of 18 and 24. For African American college students, they comprise 13.2% of the student population. African Americans represent the third highest group of population at Southern, behind Latino (32%) and White (31%) students. Breaking down the statistics further, 46% of students attending the college are male.

On campus, I witnessed a campus striving to grow with construction tape lining certain areas of the college and signs informing people of upcoming construction projects. The campus is over 90 years old and definitely had an older, at times worn look in some of the buildings. However, the buildings were constantly being used by students, often hanging in front of the classrooms or casually talking. Students would sit against the classroom doors outside or in the rooms eating their lunch or talking on the phone. Every time I was on campus, the college was active with student activity and walking traffic.

At the same time students were talking to one another, you did have individuals who went from class to class and didn't casually speak to others. Many of those students I witnessed were older students. They did not fit into the 18-24-year-old category that comprises the majority group of students attending Southern. I made a point to eat a meal at every college so I bought breakfast in the cafeteria and sat down to observe the students and faculty. The cafeteria is located in the center of main campus. It was much quieter in the cafeteria than outside. Students were eating and working on their homework. Some faculty were assisting students with work while other faculty members were getting lunch to-go and leaving. Tables were filled with flyers about upcoming meetings and campus

event and there were tables outside the cafeteria run by students asking for participation for charity events or other college-related activities. When I was leaving and putting my tray away, the lady I bought food from asked if I liked my meal. I told her yes and thank you. She told me to have a good day and good luck with exams. She assumed I was a student. I did not tell her otherwise but thanked her again and left. The surroundings, high activity of the students and the diversity of not just its students, but faculty and staff, gave off the feeling of an active and busy college.

<div align="center">Middle Community College</div>

Middle Community College sits on a 104-acre campus in the central part of the city. Currently, much of the college is being renovated and construction dominates the campus. Middle offers 160 certification programs and associate degrees. Middle has a total student enrollment of 21,661 and is ranked as one of the top 100 producers of associate degrees in the nation. Middle College is also ranked as the top transfer institution in the city. African American college students rank fifth in population (6.2%) behind White (41%), Latino (19%), Asian/Pacific Islander (16%), and unreported (9%). More women attend the college than men, who represent 46% of the total population (2007). Campus enrollment consists primarily of students within the 18-24 age group (58%), the highest among all three colleges in the district.

While on this campus, I did not see the type of diversity like Southern Community College. I saw mostly white students in the classrooms and walking on campus. Students were pleasant but people did not socialize too much with one another. Students congregated on the many grassy areas in front of the cafeteria or on picnic benches

located through campus. I went into the cafeteria to get lunch and I was asked by the cashier if I could take a survey about food service on campus. I told her I did not attend Mesa but she said "No problem, professor, I just want to get your opinion." I was dressed in a pair of jeans and a sweater and she assumed I was an instructor. I sat down, ate my meal, and filled out the form. This cafeteria was very loud, much louder than outside in the courtyard. Students were chatting and tables were littered with papers about meetings and concerns. Students took this time to socialize, not use for study time.

Unlike Southern, Middle College was surrounded by homes and some retail stores. A neighboring high school was within a mile of campus. The campus had much more of a residential feeling and leaves and trees lined the campus and surrounding areas. I was hoping to see more African American students walking around campus like Southern Community, but I failed to see more than a few students within a 90-minute period. I decided to walk around to the gymnasium and there I saw some African American male students, more than I had seen all day. However, I did not see any African American female students. In fact, I had not seen any that particular day at all.

Northern Community College

Built in 1969, this college is the smallest in the district. Northern Community College has 10,698 students (profile, 2007). Situated in the northern area of the city, this college is located in a densely suburban area—much different than the other college locations in the district. Northern Community College offers over 120 certificates, associate degrees, and transfer programs to institutions. African Americans are among the lowest student representation (5.2%) at the college, behind Whites (42%), Asian/Pacific

Islander (15%), Latino (14%), and Flipino (10%). However, in contrast to the other campuses within the district, more men (56%) attend Northern Community than women (44%) (2007). The college is primarily attended by students within the 18-24 group (44%), almost identical to Southern Community, but behind Middle Community College.

Out of the three campuses, Northern Community College was by far the most different in terms of campus feel. When driving onto the campus, there was a long road that took you into the *main* area of campus. The road was surrounded by old buildings, no trees or grass, but dirt. There were sidewalks but few people were walking on them; there was little walking observed at all. At the end of the drive, you ran into buildings that are more like portables—this housed the classrooms and offices. To the right was the area to park.

Construction projects, noise from machines hammering, could be heard everywhere. Dust and dirt paved the road where you drove and walked. Students were around but in pockets spread out through campus. I noticed the majority of students interacted in front of the library. The campus did not have a formal *center* or *hub* on campus. I only observed students walking to and from the parking lot. There was not much signage on campus so I had to ask where the student cafeteria/store was located. Walking there I noticed all the buildings looked similar and had a temporary feel to them compared to some of the newer buildings constructed on campus. Entering the cafeteria, there were few tables. This was more of a grab-and-go area for students. Some students ate outside, leaning against the rails or sitting on the steps. I got my food and went outside

to eat. Students were discussing their exams and plans for the weekend. This was their designated formal place to eat and socialize.

I did not see much racial diversity among the students when I was visiting. I did not see any African American students the first few times I visited the school. I mostly saw Asian/Pacific Islander, White, and Hispanic students. Compared to the other campuses, Northern Community College felt quite different—this might be due to the massive amount of construction on campus or its relatively young history compared to the other campuses in the district.

Results

The responses from interviews were organized into three main influences consistent with the conceptual framework: cultural forces, academic forces, and sociological and political forces. These themes framed the findings for the study.

Cultural Forces

This section will highlight the cultural forces and pressures participants identified through their responses.

Family influence. Family attitudes (positive or negative) toward school had a profound effect on the participants' drive to succeed academically. Over half of the students indicated their parents were quite supportive in their academic pursuits. For many participants, students recognized that if they wanted to have the nice clothes, car, job, house, they would need an education. The findings are consistent with literature providing empirical evidence arguing that parental involvement in their children's education often had a strong and positive association with student achievement (Fields-

Smith, 2005; Gutman, 2000). For Joseph, his family told him that college was the ability

to give him options in life:

> They have been pretty encouraging because they know that it's a step up from
> what I could have been doing, because I could have just stopped going to school
> and do a minimum wage job and try to find a career. I said I still wanted to get my
> education so they continue to support me. They've been pretty encouraging
> because it's an expectation, to finish school, 4 years of college and university, all
> of that. It's been brought upon me since I was young, going to school, getting
> good grades. Like me, they have encouraged me a lot and I graduated early with a
> 3.5 GPA from high school.

Erik acknowledged his parents are supportive but he was stubborn when it came to taking

their advice. "They have been very encouraging, they always encourage me to do better

and strive for the best. But you know I tend to shy away from that because they are telling

me to do it. But they are very encouraging, actually yeah."

Students also indicated that the parental/family influence to succeed academically

was not always positive. When talking about his parents, Michael said:

> I'd say in the beginning part of me starting off college, they were very supportive
> and very, you now, right there with me. But you know, right now, they are still
> supporting me and they want me to, you know, have a bright future and finish
> school and things like that. But you know, lately, you know, we don't talk about it
> much. They just, I don't know, let me just go off and do my thing, you know.

For one student, he received no support from his family to attend college

whatsoever, for which he never quite understood the reasons. Confused and frustrated,

Chris, an older student and youngest of eight siblings, said:

> Not at all. Not at all. Not even 1%. I don't know why they were not supportive. I
> can speculate is that by that time, I'm the youngest of eight siblings and my elder
> sister as far as I know she never, I think she got her degree but I don't know in
> what field and she went back to get her doctorate but she never finished. My
> second eldest sister had an illness and she died when she was 32 years old. My
> third sister never got her degree but was in some form of a community college.

Even today she's still in community college. She never, she kind of got wrapped up in real life and never really wanted to pursue her degree. Then my brother, my oldest brother, number four, I don't believe he ever got his degree. My fifth sister she never got her degree and she went into business selling things like Avon and now she is very successful. I think she's always been a hustler and much less of an academic. My next sister she got her associates degree. I remember when she graduated from high school, my family didn't attend and it was kind of odd that they let her graduate and we were just there. I remember we were just sitting at home. We were sitting at home eating cookies or something and when she got home after her graduation, no one made any big deal, no party, no congratulations and if you know my mom and I told you a bit about my mum running away from blacks and gangs and that sort of them, you would be utterly surprised that she didn't put more effort into kind of celebrating my sister's graduation because she's so loving and so caring and so into her family. It was quite a shock.

For three of the older students in particular, one parent played a significant role in their desire to attend college while the other was not supportive or present. The supportive parent was always the mother. Nate reflected on his strong influence from his mother while growing up:

My dad, well, my pops was like never, he was never around. He was in and out of my life. I might have saw him growing up about two or three times. During the times I really, really needed him. But those were the choices he made. And my moms, I guess typical black woman. Strong, did what she had to do. Had to be both mother and dad and stuff and it was always about school. You know my mom was always like "school, school, school. You're not going to go anywhere without school." My mom was smart and she graduated from high school early. But back then, it wasn't about, a lot of black women going to college. It was about starting a family and stuff. And that's what she did. It was always in my family, my mom, always emphasized, always pushed. But like I said, being a typical black teenager, or a typical teenager, I made some wrong choices. So it took me a little longer you know, to get where I needed to go.

For Connor, his mother provided the positive influence but his father wanted him to focus on athletics versus academics leaving him torn between his parents and eventually alienated from his father:

My mother is very encouraging. I'm of mixed background, so my mother is Samoan and she kind of set a history for Samoan women. She was the first female officer in any branch of service that was of Samoan race. And so he was very strong about getting my college degree. My father on the other hand he was all about sports and that's what he pressured me into. And he made me want to drop out of college or he was pressuring me to drop out of college so I can pursue a professional career. My mother is happy that I'm pursuing my college career again at 31, trying to get the higher education and everything. My father, he and I really don't talk. However, my step-father, he's very encouraging as well.

For all students interviewed, family/parental influences had an effect on their desire to attend college. For some students, their mothers had the most profound effect on their lives referring to their mothers as "strong," "tough," and "direct." And for other students, their parental influences left them frustrated but determined to persist in college successfully.

Parental education level and student motivation. The education levels of all parents of students participating in the interviewed varied from no formal education to having advanced degrees. For David, the lack of formal education of his parents was a sign of how important getting a degree was not just vital for his future, but his family's economic survival as well:

You know history teaches us and shows us that civilization without education, they really didn't go that far. Even now, with other countries, you know, they don't have access to education. So I know how important it is. I think it's, in the same, kind of like for my future too. When I have kids, you know, I mean because I know with my mom, she doesn't have education. And my dad he barely got exposed to education. But once he came here too advantage of it. And he got an RN degree, so he's doing registered nursing stuff now. So you know, just, I think it's important for family and stuff, for the future.

For Michael, he recognized his parents' lack of formal education was due to their commitment to provide for his family. He said:

Let's see my dad graduated from high school and he went to trade school and that was it. He stopped at trade school. I don't think he ever graduated or got a degree but, of course, he had, you know, my sister and me and that's when, you know, he had to work. And then my mom she graduated from high school and she did, I think about a year at a junior college, and then, you know, had the kid thing and she started working as well.

In Connor's family, his parents possess college and advanced degrees which he used as a motivation to succeed. He said "my mother has her master's. And my step-father has his master's. And my father has some junior college and a little bit of 4-year and then he went professional sports and in the military." Steve echoed the importance of seeing his parents' education as positive reinforcement to attend college—it always drove him to succeed:

> My mom got her Master's degree. My dad he got his bachelor's at Rutgers University, so both my parents got their college education. So seeing that, I always knew I needed to get my college education to be something, especially nowadays. They talk about how getting your bachelor is the new high school diploma right now. So I definitely want to get my bachelors and then go onto my masters. The more you know, the further it's going to take you.

Unlike the other participants, Erik was going back to school at the same time his mother had returned to school, motivating him further:

> My dad is just a high school graduate, he didn't do college. But my mom has attended college before, she is going back to school right now to finish her degree. It's interesting that we are both in school at the same time, but cool, I guess. I feel like someone understands what I'm doing.

The parents' educational backgrounds (or lack) motivated students to attend college for academic and career mobility. Students saw how the advantages of having a college degree or limitations of not having a degree affected them in terms of

employment and financial stability. In particular, Alex did not want to struggle like his

parents who did not have a formal education and that scared him into going to school:

> I always saw what my parents didn't want me to see—they struggled financially,
> fought over money, bills, and going from job to job, home to home. It was crazy
> man, I mean they didn't have anything, we didn't have anything we could call our
> own. They never finished college, just high school—no GED, no nothin'. I knew I
> had to go to school, and do whatever it took to make it happen. My family
> understood that but didn't know how to help me. I did it a lot on my own. I was
> just scared of ending up like them. It sounds horrible I know dude, but it's true.
> That's how I felt.

For many of the students, they saw how not having a college education impacted

the family's socioeconomic situation. Students saw their parents having to work multiple

jobs to not just provide for the family, but to survive. The reality of not having an

education provided the motivation to attend college. For those students who had educated

parents, they saw firsthand how the benefits of an education affected their upbringing and

created a culture in the house that stressed college was the only way to achieve success

and mobility in society.

Time constraints. All participants were asked to describe a *typical* day in their

lives. All student descriptions involved getting up early in the morning and going to bed

late at night. Balancing all the duties of the day left participants feeling mentally and

physically exhausted. Nate, the father of seven children, strived to remain a presence in

his children's lives daily. He described his day as extremely taxing but manageable:

> I usually work from 7 am to 3:30 pm. Instead of clocking out at 3:30, I just sit
> there at my desk, pull out my laptop and go online and do my homework coz, I
> know, you know if I get home, it's not gonna happen, you know I mean, it's not
> going to happen! So, the schedule is, it's challenging. You know, but fortunately,
> you know, I'm working with a woman that realizes what I'm trying to do and she
> realized that it's for the betterment of the entire family, so, you know, I have a

partner in this. You know, so if I don't come home until 6 pm, you know those days, she's all, you know, dinner's already cooked and stuff of that nature and you know, the boys are doing their homework and stuff because one of the things that you know, we emphasize in that household is, you know, you need your education. Okay, so when you come home, alright, no TV, no video games, as a matter of fact, they're not even allowed to play video games during the week, only on the weekends. You know, your homework is done and stuff of that nature. So yeah, the schedule is challenging but you know it's workable.

For Chris, a father of four, he recognized the support of his wife with children and house duties like Nate but does admit the days are extremely challenging, leaving little time for sleep, personal time, and homework:

On a typical day I would get up about 6:15 am, okay? Sometimes I get up later, depends on how late I went to bed. So about 6:15, I get the kids up at about 6:30 because they have to be in school by 7:50. Get them up, my wife and I participate together. We get the kids dressed, showered, fed and off to school. Then she and I get on our computers and check our email. I start doing my typical work stuff, which is looking at contracts—I'm a general contractor. So I do my typical general construction work and then about 2 pm either my wife, whoever's busiest will . . . 2 pm we have to pick up the kids at which time I lose my focus for work and then I'll start doing my homework. I'll either do a little work and a little homework depending on how urgent my homework is—I'll usually temper my homework. If my work is really urgent, I'll have to forgo doing my homework that time until 6 or 7 pm. If I haven't gotten into my homework then I'll pick it up at that time and then work on my homework until about 8 which is the time, well, somewhere in there dinner comes along. It's about an hour and then we have to put the kids down. They, you know—three kids against 2 adults—they're, they kind of beat us down a little bit and then they get to bed around 9 pm. My wife is very tired at that time. So then I'll usually start my sleepless night and work on my homework again from then until about 11 pm, then I get burned out. I play a few games of heart on the computer and then after I finish with my hearts I'm hungry. I'll eat a little something then I'll check and make sure all my homework stuff is either done or I'll find out where it is and I'll get it all aligned and then if my wife is still awake we'll jump into bed and then chat for about an hour and then go to sleep at about 1 am. And then I wake up at about 6:15, 6:30 the next morning.

For Connor, a former athlete who is married but does not have children, he tried to balance athletic recreational time with school, family, and work, somewhat successfully:

All right, so 6:15 the alarm goes off. Usually I try not to hit snooze, but I'll eventually roll out of bed, probably by 6:45—the latest I'll roll out of bed. I'll get up, I'll iron my clothes, jump in the shower and try and be on the road by 7:30 and head to work. And from work I'm here from 8 am to 5 pm. I'll just do what I need to do at work, after that come 5 pm, I'm on the phone with friends trying to figure out what the game times are and if I need to do my homework before game time or afterwards. Sports and working out is very important to me. And then I'm also calling my wife to see what she wants for dinner. So and then usually if I have an early evening game, let's say 7 pm I'll play that game. It takes about an hour, and I'm usually done by 8 and at that time, I'll call my wife and say "hey, I'm on my way home, do you want me to pick something up or do you want me to pick you up and we'll go get something to eat?" And by the time that's all done with it's 9:30, we're back home and we're done eating. She has to study for her school and then I'll study for a few hours. And usually by 11:30, 12 am, as time starts winding down, we are in bed by 12:30. And then it starts all over.

Connor was the only married student in his response who indicated having extracurricular activities to balance the work, family, and job responsibilities. However, his social activities time might be possible due to his lack of child responsibilities as compared to the other students.

For participants who are not married nor have children, their typical days were spent balancing jobs, classes, and family responsibilities. For Erik, his days revolved around taking care of younger relatives and sometimes serving as parent:

Most of the days I kind of get up around 10 am because I was out playing music the night before. Some days I'm at my mom's house until she gets out of school. So, Mondays and Wednesdays I get around 10ish. Tuesdays and Thursdays I'm up around 8 am for the reason of being to come here [campus] and do my two classes. And then I'll go home, clean up the house, then I'll go pick up my little brother. Then I'll go pick up my nieces and nephew at 5:30 pm, 6 pm. Then I study or work until 10 pm, then I come home, get everything ready for the next day and then go to sleep. Sometimes, I've got to watch my nieces and my nephew and sometimes I have to go help my mom with my little brother because he goes to school far away. I'm very busy with all this stuff.

For Michael, taking care of his younger brother during the day meant making sure he was

focused on school and nothing else:

> Some days, I take care of him, you know if I can. Most of the times I pick him up,
> take him to school in the morning. Sometimes I go to his school, you know, make
> sure you know, he's doing good with his teachers and stuff like that. Lately,
> actually not this report card but the one before that, he had like a "D" in his math
> class so you know I was kind of mad about that, you know, coz you know big
> brother has to say something. I told him "I don't want you to follow that path." I
> remember high school, I wasn't the best, the brightest, the best kid. So I don't
> want to see him take the path I took. You know, he says he wants to go to UCLA
> and I told him, you know you want to go to a big-time school, you got to take your
> SATs, stay focus. But yeah, I'd say I take care of him in a way. In a sense you
> know.

In Steve's case, taking care of younger relatives did not occur but his jobs

dominated his work day, leaving little time for school when he was a part-time student:

> Mondays wouldn't be school at all. I would just go to work, eight hours. Then
> after that I would go to work. And then from that point on, when work was over, I
> would just come home and hang out, watch TV. Tuesdays, I remember going to
> class from probably 9 am-2 pm. Then from that point I would go hang out if I
> didn't work. So it wasn't, school was not a priority at all really. It was just going
> to class, no going to the library afterwards to study. No going home and really
> doing homework. It was just class, okay, I was done. Any school work is done in
> class really. That was my attitude.

However, after prioritizing school, his time commitment changed but his days were still

challenging trying to handle his responsibilities. He said:

> As a full-time student now I would work ten hours a week. I would have class
> every day. And then if I got off of class or got out of class, I went to work, worked
> like five hours, came home and studied, and studied! And then if I didn't have
> work that day, after class I went to the library and studied. I'm busy, very busy,
> but now feel like I'm going somewhere. It's a good feeling just because like I said,
> when I was a part-time student I didn't study. I didn't really know why I was even
> in school—just because I wasn't really doing anything. It felt like I wasn't in
> school, I was just going to class.

A typical day for Joseph meant spending a lot of time driving back and forth from home to school and running errands for family, ending with picking up parents from work late in the evening. He explained:

> Wake up at 6 am, get to school around 7:30 after I drop my mom at work. And then class from 8 until about 2:10 and then I have to pick my mom up at 3:30 and take her to her other job. And then probably take my dad to his therapy that is back over here and it's a commute, at least 30 minutes from here to the southeast part of the city, back and forth usually three times a day. And then I had to pick my aunt and my mom from work at ten.

In David's daily routine, he attempted to find even the smallest amount of time not working to fit in studying, but was not always easy to study or find a place to study. He said:

> Let me see on Mondays, I have an hour, because I work downtown, so on Mondays I have an hour before my class starts from when I get off work. So I use that hour to go study at the library. Then on Tuesday I have from when I get off work at 3 pm until 5:30, well Mondays and Wednesdays I have about three hours before my class starts, so I stay in the library and try and study as much as possible. Then Tuesdays and Thursdays I have an hour before class starts and I try to use that time for studying before class starts. I find it every challenging at my house. I can't study. I've got to come somewhere like, an educational environment, like the library here or some where I can just find a quiet spot and study. I can't study at home or at other places. I got to be, you know, I guess just being here puts you in that mind frame of just studying and stuff.

For all students, trying to juggle school, family, work, and personal times proved to be extremely difficult. The schedules of the day dictated the priorities of the students. The follow-up question asked how many hours a week students studied and did they feel it was adequate given their academic demands. Their responses bout their preparation time varied greatly. Overall, all students did not feel their academic preparation was adequate. David replied he studies about "10 hours" a week and felt his study time was

adequate given his work load. He was very confident in his response. However, other

students were not as convinced their study time was appropriate. Steve replied, "Aw man,

to be totally honest with you I'll probably say I study a week maybe like 2 hours, maybe

2 hours and 30 minutes." Asking him if he felt the study time was adequate, he said "No,

not at all." For his response to why he only studies for that period of time, Steve was very

honest and said:

> I'll probably say laziness, like I get home from work or school or something like
> that or playing basketball and you know, I'll go into a room and I'll probably turn
> on the TV rather than go straight to the book or something like that, just to be
> honest with you. Like you know, I might not say laziness, like I don't know—just
> if I go in there I won't do it unless it's like something like a test or something
> coming up maybe. Then I'll probably study for a little bit, maybe about 15, 20
> minutes or something and then once the test day comes, before the class or
> something I'll probably study a little bit more like 10, 15 minutes. That's it.

For Chris, he feels his study time is adequate but acknowledges his study process

might be different than other students given what he refers to acquiring "poor study

habits" at an early age. He replied:

> I study about four to six hours a day. I'm very, very dedicated to my studies now.
> But I think that my studying, studying 6 hours a day is what people can get
> accomplished in three hours. And the reason why, is during my grade school
> years, and all throughout my kindergarten to high school, and leaving high school,
> I developed some really bad study habits. So I don't study as well as most people
> who are really determined to study. No matter how determined I get to study I've
> got a mental block that just prevents me from focusing on what I want to focus on.
> And I can read the same material and get nothing out of it and then I go. That's
> just like someone just told their name and I'd forgotten their name just like that.
> And then I read it again, and again, and I get it. So it's taking me three times that
> amount of time to get the same benefit that someone else who buckles down and
> focuses. So, yeah, let's call it my daily study is about four to six hours with about,
> one to three hours of actual success.

Although Chris felt he had to study harder and longer than other students, he was confident and positive of the actual study time and result of his study efforts. His response was quite the opposite of Connor who did not feel his study time was adequate but attributed his challenges to having a semester strictly of online courses and little instructor interaction:

> I feel it's inadequate, because this semester I decided to take online courses and I feel like it's not. . . . I don't have that chance to sit with the teacher day in and day out to tell me what homework is due. So I'm not being pushed by a teacher and I find myself slipping back in everything and playing catch-up. So it's kind of difficult, but I know when I was sitting lectures and everything, I was always on top of everything. So I just think this semester I kind of slid back a little.

Nate, like Chris, was taking online courses but his response to the educational format and its effect on his study time were manageable since both job and school activities, for him, work together positively. He said proudly:

> On average I study maybe 10, 12 hours a week. But I'm just doing this job, you know, it ties in with what I'm studying so in a way I'm always studying because if I have a project in my class, okay, I see how that applies to the overall operations of the campus. So I'm studying earnestly, I mean, as far as picking up a book, you know, reading it, maybe 10 to 12 hours but I'm always studying.

In the interviews, students also indicated their desire to exercise, play athletics, and have some personal time. Students said they constantly felt exhausted, mentally and physically. Students wished they could spend more time on their school work but their daily responsibilities, which often changed at any time, dictated the priorities of the day. Some students expressed disappointment in themselves about the lack of study time, concerned their ability to pass classes and eventually transfer would be affected.

Managing responsibilities. Participants were asked how they manage all their responsibilities (personal, work, educational) and if balancing everything was ever challenging. All students indicated at times handling all that "life continues to give to you" from the words of Nate, can often be overwhelming but is possible depending on personal drive, support from others, and identifying goals to be achieved. For Steve, he handled all demands by prioritizing what was important to him:

> You just have what was the priority. You have a list, I had a list. Work probably at first. School later was at the top of the list. So I just tried to balance the time. I was like "okay, I need to put more, I need to work more." So I just had to divide the time according to what I felt needed the most time that I needed to focus on. But I realized that if I need to study more, I can't work as much. And if I can't work as much, which means I can't go out . . . man my friends used to get on me all the time. Like, "oh man, you're a nerd now, you don't want to hang out. You don't want to go party." I was like I don't want to. I really don't want to. I was really focused on going to UCLA, that was my goal—I told my friends all the time. It was school, school, school.

Balancing all his responsibilities for Michael was often overwhelming, making it hard to find personal time:

> You know, if I'm home or something I'll see the kitchen dirty or bathroom dirty, I'll just clean it up. My mom, you know, expects me to clean it up, you know, vacuum sometime, you know, but not do a lot since I'm working and going to school. But at times, yeah, it gets pretty rough. And I also play basketball too. I forgot to mention that. I play basketball, too. I play with this men's league and I also play with this college, you know. They pick up college players and it's like of a league. I play with two teams. At times, yeah man, it gets way challenging. You know, I get off work or I come home from stuff. I'll be real tired and I got homework or chores to do or I'll wake up late and I'll almost be late for work. You know those kind of things. It gets kind of, you know, challenging, you know. Trying to balance homework, class, work, family stuff, work and basketball—which I love and need to do all the time—it gets overwhelming and challenging sometimes.

While feeling overwhelmed, Michael found motivation and stress relief in his athletic

ability and aspirations to be a successful, responsible adult:

> I get that motivation from . . . well basketball, I guess for one. I don't think
> playing basketball in college has closed its door on me yet. You know, I feel that I
> can, you know, still achieve, you know some of my goals and dreams. That's part,
> that's mainly one of the big, you know, things that keeps me going with school.
> As far as work motivation, you know, I'm grown, I need to take care of myself,
> things like that. I got to pay for school, car, bills, things like that, you know. My
> mom's not going to take care of me anymore. I'm too big for that so as far as the
> work goes, that is what keeps me going day by day. I always want to look nice. I
> always want to have fly things you know.

For David, the demands on his time were always overwhelming and challenging

for him. He rarely felt successful in handling all his responsibilities. Looking frustrated

when responding, he said:

> It does get overwhelming. I was planning on taking 12 credits, full time, but I had
> to think about that twice. If I'm going to work full-time and . . . because that
> would mean I would have to take an extra class on Saturday. That would mean I
> would go to school Monday through Saturday and I need some time to myself,
> you know. I can't be at work and school twenty-four seven. I know I'm still
> young, but some of the things I've been through I just learned how to have will
> power and stay dedicated—determination. And I'm really convinced that
> education is important right now, so I don't want to let it go. I can't. I'm trying,
> barely, to hold onto education and try to hold onto everything else too.

Managing time for many participants meant striving for financial security.

Without money to pay the bills, their academic progress and family future risk being

negatively affected. For Erik, although always tired, he knew that whenever he ignored

his responsibilities, he pays the price later:

> It's like, I don't have the mindset, if I don't want to do it then it becomes a hassle
> and I've got to like, push myself to do it. Because like there are some days where I
> just like don't want to get up. I just want to sit there and lay down for a minute.
> But if I do that, then my whole day is thrown, wasting sometimes a week by not

doing anything. Because then I got to catch up and do what I missed out on—work, school, I need to make money. So I try not to, but yeah, I pay for it.

In Connor's situation, constantly working, having money, required a lot of his time but without both, his family would suffer greatly. He felt he had to remain calm while juggling everything to not become overwhelmed with his situation:

> You're just got to take everything one step at a time. I don't really stress over anything. So, I know if I have to get to work, I'll work. My main focus is having to get to work, to have that income because I know my wife and I wouldn't survive on just her income. And then from there, marriage is a big factor as well. There's quality time and quantity as well, so I always have to throw that in, I guess like quality and quantity time, so that QT [quality time] is there. And she doesn't consider coming to any of my basketball games or water polo games at QT. So yeah, it's tough, but I know, I mean just looking at my wife and the example she set for me I know if you just keep chipping away you'll get to your goal eventually.

Joseph felt that he cannot focus on the negative. His responsibilities might be challenging, but that was his situation. In his eyes, you just have to deal with life and:

> Just accept it. It's something I have to do, it's not necessarily something I want to do, but I understand that I have to and that if I don't, there's consequences for not just me but my family. Because like, if I don't get my mom to work and she's the only one working right now, then we won't have enough to pay the bills and we probably would have to be out on the street or a lower-income area.

Chris expressed confidence in his abilities when he responded. Regarding all the demands on his time, he replied:

> I don't even think about it. I do have staying power. That's for sure. When I'm focused on something I'm not one of those guys who or those people who say 'well, you know, it will wait.' I don't do that. You know, once I start something, I'm going to finish it. And I kind of like that about myself. So yes, so I handle it. I think I handle it pretty well.

Joseph's ability to manage his various responsibilities was driven by hopeful positive outcomes for him and his family:

Family drives me. If I do better then I know that they'll do better. The more knowledge I know, the more they'll know and I guess the more I can progress to make more money to take them out of where we live now to a better neighborhood and get better things in life and more privilege—with knowledge comes privilege.

However, in the case of Alex, he gave a less optimistic response. For him, managing time was all about survival and achievement of his goals, but he felt like he was often fighting a losing battle:

Sorry I get so emotional about this stuff man, it's just hard. I work and work, and go to school, and try to provide for family and I'm always tired. I never get enough rest, never find enough time to study, never find enough time for friends, never succeed in anything. That's how I feel. I just want, sometimes man, to just walk away from everything, ignore everything and start over. But I can't start over, I haven't even begun to do anything yet. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy working and school. I have good people around me. But I sit up sometimes wondering how I'm going to handle all this and be successful. I want to finish school man, I want a degree, a big job. I want to buy a house a new car. I want my family to enjoy life. But all I want to do is sleep man. I just shake my head wondering what is going to happen next. [laughing] It's crazy man, just plain crazy. No one has ever asked me that question before.

When asked how they balanced work, school, careers, family and personal time, participants were firm in their beliefs to possess a *do whatever it takes* approach to accomplish everything. Seven participants said their lives had always been in constant *auto-pilot*. Participants recognized their responsibilities were not going to change and possibly increase depending on the economy and their financial situations.

Accepting this fact, the participants believed their attitudes toward education had to remain strong, focused on obtaining a degree. At the same time, students felt that if they failed to balance all these responsibilities, in particular their academics, they and

their families would suffer. The weight and success of the families was on the shoulders of these men.

For all participants, listening to themselves describe their lives in this interview helped them see the magnitude of what they are trying to accomplish. Also, their responses showed them what they have already accomplished in their lives. This was emotional and overwhelming for some students. Regardless of the participants' ages, these men carry the weight of family, friends, and their futures in their hands with little personal reflection, since for them, they are constantly trying, as many men said, to *handle their business.*

Goal attainment. Participants were asked if they were progressing toward their educational goals at the pace they expected. The responses were split between yes and no. For the younger students, they were comfortable with the time spent in college answering the questions with simply a "yes" response. However, for the older students, the responses were quite different. Many of them expressed disappointment at their progress, reflecting on the time amount they spent out of college, compared to the amount of time present they currently spend on their school work as older adults now with families. Nate replied:

> No, I'm not progressing at the pace because I would have loved to have that bachelor's-out of the way already, and you know, working on my masters and stuff of that nature. My ultimate goal, and like I said, I'm 51 years old now, you know, I've taken some detours along the way, and stuff of that nature. So I'm behind as far as the progress is concerned but it's a on-going thing, it never stops. So, that's what I tell the boys—I mean, if you're not learning something everyday I mean, what's the point. So yeah, I'd love to be a lot further along but I'm not but that's not a big thing to me. It's not a big disappointment because I know I'll get there—I'm not going to stop.

Like Nate, Connor was not pleased with his pace but kept a positive attitude and looked

toward the future:

> I'm not at pace I expected. I feel like it's what? Seven years and I'm still in the 2-year system. And I didn't expect to be out of here in 2 years. So it's a delay but I know that certain factors have hindered my progression, but I now eventually I'll be at the four-year level and if I'm there, I'll be in some counseling program or Master's program to become a counselor.

Although not the educational pace Joseph expected to finish his education, he was

content with his progress, saying "It's not the pace I expected, but I can see that I'm

excelling in my work. It's at a slower pace, but it's cool." For Chris, he loved school and

the idea of learning many subjects but wished he could find a way to learn more, and

faster, saying:

> No it's not the pace I would like. I would like everything to move much faster. I really wish that I could find a way to read faster, comprehend better. I would love, love to take six classes and learn everything. I wish I could get it all done quickly and fast. I love science and I love the idea of being able to actually tackle something so enormously attractive to me.

Similar to Chris, Alex remained optimistic about his goals although he wished his pace

was faster, but realized:

> I will set out to accomplish everything. I know that about myself. It will just take a little longer. I had this dream that school would be done in a few years and I could just focus on something else. But I don't get too down on myself about it. It is what it is. I'm just happy to be going to school and learning. It might take me a few more years. It's going to take me some more years [laughs] but I'm going to make it.

Overall, students recognized the importance of identifying goals and believed it

was imperative to accomplish their goals for their personal growth, self-esteem, and

financial security.

Influences from friends. Many of the participants had friends that were either in college or have completed college. In some cases, their friends pursued advanced degrees. At the same time, students had friends that chose not to attend school as well. These different groups of friends forced some of the participants to align themselves with a particular group of friends or not interact with a group completely. And when making that choice who to befriend and interact with socially, often some of the participants struggled with their choice. In Chris's case, his friends had been very supportive of his educational goals:

> Oh yeah, my friends have definitely been supportive of my endeavors. I acquired my friends that I have through my wife. Most of my friends know and work with my wife. She's a Stanford Ph.D. My wife is a brilliant professor and I know, all her friends and I've really come to enjoy their friendship. So I probably have the greater majority of my friends have PhD's and I have friends who have masters and just a couple of friends who don't have degrees.

For Connor, being accepted by his friends was very important and comforting as he finishes school:

> Friends who are college graduates, so they've already gone through the process of getting their degrees and everything and they're working in the fields that they went to school with, or went to school for. And I can see some that are unhappy with what they're doing and wish they had chosen another route and then I see some that are loving it every day. It feels great because I'm surrounded by a lot of my friends that are supportive and everything. Even though they know I don't have my degree, they feel like I'm still at their level.

Joseph indicated all his friends attend college, close friends, saying, "All my friends go to school, all of them. Like I have about five close friends and everybody else, they are just friends, actually more like associates. Like I wouldn't really expect to count on them for anything, but I have a certain select close friends."

Michael was adamant that he hung out only with friends having the same goals.

For him, it did not make sense to do otherwise:

> Yeah, that's all I hang with . . . Yeah, all my friends are really in school or either
> done with school or something like that. I don't really know of anybody who
> doesn't really have anything going on for them. I don't want people to bring me
> down. I mean why would you want to hang with somebody that's not doing what
> you are not doing anyway? I'm in school so I should hang with people that's in
> school. Hang with somebody that's trying to do something with themselves so
> keep you motivated to keep doing what you're doing. You don't wanna hang with
> nobody that's doing drugs or something like that. That's got to rub off on you at
> some point—hopefully. I got a lot of friends that's in Los Angeles that go to many
> colleges there.

His friends constantly motivate him and show him a life he wants to have as well.

Michael continued:

> It's very motivating. As a matter of fact, couple of my friends just transferred last
> semester from here. One transferred to UCLA, one to USC. Now we all took a trip
> up to USC and I was just like "Man I gotta get here man, I was just in shock." I
> wanna get to the university so bad like seeing the atmosphere and they are talking
> about the academics, the parties, the girls, oh yeah, the frats. It's so obvious that I
> wanna do that—this is driving me. I would just love it man, hell it super motivates
> me!

For Steve, his core group of friends has been instrumental in his drive to finish

college, saying "they're headed in the path they want to go—I want to do the same." He

further adds:

> Well my core friends are in school, they push me because of what they are doing.
> My core group all go to school. So when I'm slacking off, they look at me and say
> "come on man, what are you doing? You need to do this, do that." So seeing them
> going in their direction to get their education is motivating to me. You know it's
> like when you hang out with a group of people, you kind of just do the same
> things or have the same interests. So I just, like naturally, it's okay that I need to
> go to school too. I see my friends doing it, they're getting their education. Like
> when I was here, my friend was at another college and he was like "Man what do
> you want to do with your life?" How would just ask me questions like that. What
> do you want to do with your life? Are you always going to be at junior college?

Don't you want to go to a university? Why don't you go for something bigger than that? Yeah, my group of friends motivates me just because of what they're doing.

Outside of his core friends, however, Steve said his interactions with the other group were quite different, making it hard to relate. When commenting on his non-core group, he said:

Outside of my core group, I mean they're my friends but we don't talk about things like my friends in school. We don't talk about things like school, or like what we're going to do five years from now. It's like, "Oh, what are you doing? Do you want to go to a party?" They are cool like that, into girls, whatever. They just work. If they do go to school they're not really focused on leaving the community college and going to a 4-year university. And some of them have gotten a girl pregnant so now they're just working. But my core group of friends, we really talk about life, everything. We talk about school work, family, having a family, when you should get married, things like that.

Many participants acknowledged that hanging out with their non-core friends was tempting but would impede their academic goals. For David, he always felt the pressure to hang out with that group:

I feel pressured from the group you know, not from school. The ones that aren't into school. They are just probably in the neighborhood, just sitting around, drinking, stuff like that. So there's probably things that I probably wouldn't do before, but now that I'm in school, I'm trying to stay focused. I don't want to go back and do that stuff no more. And they always say "you used to kick it with us, hang out" stuff like that but now I don't anymore. I don't want to do it but they always pressure me. I feel like I can handle it, but it's not always easy to say no.

In Steve's case, it was too easy to get "trapped and lost into the environment because hanging out was easy and free. It felt like you didn't have to do anything. But then I was like 'Where am I going to be honestly in two years?'" For Erik, having two separate groups of friends to socialize with was the only option. He explained:

Nope, oh no, my friends are in two different crowds. My friends here at college, it's like they have their way of hanging out and then the friends I hang out with

outside of school, we do our own thing. We do, they seldom connect, but it's like, rare, very rare. I prefer to keep them separate because I rather it be where we can all see eye to eye on one thing and leave it like that instead of having to try to find millions and millions of ways for us to just hang out to be on one accord. You know what I'm saying? So like if I went out with one friend who doesn't like parties and we go out with someone who does like parties, it's like okay, then we're going to be sitting here trying to figure out what we want to do. Because you don't want to party, but you do, so it's like I have to keep my one groups of friends on one side. And my other group, they need to be on a different side.

Lately, Erik had been hanging with the one group of friends not in college, and felt the pressure because "yeah, I'm not really in school too much right now, So I just have more time to just hang out with them really." For him, not taking many classes in the college allowed him to spend time with people, taking time away from school and his focus on transferring institutions.

Participants surrounded themselves with friends they considered to be successful, similar in thinking to them, and individuals they considered role models. These friends symbolized another path of life the students wanted to take. However, there existed for five participants a temptation to just ignore the demands of school and hang with their *street* friends as one student called them. While knowing that embracing the lifestyle of their *street* friends would prove to be problematic, some participants struggled daily with this temptation.

Future outlook. For all of the students, getting a bachelor's degree was definitely a goal in their future. The educational goals for more than half of the students did not end at just a bachelor's degree, but obtaining a graduate or professional degree in the future as well. For David, he wanted more than a bachelor's but knows he has to focus on one degree at a time:

Let me see, I always, I think about the Ph.D., but that's kind of like it's up there as something I want to do, but it's not really like something I feel I can grab for yet. I want to see how far, I'm trying to take it step by step, like see if I can get the BA first, then from the BA, Masters and from the Masters to the Ph.D. However, I'm just trying to focus on just getting through the BA first. But I mean I don't want to rule it out. I see it as an option, Ph.D is the highest but it's an option. That's what I hope to accomplish, but I'm really focused on just getting the BA right now.

For Joseph, his goal was to acquire as much information as he can for success in school.

He felt:

There isn't a level for me. I just want to get all the knowledge I can. I found that out in my philosophy class at Southern Community College, we had a professor. He opened my mind to a lot of stuff. That was the first class that I had that really told me about where I came from. In my high school district, you really don't learn that much about African Americans in the history. They don't tell you anything about yourself. They said they were slaves and then there wasn't. So it was like, "Oh I guess we didn't do anything." But he really explained it. He did logic and critical thinking so he really opened my mind to the critical part. I plan to transfer to a campus in Los Angeles in two semesters. I like that environment a lot, a warm feeling.

Connor has one more semester before he transfers to a local institution, saying:

Oh my goal is fall of next year. So I only have 6 more units here come spring. And then I transfer. I'm a kinesiology major. And I was thinking about doing a part time, like training, physical training program especially for like high school kids and first and second year college basketball players. And just do like basketball boot camps with them and probably spread it into other sports and everything. And I wanted to go into a business doing that and then I kind of sat here at work and I've been noticing what this office does and everything. And I was like, this seems interesting, so I'm still kind of trying to figure out if I want to be in business doing sports or if I want to be at school counseling and trying to get students into a four-year college. So I always think about being a college counselor so I can be that person to kind of advise students. And be their first point of contact once they come into the college realm, especially from high school or the military or even off the street. And I think my background with school and dropping out of school, and coming back to school will kind of help me with that.

For Erik his actions were more extreme. His goals involved leaving his city and

moving out of state to start over and finish school. He said:

> I have to get my classes taken care here before I go out of state and finish. I just
> want to go out there and be on my own for once, you know what I mean? I don't
> want to rely on friends and stuff like that to get me where I want to be or
> something. And I want to play music. Music is my life and my get away.

Steve strived to finish his degree at UCLA and then pursue another degree but not sure on

exactly which one:

> I was thinking I wanted to get my Master's and then I was like if I get my
> master's, then a Ph.D. How many years is a Ph.D.? Is it three years? I was
> thinking about the Ph.D. just for a little bit. I was like Dr. [Steve] sounds pretty
> nice. But I'll probably just after, I will go to law school so after that I will be done.

Michael would like to obtain a graduate degree and continue his work toward playing

collegiate and professional sports:

> The ultimate goal is the Master's degree. But right now, I need to get my
> bachelor's degree. I want to, you know, go on and succeed out of where college,
> you know. I want to go on to like a USC, you know, and be the second person in
> my family, and first male to get a degree in college. That's my ultimate goal and
> my family will be so proud of me, you know. And it's not just for family, it's
> really for me man. That would be so great man. You know, graduate, get my
> degree, and get a good job. Of course, you know, basketball is my dream. Since
> day one, I always wanted to play basketball. You know I had an offer to play
> overseas a couple of years ago like I think it was 2 years ago. But I never went
> 'cause, well, Ma, she wanted me to finish school and I also wanted to finish
> school too. And I really want to play ball, but I don't know—I want to do
> everything.

Chris's goals involved more years of college and ultimately relocating his family

to finish his graduate degree aspirations:

> Well, I have a dream and then I have a goal. My goal would be to have a
> microbiology Ph.D. I love science and I love the idea of being able to actually
> tackle something so enormously attractive to me. So yeah, it would be my dream
> to become a Ph.D. in microbiology. My goal is to get a bachelor's degree in

architecture. So, I would have to continue with these classes, it looks like until 2010, 2011, and I would then get my associates and transfer to another college, which is really far away and unlikely or in Los Angeles area, bring my family back. We'd probably live in a place like Pasadena.

Nate's "ultimate goal is to get my doctorate. So you know I can have that Ph.D. behind my name and stuff like that, but as far as the Ph.D. and stuff, that's my aspiration and goal." For Alex, his goal was to eventually attend medical school:

> After my BA, I want to go to medical school. I'm ok in science. I don't hate it but don't love it. [Laughing] So we will see how that goes. I want to help people learn how to be healthy and give people the help they deserve. I saw people in my family who didn't listen to the doctor, or never went. And I saw what it costs them in terms of their life. I was one of the lucky ones who goes to the doctors, sometimes reluctantly, but I always admired what they do. Who knows, at times I think about being a nurse since school is less, but I'll be in the medical field I'm sure.

All students were optimistic of their futures. Despite all the challenges and barriers they face and will continue to face, everyone looked toward their futures in a positive manner. Participants believed achieving their educational goals was going to provide an increased sense of self-worth, accomplishment, and a framework in which to set additional life goals.

Mentorship. A question was asked to all participants if they had a mentor in their lives to help achieve their goals. Responses were mixed. Some students indicated a family member was their mentor. Other students said a faculty member was the most influential person in their lives. For others, some students commented that they had no mentors in the life but it would have been easier to handle all their experiences if someone was there. For students who had mentors, those people in their lives were all people of color, mostly African-American. They felt their mentors needed to share the

same experiences so both could relate from their perspectives. For David, he regretted not

having a mentor who he could share things with:

> I don't have a mentor. At times I do feel like I need one, yeah. I feel like I need
> someone to go to and tell them you know, this is what I'm thinking about, or is
> this is a good decision to make? Is this the wrong decision to make? Like if I've
> got a plan or something I want to do or change my mind—if I need somebody for
> just, guidance or something. And they just got to, to, look like me. I wouldn't
> want to rule out someone who didn't look like me, but I'd probably prefer
> someone who did look like because of our similarities.

For Joseph, his mentor was a faculty member on campus, classifying him as a good

resource to have:

> My professor is a good mentor I guess. Because like if we need something we
> contact him and he helps us do it. Like his whole class, two semesters that I had in
> his class, it was like he was a mentor and we were all just venting together and he
> was helping us along through it.

Joseph continued saying his mentor's role modeling made him want to be a mentor to

first-year college students. He said:

> Yeah, because in his class he made us be mentors. Well he didn't really make us
> but he gave us a choice. And most of my friends that I'm really close to now from
> his class we all are mentors. And if he needs us to talk to his students then we talk
> to them. Like he usually sends us a text message and says "Hey I need you to
> come to my class and speak to the kids about your first-hand experiences." So we
> get up there and we just talk to them, or he'll break us into groups and we would
> talk. We'd meet in the room next to the cafeteria and we basically had our own
> table. And the kids came to us and then we exchanged numbers and information
> and everything and then we had to keep in contact with them, just to make sure
> they do well in class.

For Connor, he was surrounded by role models from his family and work colleagues. He

described them:

> My mother—I'd say my mother was a big role model, because I've seen the things
> that she had to go through and fight through and she's still the woman that she is.
> She's very strong, very independent and she has a whole bunch of love to give.

Even though she and I didn't really start living together until I was fifteen I feel like we bonded a lot better because of that, because I was able to see things that she had to go through. Also, my boss is building into my role model, because I'm looking at her career and what she does. Yeah, I'm trying to see myself in her shoes.

Connor considered himself a mentor to high school athletes, because of his own challenging experiences in high school and college athletics. This mentoring had been beneficial to him:

I have mentored high school students for basketball. It was tough because you have all these athletes and I never ever pictured myself as one, but I guess yeah you've got to have a big head to actually succeed in this sport. And just dealing with twelve kids who are all at the same level but think they're better than the other and deserve more time, it was challenging. But you know, you have to sit them down and say "Hey we're going to do this. And we're going to run in my way and if you don't like it, we can look to trade you." Yeah, it was tough, but you just have to set them down. It was fun though and I think it helped me with my work and school because it helped me to build leadership skills. And now like, when students come in [to work] and they're trying to boss me into doing my job, I'm like "Hey wait, hold up and stuff" [laughing].

Erik believed the closest thing to a mentor was one of his faculty members "because he's been there, like he's been there, done that. He grew up where I grew up. So he knows how it feels to be pushed back and forth between two different things. He can relate to a lot of stuff I have to talk about." He chose to mentor his little brother because he sees himself at that age. While reflecting, Erik also recognized his brother in some ways as a mentor to him. He says:

We're kind of both in the same bed here. So my struggle is his struggle too. So we kind of struggle back and forth, kind of like look up to each actually. Even though he is my little brother, that little boy knows what he is talking about. So you know, at the age of thirteen he's going through stuff I went through when I was nineteen, eighteen years old. So we can see eye to eye with certain stuff.

For Steve, his mentor was a faculty member. He described one particular class in which his mentor's guest speaker's speech changed his life and focused all his efforts on education:

> My faculty member helped me a lot. Like I said, that guest speaker, I forgot his name. He came in, actually he showed a movie and then he spoke. And when I watched that movie and heard him speak, I was like man I really need to step my game up and focus on school. I can't stay here another years and just be the same person I was a year ago. I've got to keep on moving forward.

Specifically reflecting on his mentor, Steve added:

> He and the class, it helped you to make a transition from high school to college. He helped me prepare for tests and how to study and just, it was a class where you could learn how to study, learn about life, and school really. It really prepared me for life. I took his class for two semesters. I continue to keep in contact with him.

Michael's shared more of his life and experiences with his mentor than his parents, in particular his father. He identifies his counselor at college, saying:

> He is a mentor to me. He always, you know giving me good word and things like that. You know, he keeps me mind, right and focused. He's probably the only one I really have. I mean, you know I got a dad, but to be honest with you, you know, I don't look at him as a mentor. We don't really talk like that. You know, he provided and took care of us, the family, but I never really had a real, real, real, real relationship like the type where I can you know, tell him anything. You know like I'll probably say I tell my counselor more stuff that I'll tell my own dad, so you know. I'll say he is probably the only mentor I really have.

Due to his relationship with his counselor, Michael mentored his family members and their friends because they can relate to him. He continued to say:

> I talk to my brother and I'll talk to my brother's little friends. And I think it was last spring semester the high school [kids] came up here for a mentoring program and it's for the high school students. I mentor them in the program. Yeah, it's cool 'cause I get to share with them some of my experiences and a lot of times they can relate to it and I can, you know, give them advice. I tell them "You do this man, you don't do this. Don't go that way, you know." You know, a lot of them, I've been through some of what they have gone through, so you know. Some of them

kind of can feel me and you know say, "Oh yeah man, you're totally right, you know, you understand." And I tell them, "Yeah I do understand. Go on and do that thing in high school. You want to go here [you've got to], you know, you've got to get a start from somewhere."

While Chris does not have a mentor, he stressed the importance of finding

something you like to do and focusing on being successful in that area or career for his

family. He said:

> Absolutely, I do consider myself a mentor to people. Several of my nieces, my nephews, my kids, some other friends and yeah lots of people I talk to. I tell them my story and tell them that I think they would be happier if they found success. I remind them that it's not about what I think, it's about what you think. If you are just completely happy with the idea of being a cosmetologist and you wanna do hair, you wanna do nails just go be the best cosmetologist you can be.

Taking a moment, Chris thought about his daughter and how he pushed her to become

college-bound. For him, a large part of personal success was education and he stressed

this point for all of his children:

> I really adamant about that [going to school]. All my kids are going to college for sure. My 20-year-old, I push her, and push her, and push her, and she won't go. She's finally gotten to a point where she's agreed to go back to a community college and I keep telling her that "Get your degree, you don't want to do it like me and regret it for the next 20 years, 30 years, whatever."

Finishing up the question, Chris concluded by saying:

> I'm successful according to why like other people who would expect, according to other people's expectations. I'm certainly successful in terms of what I have it terms of family in like abundantly but in terms of my self-satisfaction and gratification no, I'm not successful yet because I really want to have this degree.

For Nate, he idolized his mentors who also were family members. They provided a

certain type of learning he could not find anywhere else:

> My uncles, and my family members and stuff were mentors. My uncle James and that's Doctor Johnson—he taught African history at a university. And there were

times where he would come up to Chicago to visit and it would be like "Oh you gotta go sit down in the front room with uncle James"—this guy, I mean was so intelligent you just wanted to be like him and stuff. As a little kid, you dreaded the hour in the front room 'cause you know you'd be sitting up there talking about stuff that you didn't totally comprehend but yes, my uncle James was that for me.

This teaching he learned from his uncle was a main reason he mentored his children and staff in his office. Thinking a bit about the answer, Nate replied:

Yes, and no, I would say. Well, for work, right now we got two interns in our shop and they are my responsibility. You know since I'm the low man on the totem pole right in the shop it's my responsibility to bring them up to speed in that regard. Personally, my stepsons—I'm always to tell them something but I guess that's natural. I mean you're supposed to do that, right? But so yeah we had to sit and mentor the interns we have working at the shop and stuff like that. We try to prepare them to get a job.

For Alex, his mentor is a friend who had "made it." Thinking about their relationship, he said:

My buddy has done it al— school, good job, family. I want all of that man. He has been there for me at times, even times when I didn't think he was there, know what I mean? There were times that I felt alone, and he was always there, I just didn't see it. I feel like if I don't achieve my goals, I will fail. I don't want to be a failure. I don't want to be an embarrassment. I'm terrified of failure man. My buddy, he has to tell me again and again that I will never be a failure if I focus on my goals. I try and listen to him but sometimes it doesn't always sink in. He's a good person to help me understand what I gotta do. I sometimes get sick worry about all this stuff—it keeps me up at night. [Laughing] He thinks I'm crazy but seriously, I think he understands. That's why he is there.

Students recognized the importance and power of having a mentor. A majority of participants felt positive role models contributed not only to the educational success of themselves as students, but their development and maturity as African American men. Many of the participants indicated they were mentors to their significant others, younger siblings/family members, high school students, colleagues and fellow college students.

Participants who mentorted younger family members/relatives said they do not want these young men and women to follow the same path they led. Participants continued to stress education and a clear focus to their mentees. The men felt they could relate to people's experiences and used mentoring as a way to increase self-esteem in the young men and women.

Academic Forces

This section will highlight the academic forces and pressures participants identified through their responses.

High school experiences. It was important to be familiar with the educational background of the participants in order to understand their experience within the community colleges. This section details the high school experiences of the participants, however not all participants graduated from high school and therefore their experiences are quite different. Those who did not attend or complete high school chose to pursue a different path which played a part in their educational formation. Their stories provide a different perspective than the stories of those who attended and completed high school.

Three students attended more than one high school for a variety of reasons. Connor stated, "I went to high school in Hawaii and Texas. El Paso, Texas, Austin High School and then in Hawaii, Capitol High School. I moved around a lot with my family." Some students attended more than one high school within their hometown specifically. When asked why he changed schools, Steve initially remarked: "I went to Private High School, which is a private school. And then my senior year I went to North High School . . . 3 years at Private and one at North. I changed schools for football and just because I

also didn't like the atmosphere at Private." Two students commented that it was very

important to be in a school where there was ethnic diversity among its student body and a

strong athletic program. Steve remarked:

> In 3 years, actually my whole life I went to a private school and then going to
> Central Prep an all-boy's school, predominately white school. There were a
> handful of African Americans that went there. So that just wasn't really my thing.
> The group that I hung out with was just the African Americans. I really didn't
> have anything in common with the White people there or the Mexicans. And there
> was a lot of racism. They had their jokes about Black people and stuff like that. I
> really couldn't deal with it. So my senior year I was like, oh I want to experience
> something new. Be in an atmosphere where I feel like I blend in more and can
> hang out with friends that I know and that I know and that I have more in common
> with.

Nate gave a similar response for the reason he changed schools stating:

> I changed schools attended University City and rode the city school bus. In the
> beginning it was alright. It was pretty good. A lot of friends got along, but with a
> lot of people, you know, and then close to, you know, junior senior year, I started
> to see the racism side of it. Coz this is a predominately white school, and you
> know, I played basketball too and I played basketball my freshman, sophomore
> and junior year all with the same coach. Well, actually my freshman and
> sophomore year I played the same coach there at university city and in my junior
> year I got a new coach and in my senior year I came back and didn't make the
> team for some reason and I was like "I should be on this team." And there's a
> whole lot of other different kind of things like, writings in the bathroom, different
> kind of stuff like that, you know, racist comments and stuff like that. So it was
> one of the reasons I didn't like it. Other than that, it was pretty good, you know.
> I'd say I got a pretty good education. Not probably what I would have liked, you
> know, but you know, it was alright.

The student and staff diversity contributed to their belonging as part of a community and

their academic success. It was more than just going to a perceived *good school* but being

connected and respected by their peers. Alex, when reflecting on his high school

experiences said:

I changed schools quite a bit when younger. My family was always moving around from place to place. I went to a few schools where I was the only one—you know, the black kid, or it seemed like I was only the black kid. I just felt out of place and alone most of the time. I didn't like school and didn't like my teachers. I just felt like I was by myself. I was so excited when I found out I was moving out of town and to a better school. To be honest dude, I mean, the school I was leaving wasn't a bad one academically. Actually, it was rated I guess very high with their test scores and such. I just didn't learn anything there. The new school I went to was in a poorer area, and the school was rundown. It was different there but I wasn't the only one. I saw people there, black people who looked like me. And other people spoke like me. I didn't feel alone. Academically, I didn't do bad there either. I actually wanted to do well.

The diversity for these students was much more important than the school rankings or perception by the outside community. Students wanted to feel part of a place where they could learn and feel safe. Students sought respect and community from their peers, but often were unsuccessful in their efforts.

For three students in particular, athletics played a major role in their high school experiences. Playing sports was something participants could identify with and many felt this contributed to their drive to succeed in school. The literature on African American athletes varies from positive to negative. For example, Basinger (2002) argued there a healthy relationship can exist between athletics and academic achievement, while Busseri (2006) believed the power of extracurricular activities for youth can increase self-esteem and empowerment. In other literature, the role of athletics in the lives of African American men is often negative and debilitation to a successful academic path (Schulman & Bowen, 2001). In the interviews, however, students who classified themselves as athletes did so with pride. Although some students were frustrated with the perception of

them strictly as the athlete, nothing more, participants used those stereotypical attitudes to push them further along in their academics.

Transition to college. For some students, college was not a priority after high school. Three students went directly into the work force and military after high school while the rest of students entered college immediately upon high school graduation. Nate chose to enter the civil right after high school which later drove him to enter college. He explained:

> I came out here in 1984 and basically worked Civil Service. And I worked for the navy and I was working up at Miramar. That is when it was a naval airspace instead of a Marine Corps air station. But when BRAC (Basic Realignment and Closure) came along, and the navy moved out, marines moved in and they said you had to have to answer to this person, this person, and this person. And I was like okay—I had an option, early retirement or deal with the marines. So I chose early retirement and I started working for a company, Jag Chemical Company which I came into contact with my various dealings with supervisors. So I did that for a couple of years knocked around the country flying here and there to different military bases, representing the company and stuff. Got a little tired of that of course, living out a suitcase. So I made a decision. Well, I needed to go back to school. Didn't know exactly what I wanted to do but I know I needed to go back to school so I chose South Community College.

For Connor, he entered the military due to pressure from his parents. They felt he was not ready for college:

> I pursued the military because my parents wanted to push me in that route because I was kind of hard-headed in high school. I felt like school wasn't challenging enough at the time. So I was putting all my energy toward sports and women and stuff. So my parents thought it would be nice for me to straighten out my life and become a little more mature before attending school. So they kind of directed me in the route of going into the military. I felt it was a good decision. It's just I had some unfortunate setbacks since I've been out of the military, trying to survive out in a very expensive economy here. I just got to finish school man.

For Chris, he briefly took two classes at a community college but left the institution, because he wanted to make money and not attend school anymore. Years later, he sought to obtain his degree:

> I didn't go back to college. I just went fulltime into construction with my brother who also didn't graduate and we were making pretty decent money and I didn't worry about it. And then when I got older I started recognizing that they just let me slip through the educational system. I realized I needed to go to school and get a degree.

For the remainder of the students, they entered college directly out of high school. However, there were those students who hoped to enter a 4-year institution, rather than begin at a community college. Erik said: "I wanted to do a lot of stuff when I came out of high school. I had planned to go to school in Florida but because of some situations that happened prior to that I couldn't do it, so that kind of made me stay here. So, yeah, I stayed here." For Steve, he wanted to attend a 4our-year institution but was not eligible by admissions standards to enter as a first-time freshman. He said:

> I didn't take an SAT, I didn't take an ACT. Actually, well when I transferred from Saint's to Morris they tried to cancel the units, some units that I took at Saint's, because they were religion courses. And so they said, "oh you have to stay another year because we don't accept these religion courses." And so, okay I was under the impression that I was going to stay another year so I didn't take the ACT, SAT, or anything. I probably could, I had good grades at my high school. I had a 3.0 average. And then at new high school, I think I maintained a 3.0 average, maybe I feel down a little bit because I got mixed up in the crowd and just running around. But for the most part I think I could have gone to the local college, but I didn't take the SAT, didn't take ACT, so then I just went to Central Community College.

However, for opposite reasons, Joseph originally wanted to attend a 4-year institution but financially could not afford the costs. He chose to attend a community college instead saying:

> I wanted to go to ASU, but since I graduated early, I really didn't have nothing together to do that. So I just said "I'll take my time and get the general education out of the way and then go and it will be cheaper." I graduated in 3 years. I could have graduated in my tenth grade year but I didn't want to rush everything, because then I probably wouldn't have learned everything to the extent that I have. I live at home with both of my parents.

The ability to play athletics at a college was the main reason Michael wanted to attend college directly out of high school, in particular a HBCU (Historically Black College and University) but was not prepared to go directly into a 4-year institution:

> Oh man! My dream was to, you know, obviously go to a big-time school and I like I said before, you know, play basketball there at a big-time school maybe like USC or UCLA, or something like that. And then I also wanted to be a black college student at a black college. I wanted to, you know, ever since I was little. I always wanted to play at a black school, you know like Howard or something like that. But yeah, I wasn't able to go straight out of high school so I entered the JC and live at home.

Students cited college as "way too expensive," "too far distance-wise," and "needed to be close to home" in many of their responses. Although students desired to attend college outside of the city, the realities of work and family responsibilities, parental influence, along with not being competitive-wise academically, kept students local, consequently entering into the community college system.

The community college system was the preferred choice for some students. Participants wanted the close proximity to their home and friends. A few students indicated they were not ready to leave the city due to age or maturity. Attending the community college was an option that students could use to grow and develop as students in their hometown and could take the appropriate courses to eventually transfer to a 4-year college of choice. For those place-bound students, the community college system

offered flexibility in scheduling around work and family responsibilities, making the

option to attend a sensible and realistic one.

Faculty/teacher relationships. Participants were mixed on their relationships with

their teachers inside and outside of the classroom. Five of the students classified their

relationships with their teachers as "okay," "adequate," "decent." A few students were

more descriptive in their responses. Nate's relationships with his teachers were always

positive, proudly saying:

> I always ask questions. I'm one of those guys that challenges things. Yeah, I have
> no problem whatsoever asking questions and stuff. I had a music professor a while
> ago, and she tells me "I'm still using that paper you wrote as an example in class."
> So I mean, I have no problem with the faculty and the report was great and stuff
> and I used to stay out to class and sit up and we would discuss things and stuff of
> that nature. So yeah, my relationships were great.

For David, having a faculty member of color was an eye-opening experience that

contributed to his learning:

> Actually I had one teacher, she was one of my first teachers, this was at South
> Community College. She was a black lady, she was teaching 101 English. To tell
> you the truth, in that class if kind of, well out of all my classes from just having
> that black teacher, it had a different feeling. I really could relate to her and stuff
> like that, the way she taught the class and everything. It was like, it was just a
> different experience. Plus, on the topic, on the literature, you know, on 101
> English when she would use examples, she kind of used examples like that that I
> can relate to, you know? So I think that experience was, I think probably if I had
> more Black teachers it would be a different feeling, you know like the whole
> teaching experience. I just learned so much from her.

For Chris, he felt that interactions with teachers were positive, not just for himself but the

class experience for everyone as a whole. He offered an explanation:

> I think I actually stimulate the class because I ask lots of questions. And I can see
> that, I've actually been told by lots of professors that they're glad to have me in
> the class because I ask lots of questions. And I, you know, I can see that the other

students have questions, they just don't ask. And I think that's a function of the community college. I think that if it were a major university those same questions would be asked by the general students, not just the older students. As an older guy, I guess I feel more comfortable participating.

Initially for Steve, there was no development of relationships with faculty. As he progressed academically through college and became more focused, he changed his attitude toward his teachers:

> I really didn't have a relationship [with teachers]. I would go to school and go to work. No I wouldn't go, never went to office hours. But when I went, when I was a full-time student, and I joined the Honor's program, I had to have a relationship just because you had to have a different syllabus or different course work that you would do separately from the other students. So then I built a relationship with them. I would email them frequently and talk to them after class just to clarify "Oh you want me to do five more pages or two extra pages?" And then I would just build a relationship from that point on. And now, I continue and go to office hours and talk to my professors. Just, I don't know, it's good because at the end of the day if you're on that line, A-, B+, he'll give you an A- or maybe even try to just give you an A. I learned that a lot. Like at first I was like "Oh teachers aren't going to do that, I don't care." But now it's like, oh that could be the difference between an A- or A, B+ and a B.

In contrast, Michael's experiences with faculty were not always positive. His relationships and interactions with African American faculty were strong but outside of that group, he was frustrated with the majority of his faculty interactions. Reflecting on a few negative experiences, he said:

> Professors, aw that's a great one. Aw man, I'd say man, I had had some incidents with a couple of professors. I had an English teacher—this was my first year. And I really did feel that because I was black, you know, treated me in a certain way because I would come into the class, you know, I'll sit in the back or something. They use that to stereotype—a black person comes in, sit in the back. I felt she was saying "Oh, he's a you-know-what type of person, a black person." But you know, I had a few bad experiences with her. I don't know why she would pick on me at things. Oh! I had a philosophy teacher. It was a white lady. I noticed it was three black people in the class, two men and a young black lady. And she always picked on us. She would make us sit in certain seats. She'll be like "Oh you guys

can't sit over there, you have to sit here . . . ." Oh we just couldn't sit where we wanted like everybody else. She has something against me and others in there that were people of color. I don't know why. I never confronted her and actually dropped the class after a few weeks.

Since he was very descriptive in his response, I asked him if he had positive experiences with teachers who were not black. He offered this account:

Only teacher that I can remember that was not black that I felt a good vibe with, and I don't want to come across like it's always bad when I have white teachers. 'Cause I want to get along with everybody. But anyway, I had an English teacher my first year here and he was a white guy. His name, I forgot his name, but he was a really good teacher. He taught about a lot of black culture, which was a total surprise. He would talk about things say it'll be from a regular English book from western civilization or something like that but he'll put it in all different types of cultural perspective. He wouldn't just do white, he wouldn't just do black but just to mix it up. It wouldn't just come from this one book. He would mix it up so everybody can get a feel and understand. Like let's just tell the truth. And I learn best from that. Everyone, everyone talks, shares their examples, shares their experiences and things like that. There is always something to relate to. When it comes to hands-on learning, that's how I learn best. And when teachers just sitting up there reading from her book, writing on the board and you just got to take notes, it's kind of boring.

For half of the students they identified faculty members as a significant reason they felt connected to campus. Faculty members and counselors (who often wear the dual roles of faculty) provided an opportunity for participants to share their frustrations and created an environment to assist students academically. In particular faculty of color were the main instructors noted in the interviews as having the biggest effect on the students. However, for three participants, it was not about the color of the faculty member but the content of their class discussions that made them feel connected on campus and supported. For other participants, they stressed relationships with faculty were often filled with feelings of racism and unfair treatment. Some students felt faculty were singling

them out in class and their expectations and treatment of them were unacceptable.

Students expressed frustration and resentful attitudes saying faculty made them feel like

they do not belong in school and were treated like children. Students said the faculty of

color did not ever treat them this way, only other faculty members in the college.

    Recommendations for community colleges. Participants were asked if they were

president of a community college, what they would want to change for their school. The

question was a challenging one to answer as all students responded either "Wow that is a

tough one," or "I've never ever thought about it," or "No one has ever asked me that

question before." Five of the nine students responded with detailed suggestions ranging

from improving campus structures to understanding more about the academic and cultural

makeup of the campus. For Joseph, he would like to "improve the beauty of campus,

making it look more attractive." He felt that by making the campus more attractive, it

would be more inviting to "bring in the best teachers. They would want to teach here."

    For Connor, improving campus beauty was also important but his main priorities

would involve funding more programs:

> I would probably increase funding for the certificate programs that they offer here, the associate programs and also transfers. Because that's what students ultimately come to a 2-year for, either a certificate program, their AA's or to transfer to a 4-year. And I would probably try and get better facilities for these programs so that the students find it easier to for them to get the information.

As a follow-up question, I asked if he felt students at his college fail to get information.

He replied:

> Yeah, because no matter how many boards that we have around campus to post information for them to come in here, you're always going to have those students that aimlessly walk straight to class and back to their car and leave and they don't

see it. And then when they come in here and they want to sign their transfer agreement for the spring to a campus and you're like "You should have signed this by summer, by the end of August," they're in shock and you can just literally see their whole world crumble because they didn't see that information. Yeah, it's tough.

For Steve, his goal also included funding programs that supported students.

Reflecting on a program he participated in, he said:

> Maybe help the program Mr. [Professor] is running, the Academy program that I was in. That way he could help the minorities, African American students. Because if you go outside and go to the cafeteria you would probably see just a handful of African Americans just in there talking, not in class. That's where all of them hung out. I'd go and at first, I was hanging out there. Then when I decided I didn't want to be part of that, I wanted to move forward, I stopped hanging out there with them. When I would walk part as I was going home or going to class I would see them and say hi but wouldn't stay and socialize. Yeah, that's what I would say, give Mr. [Professor] more money to help the African Americans in school.

For Michael, as president, he would "talk and reach out to the students and hear their voices and opinions about the school, teachers, what it means to be a student here."

Chris would like to have a better understanding on how students succeed or fail in community colleges and use his knowledge to motivate everyone:

> I'd like to get a handle on the interaction or the success rate of continuing education students. I'd like to know are these people matriculating and then dropping or are they matriculating and sticking with it. I would want to get a hard count on how things are going. I would want to make sure we as a community should make sure that our students have encouragement and so that they will want it [education]. I'd focus on keeping my students and encouraging other people who are just up there doing nothing in the community to get involved.

While the majority of students indicated they had a positive experience in the community colleges, all participants offered suggestions on how to make the campuses a better environment for African Americans. Participants suggested the administration

should do a better job of hearing the issues and concerns of minority students.

Participants felt their voice was often ignored and silent on their campuses. They believed

participation and involvement of African American men in campus activities, clubs, and

community building would increase if their presence was recognized and embraced by the

administration. Students felt hearing the voices of these men would also help understand

the growing retention issues on the campuses as well.

Societal and Political Forces

This section will highlight the societal and political forces and pressures

participants identified through their responses.

Financial survival. All students interviewed have a job and attend school at the

same time. Six of the nine students had a full-time job and attended school full-time as

well. Three of the students work full-time and attended school part-time. When asked

why students worked full-time, they all replied it was due to family responsibilities. Alex

said, "I have to pay a portion of the bills in the house like the cable bill and the electric

bill. I also pay part of my folks car note so I have to have a job to help out." For David, he

was supporting his family completely financially so working was the only option:

> Everything is still difficult right now, I have to work full-time, take care of my
> mom, take care of my family, send money to my other family. I got to take care of
> my entire family. And rent is high here, so you know everything is difficult. I've
> got to work full-time at my job. I've still got to fit in time to go to class and have
> some time to study. So it's real difficult but I think I can handle it.

In Nate's situation, providing for his extended family means having to work and attend

school full-time but he enjoys doing both everyday:

I have two children of my own from previous marriage. They're both in college right now. I have a son at a school in Iowa. He is there on a football scholarship. And my daughter is in Los Angeles, and she is on a soccer scholarship. It works out for me really great because college is expensive and this helps out a lot. And I'm currently with a young lady that has five kids. So two are them are grown and then there are three boys—16, 14, and 10—they are a handful. So I got quite a bit on my plate. It's like fulltime family things going on. I got school going on and work. But I love my job. So, I consider myself fortunate because there are not a lot of people who can say that. A lot of people just work to pay bills but I don't mind actually getting up going into work every day because this job gives me a chance to work with my hands and plus to think too. It's the best of both worlds.

For those students that do not have kids of their own, having a job provided them with financial security and spending money that their parents could not provide. Students referred to spending money as "the only way to have fun," "the way to get a girl," "survival here in the city." One student, Steve, seemed focused primarily on making money at the beginning of attending college, and playing sports, leaving school as the third priority after sports:

That was my first 2 years. So I was just like, okay I wasn't really focused on school, getting my Associate's or Bachelor's or anything. So I was thinking about football and getting money. Just to support myself really, because my mom has a good job, but it was like I can't do what I want, because she didn't have enough money. Like I had to buy my own car and everything. So she couldn't help me as much as maybe another family that could just buy their daughter or son a car. So I was just focused on, like I said, football and getting paid.

Scared of the future, Steve saw how the effects of these responsibilities took a toll on him academically and decided to take action to benefit his future:

My first 2 years when I was working two jobs, my grades weren't as good as they could have been. C, B, no strong A's, yeah no strong A's, B's and C's really. And then like I said, my third year I quit one job. The job that I stuck with they worked around my schedule so I worked now probably 10 hours a week. And I went full-time, I went full-time into school. I eventually got into the Honor's program, and began to do a little more academically. I wanted to get into UCLA and that was my goal.

While at times frustrated, students accepted their roles and responsibility with pride. Feeling like it was their responsibility to contribute to the family, they recognized their goals were the family goals as well. Despite the financial constraints, students still persisted and continued to find a way to make sure education remained a priority in their lives despite their economic situations.

Race matters. All of the participants indicated their ethnicity played a role in their goals to succeed financially, socially, and academically at some point in their life. Being an African American male, some students believed, made their experiences different than other ethnic groups. Steve believed he had been judged throughout his life due to his race and his desire to play in athletics. Due to this combination of being an African American athlete, unfair assumptions were made:

> It [race] plays an important role. There are not a lot of black students here. The majority of black students are athletes. So when they [people] judge, when they look at me, they just see athletes and say "oh, he's dumb, he didn't get here on academics. He's not a bright student. He's just here for football or basketball or whatever sport he plays." So it's hard to even make friends outside of the Black community really. I'm not really welcomed into that student group. There are a few people that know me and they hang out with me just because I see them regularly. But just for an average, let's say a white kid goes to a party and meet new people and they are like "oh ok, what's your major?" That's what they talk about. But when I go, it's like, oh hey are you on the football team? So it's hard to break that barrier. Like no, I don't play football. I just am a student, just like you. I want to tell them "let's talk about something other than sports."

For Michael, he felt race makes him stand out in society and has prevented him from receiving certain work or financial opportunities:

> Yeah, yeah, yeah—cause I'm a black man in America, you know. Again, I'm not trying to use my race or anything, or sound cocky or anything like that, but it's different. I'm a black man, working, and I want to succeed in basketball and it's

kind of tough, you know to survive at times. I'm trying to think of the words I want to say. It's like I got it, but I can't say it.

After a few minutes, Michael comes back to the original question and elaborates:

> You're black. I mean it's tough for a black male 'cause the stereotypes we got put upon us. Sometimes, I'll be walking through campus and I like to wear hip hop clothes. I mean I don't sag or anything like that. I don't do like, that's not my style. I'm a neat person but sometimes I wear hip hop clothes or something like that. And I walk through the campus, they would be looking at me and its like "what are you doing here?" Know what I am saying? I'm not a thug, but I'm in school trying to, trying to succeed. But I think that because the stereotypes that's put upon us by people, you see a black guy, say like you see a black guy in a university, I think most people are surprised. He's trying to make something out of himself. 'Cause you don't really see a lot of positive black people. You turn on the TV, what do you see? The black people, what black males do you see on TV? You see rapping, talking about money and things like that. I think that's what and how people want to view us. They don't ever really see the Barack Obamas well, lately you've been seeing a lot of Barack Obama, something in the past you never really saw a lot of. But successful black men have always existed. In the media, they never showed us, and due to that, you never had like a hero or figure of that sort growing up. Your hero was always a basketball player or rapper or something like that.

For Joseph, the reality of what it meant to be an African American male in society was

further strengthened by a presentation from a professor:

> We talked about white and black privilege in class. I learned how women have a certain amount of privileges, Black men have privileges and White men have privileges. And me as a Black man, it's still hard because I know that I don't have the same privileges as everybody else. Man, they are still a lot of people in American that doesn't want a black man to rule over a white man. So I know it's harder, I've grown up knowing that it is going to be harder for me because of the color of my skin. My parents tell me that everyday. I see that it's wrong, but I know the reality of that.

Being an African American male for David meant feeling isolated and alone at

times to deal with everything in his life. He wished there was a

> Networking kind of place or group he could connect with, making the process easier and smoother. Especially if there's people there that can relate to, you know

where you're coming from as a black man. Where you're trying to go, the stuff you're bound to experience, they could help you. They could facilitate the process for you, and then know you have support too from them.

When Chris replied, he gave two different responses. One response was based on his experiences in his teens, early twenties versus presently in his forties. Present-day, he does not view his challenges differently based on his race: "No, I think that, I don't think the challenges are any different for me at all. I don't think it [race] makes any difference whatsoever." However, when commenting on the perception of him as an African American male by others, his response indicated race does play a part in the attitudes of others. He offered his response while smiling:

> I think that there is some, well, there's this unspoken fear of black men and I think that when you don't behave like the stereotypical black men that you give people who you interact with a sense of relief that they're not going to get attacked or robbed. So I think in my general interaction and pursuing school now as an older man, they are like "Oh good. He's not an ex-con and he's actually not going to beat me up or take my children's money." So I think that now I probably get more relief than your average white guy because you know they are so relieved.

However, when younger he was perceived as *acting white* by other African Americans by going to school but found a way confront those attitudes:

> I thought that people were doing it because kids are mean. And I did tell a few people, I'm not trying to act or sound white. I act like I act. This is the way I can. And I'm not going to. My rebuttal sometimes is like are you trying to act black? Are you trying to act like a black person? What is it that a black person acts like? And when they say something like "you speak white," blah, blah, blah. It's not like all white people have proper English and good grammar. It just isn't that way at all. You have to make a choice. I didn't want to be part of a statistic and part of a stereotype. And you shouldn't want to be that way either. So that, yeah, I've learned to kind of get around that. And my confidence now, is way, way higher than it used to be at the time.

Similar to Chris, the accusation of acting white and not acting enough black had

been consistent throughout Alex's life. However, Alex's response was out of frustration

and sadness. What angers him the most was the criticisms he receives from multiple

races. He always felt torn and replied:

> If I dress in polo then I'm white. The brothers hate on me and the sistas won't talk
> to me. But the white people love me. I'm their friend. They are comfortable with
> me. But then you know what, I feel bad. I feel like I've done something wrong.
> I've let someone down, I let myself down. But that doesn't make sense. I haven't
> done anything wrong man but it gets to me. Then if I try and be like my boys, I
> scare the white people, and now I'm "different"—I remember one person telling
> me, you could be so much more than those guys, they are nothing more than
> thugs. But I wasn't a thug, neither were my friends. But since they wore hip-hop
> clothes, talked a certain way, they were drugs. And I spoke differently, I guess I
> had a different swagger about me man—so I'm different and can "be somebody."
> It's so messed up man. I can't even be myself because I don't know what that
> really means anymore. No one understands how it is to be black except us. No one
> gets it. When I wake up I feel punished sometimes that I am who I am. Black,
> White, acting a certain way, I just don't know how to be.

For all participants, their lives in some fashion had been impacted by their race.

All students felt they were judged and discriminated by their race in school, work, and in

society. For three students, they felt people assumed they were not intelligent or hard

working because they were African American. This left the men feeling frustrated and

angry. Students indicated that assuming they were not smart enough to go to school and

that they came from impoverished homes was not just disrespecting to themselves, but to

all African Americans.

Feeling connected and African American. All students felt connected to their

campuses through various ways: social contacts, interactions with faculty, and their

academics. For three of the students, having a diverse campus was the main reason they

enjoyed and embraced their campus. Erik remarked:

> Of course, yeah, man, this is a diverse campus. When lunch times comes around
> you know where to find me and the other black people. Over here, you got one
> group and I could be there. I could be over here, or I could be with this group of
> students. That's it, we really don't go anywhere else but out in the green area. So
> it's like we come out in this area, it's a whole different world than the classroom.
> But I think that's everywhere pretty much. When I toured [another community
> college], it was the same way. You have two people in one spot, and two in
> another spot. I guess that's just the way a lot of stuff is. People stay with who they
> are comfortable with.

Joseph never felt like an outsider due to his participation in a program at his college,

saying:

> No, never felt like that because the first classes I took was joining the [program]
> academy here. So that made me feel like I was a part of something right there
> because it was the beginning of the new academy on campus and it was like the
> first Black one at that, besides BSU [Black Student Union].

For Connor, having a diverse campus added to his learning experience:

> It's very important. I mean how else are you supposed to grow unless you are
> exposed to different ideas, different cultures, and different thoughts of mind.
> That's one of the fortunate things I always talked to my mom and stuff like that
> and we talk over several occasions and I said that's one of the benefits of growing
> up out here versus Chicago okay, and not that there was anything wrong with it. I
> mean I knew what I knew. Okay, but here being a diverse environment has a
> different culture and it comes out in the classroom. The teacher is out there
> teaching and they say this and that. It can't help but broaden your learning
> experiences because everybody is bringing something to the table.

However, for a few other students who felt their campus was not diverse enough

in terms of African American students, they often felt alone and out of place. David,

somewhat frustrated, said:

> I don't see them maybe because most of my classes are in the afternoons or
> evenings, but I haven't seen that many. Let me see in all my classes, I think I've

seen . . . since I've been here, I want to say twelve classes and probably only seen eight black people. It's strange, even though like I'm still motivated but it's kind of like a little bit deep inside you, you know, you wish there were more people that are like you in the class. You want to feel like you guys are all on the same mission. But, there's a feeling there where it's like, you are by yourself. That's why when I do transfer, I'm going to look for something for me to connect with, black clubs, black organizations, you know, black fraternity.

In the case of Michael, he often felt out of place and wished he was at a different type of institution, saying "A lot of times I did, I do feel out of place. I feel like I shouldn't be here. I feel that, I really do feel like I should be at a black college or something like that to not feel out of place." Connor compared his experiences between different colleges within the same district. He says:

> South College was my best experience. I like the more urban feel of it. I feel everyone at that college cares more for their students there. A lot of my friends go to that school, a lot of friends that I play basketball with and everything and have similar interests, be it music, style, fashion and everything. I was able to walk around campus and you could just say "What's up, blah, blah, blah" and then the next thing you know, you know their name and you're talking to them. And you would see them every day and now talk to them. So it was cooler at South.

However, at his current campus, Middle Community College, he shared a different student experience:

> I feel kind of an outcast a little bit. I feel older. And that's why I like South Community College, it's more of an older school, you have older students. You have returning students from, who probably started junior college from back in the day and then they decided to go back like after a few years and everything. Out here I feel like it's a younger campus, as well as Central Community College, and I just feel like, I'm a little too old and everything. It's just up here I think it's younger so I alienate myself on purpose because of things like if we're in a study group and then two people will be talking about little kid drama. Well what I feel is little kid drama and I'm just like ok, I don't want to deal with that. As far as black people, I do see black people here, sometimes. A lot of them are athletes though, you know some guys that I play ball with on this campus. But it's not prevalent as in South Community College or even Middle Community College.

And I think it's a smaller campus here but you also have to think of the area since we are in the northern part of the city.

Steve often felt alone in his classes, and insecure when interacting with his classmates due to their assumptions (in his eyes) of him:

It is tough being a black male on campus, just because there's not a lot of Black people and all the black males do play sports. They play basketball or just hang in their own section. They're kind of just segregating themselves. And I would say it's hard in general because when you go into a classroom you and maybe two other people in that class is black. So it's kind of intimidating. I feel like "Oh man, nobody in this class looks like me." I'm usually the only black male in the classroom. And just talking to people, I remember we'd always be assigned groups. The teacher would be like, okay get into groups. And I would look around and wonder who should I should ask who to form a group with. "Who looks like they would accept a black guy into their group?" Some people wouldn't, I guess they feel, I don't know how they feel. I really want to know how they feel. Like they're scared to talk to me, or yeah, just plain talk to me. And they kind of look at me with that feeling of "Oh I don't know if we should have him in our group because he looks like an athlete again. And he might not do his part." If I was just a regular student, a white student, or any race, this wouldn't happen.

Chris believed he was connected to campus but mainly through his courses not social circles. Firmly grounded to finish school, he classified his attitude as "Focused and determined and interested in the outcome. I'm not interested in the activities of the school per se." His age, occasionally made him feel out of place saying, "I'm always happy to see an older student here. I don't act like an old guy. I'm not a scrooge guy but definitely older than most students." Nate laughed a bit when he responded, saying:

Sometime I feel a little old [in classes, at college] I mean I'm taking three classes when I'm in my forties and stuff of that nature. So yeah, there is some awkwardness there because of the age. You look around the classroom you see these babies and these teenagers and stuff like that. I mean they are my son's and daughter's age and stuff like that but I mean other than that, I don't feel out of place.

In Alex's case, he found it difficult at times to be focused when you are all alone. He

reflected:

> It's so strange man, I'm look around and I feel like the only one in the cafeteria, in
> the bookstore, in the parking lot, in class, everywhere. It does get lonely when you
> feel like no one understands you, your experience, your neighborhood. And I
> don't drive a fancy car like some of these students around here. And I'm sure I
> don't live in big homes like they do. Hell, sometimes my car doesn't even work
> and I have to share it. But whatever, I know there are black people that go here,
> but I don't ever see them. And when I do see them, sometimes we acknowledge
> each other, sometimes we don't even speak. It's like we are in a hurry or
> something. But I know I got to take care of my stuff man school man, school,
> regardless if people around here look like me. White people aren't going to help
> me go to school and black people won't as well. You just gotta stay focused but
> I'm out here sometimes on this island. Well at least that's how I feel.

All participants indicated they feel connected to campus in a variety of ways.

Some students felt connected due to the campus diversity as opposed to other campuses

in the district they had previously attended. Diversity on campus was a key factor for

students to feel welcomed. Other students identified joining clubs and organizations as

main reasons they felt connected. Faculty involvement and the clubs and organizations

gave students the feeling they belonged and were respected. Once students began to

utilizing these resources, participants felt their voice could be heard and appreciated

unlike when they first attended college.

Guidance for African American males. Participants were asked what type of

advice they would give to a new African American male student at a community college.

Participants' advice was based on their own personal experiences and looking at the

choices they and their friends made once they arrived on campus. David said to "stay

focused, stay very focused on school, no matter what." For Joseph, he believes all

students have to "get involved from the beginning and form friendships." Connor gave a

more broad response in giving his advice for a student in the beginning of their college

experience—to always look toward the future:

> I would tell him to look at himself in 15 years, or think of what he wants to do in 15 years and work toward that as a goal. He should look at what career he wants to be, or what business he wants to own, just something that's realistic but achievable. And I'd tell him, hey if you see yourself doing this in 15 years, look at what kind of degree or major programs that we offer that will help you get there and just tell them that this is the first step in achieving that goal.

Erik stressed communication and building relationships with everyone at college as a

main focus and to continue that networking throughout school:

> Stick to it, don't let nobody tell you different. Don't let nobody steer you the wrong way. Listen to what you feel is right. And make sure you have some type of relationship with your teachers. It doesn't have to be like "We got to talk on the phone every now and then, or you've got to email me some stuff or anything." But just keep a relationship with your teachers, so that way when you come in he or she will recognize you and know what you are doing.

Steve's recommendation for students centered being humble and prepare for criticism. He

wanted the men to realize that just because a student is in college it does not mean you

have *made it*—there is much work to do:

> Even though you're in college and you have that "I don't have to come to class, teachers are not taking roll, they don't care' attitude," it's not like that. You can leave school, you don't have to do anything you don't want to. In high school you know, your parents are really telling you to do this, you're in college now, but do not let that go to your head! Stay on top of your schoolwork, because after 2 years you want to get that Associate's degree and go to a 4-year university and get your bachelor's. Because education is the future. If you have education, the further you go the more you'll be able to do. So don't get caught up in being here and hanging out and thinking you're grown really. Because I thought I was grown. I was like "Yeah I can do whatever I want." So yeah, you think you're grown but don't let that go to your head. Take care of the stuff you need to, so you can get out of here and get a good job, especially now in this economy and how things are going, you

need a good education. And I would introduce myself to people on campus and say 'I'm new here too, but I'm . . . ."

Michael's advice was simple and direct saying, "Don't mess around. Just get straight through it. Get straight to it. Take them classes, you know, go through, go to those intercession classes and take them summer classes. Get out of here as quick as you can." Chris believed to be successful, students have to take themselves seriously, and be purposeful in going to college. Their attitude has to change immediately. He says:

> I would tell him whatever he's doing to take it seriously, don't just coast and make sure that there's some judgment behind it. I would tell them while you are *coasting* along, make sure to stop at the counselor's office and have a good long chat with your counselor and don't make that your last chat because the counselors will guide you and you won't waste your time. At that time, you can find out if you're serious or not. If you are not serious about school, go find out how you can make yourself serious and if you don't, you don't come back until you are ready to be serious.

Nate said black men need to appreciate the blessings and opportunity of going to college, to:

> Always keep an open mind, ask questions, challenge and participate to enrich your overall college experience. A lot of us didn't have that luxury to do that because we're too busy trying to work at paying bills you know, then joining the student government office and running for a position. But if you do have that particular opportunity to do by all means go for it because it's helping, it's preparing you for life.

Alex stressed students have to be realistic in the beginning and know their ethnicity will always provide challenges but instead of being angry, you have to channel that energy in a positive direction:

> You are black, a black man, that will never change. You will be reminded that everyday on campus—in the classroom, cafeteria, reading your textbooks. And that is going to make you angry dude, angry at times because people are ignorant and will judge you, maybe hate you. But you have to finish school, prove them

wrong, and help yourself. That should always drive you—you to succeed. It's not that simple, but then it is—we have no choice. A black man will always be a black man, but you can be an educated one—a choice you can make.

All participants agreed African American men just starting college need mentoring, guidance, advice given on college survival. Participants believed it is easy for young men to get "caught up" in the social atmosphere of campus (meeting girls, hanging out with friends) and fail to make school a priority. Students stressed maintaining a focused and steady pace through the community college so transferring to a 4-year institution would be a realistic and viable option.

Obama is hope. Since the goal of the research was to understand their experiences of being an African American male in college, the goal of the last question was to see what Obama's presidency symbolizes to them or any other African Americans. All students responded with "hope" and "change" in their responses but five students gave more detailed responses. The answers varied in tone by age. For Joseph, he saw the selection as full of "promise" saying:

> Obama's win is one of the best things that we've done in America so far because it's a huge change. Because I still know there are a lot of people in America that doesn't want a Black man to rule over a White man. So it's great because he knows his challenge, he knows that he can be killed for it, he knows what is going on and he still is striving for change. So since he can do it, I can get there. And it's helping the children because now instead of the children thinking, "Oh when I grow up, I want to be a basketball player," I'll hear them saying "I want to be president." And have the teachers not looking upon them, as "Oh you can't do that"—but not saying it. You can see it on their face. I saw it on my teacher's faces back in elementary. When they ask you what do you want to be, I say "president." They look at you like "please!" But he did it, they ain't saying nothing now.

For Connor, he identified with Obama on many cultural levels. He could relate to his Obama's life:

> I feel like we come from similar backgrounds. Being both biracial, he also grew up in Hawaii a little bit so. And he's also a basketball player. So I'm just like, "You know what, there's hope"—I mean he's educated of course. It's historic. It gives all of us a role model other than someone like athletes and giving them those dreams of "hey one day I can tie my sneaks up and step onto a basketball court." They can think, like "Hey I can tie up my nice leather shoes and put on my business suit and go be a senator." It gives them other routes other than sports to kind of focus on. It just opens more doors.

For an excited Michael, Obama's victory gave him a sense of pride and for his friends at school, a reason to always celebrate:

> Man, Obama, here is a successful black male that wasn't trying to be a rapper. He is just this amazing hero. To see a black man go through all those obstacles and all those barriers, he broke down all those, all those walls for a lot of people. He gives me motivation. The day after the election when I came to school you could just see the atmosphere from all the black people on campus they were like "Obama the president!"—We're walking with our heads up high. He's just amazing, just eye-opening!

Chris gave a different take on Obama's victory. Happy that Obama was elected, his comments were tapered with a bit of caution concerning his race and the work ahead of Obama in office:

> I'm very happy that a black man was able to successfully make it into the office of the presidency. On the other hand, I'd really wish that this had been possible without the current president screwing up the nation the way he did. Because I don't think Obama's election would have happened under any circumstance other than people's hatred of Bush. I think Obama has greater ability to lead the country and I think he's less likely to be in the pockets of the elite and be in the pockets of the lobbyists. So I, yeah, I do think he is the best possible choice for the presidency. Whether or not he's black or Mexican or white or Asian, I don't really care about that at all. I'm just happy that he's an intelligent person. That's where I am.

Nate, like Chris, was happy for Obama but recognized the many challenges he

feelt the President would have to address once in office. He was cautious and critical,

saying:

> Well, it's a great thing, it's a great thing but it had to be a perfect storm and by
> saying that I meant, you have to have 8 years of Bush policies, okay. You had to
> have the economical mess that we have going on right now because other than
> that, I doubt very seriously if we would be looking at president elect Obama. It
> had to be a perfect storm for him to be elected. Okay, seeing that and seeing how
> he was swept into office I never thought I would see that man. I sat up there and I
> watched that rally in Grand Park that night and as the cameras swept the crowd, I
> mean you saw all nationalities of people. But Obama's got a lot of work to do.
> This is gonna be, this is not going to be easy. It's a mess, it's a mess. My brother
> sent me a cartoon, a political cartoon that said you had two hillbillies sitting on a
> porch in rocking chairs and one hillbilly said that "I can remember the only job a
> black man could get was cleaning up the mess of a white man" and the other
> hillbilly rocks back and forth, thinking about it and says "Well, I guess things
> haven't changed."—It's a mess, but Obama is good for us.

Participants identified the election of Barack Obama as president a milestone for

the country. Participants recognized his presidency would consist of fixing a wounded

and financially strapped economy, among other challenges. Some students, while happy

about his victory, believed race will be more of an issue than ever before, because the

new face of the country is different, once again giving the African American man another

burden to carry.

Summary

The findings that emerged from this study reveal a poignant story about the

experiences of African American male community college students. Chapter 4 began with

a detailed overview and description of the community college campuses as they related to

the study. The chapter then uncovered the findings of the interviews, identifying themes

found significant through the participants' statements. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings, additional questions derived from the research, recommendations for further action and research and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I urge us to tell our sons every day, over dinner, in the bathroom, in school, on the
basketball court, on the phone, during the commercial break, in Sunday school, before
they go to bed, when they get up, when they head off to college, when they come home,
when we visit them in jail, when we attend their weddings, when we mourn at the
funerals of their friends, you have a choice, you are responsible for what you do, and your
community will hold you accountable. Racism will never change that. Long after our eyes
glaze over and our ears grow numb watching and listening to the TV roundtable
discussions that seek to address our fate, we can still keep our sons awake and perhaps
alive if we teach them that the first line of defense against racism is to mold themselves
into disciplines, self-respecting refutations of its ability to destroy our souls or ourselves.
—Marita Golden, author

Introduction

African American males consistently are poorly represented in most areas of

higher education degree attainment. However, within community colleges, the majority of

African American males reside in this system. However, few men matriculate into the 4-

year system and either stay in community colleges or leave higher education altogether.

There is a great need for educators to understand the story of these men, the social,

political, cultural, and academic challenges they face in terms of achieving academic

success, and identify significant factors that motivate them to persist in their educational

journey. This chapter will provide a section summarizing the findings, discuss

unanticipated findings discovered through the study, pose additional questions that arose

from the study, offer suggestions for future research, and provide recommendations for

student affairs administrators at community colleges that seek to improve the academic

experience and retention of African American males. The final section is devoted to the

researcher's process of conducting this study and its limitations.

Summary of Findings

This section of the chapter summarizes key results about the forces that shape the participants' experiences in their community colleges. The four key areas that emerged from the data are: family support and influence, faculty and mentor relationships, time commitment and cost, and racial identity. These areas will be discussed throughout the chapter in light of relevant literature.

Family Support and Influence

Parental attitudes often dictated the career and educational path of the participants. For the majority of participants, their parents stressed the importance of going to college to achieve mobility in society. Their positive attitudes were the push needed for most participants to see education as an option. These responses are consistent with literature that provides empirical evidence arguing that parents' involvement in their children's education often has a strong and positive association with student achievement (Fields-Smith, 2005; Gutman, 2000).

However, for a few participants, their experiences with families were not always positive. The parental influence provided additional pressures for the men to succeed in athletics, not academically. These pressures had a substantial impact on the success of these men. The desire to use athletics ultimately as a means for financial survival and security for families supports arguments made in the research literature about the often false hope these men possess about their athletic ability (Edwards, 1984; Funk, 1991; Gerdy, 2000; Towers, 2004). Participants who identified themselves as athletes felt they were forced to choose between athletics and academics. In one particular case, the

participant chose academics and as a result, experiences an estranged relationship with his father. The participant's choice to embrace academics is in contrast to the literature that details how many African American males choose athletics and completely abandon their academic goals to pursue an unrealistic athletic career (Edwards, 1984; Sperber, 2000). As a result, the men are not connected to their institution anymore and become withdrawn from their academics and relationships with other students, risking dropping out of school (Tinto, 1993). The participants in this study validated Tinto's theory, indicating they had periods when they wanted to withdraw from college due to lack of family support, family responsibilities, and their tension between athletics and academics. Two participants remarked they did withdraw from their college for a semester but then returned to school once they felt they could successfully manage all their responsibilities.

The responses in the study about family support were often positive. Many participants remarked about how observing their family socioeconomic situation and having conversations with their parents often was a substantial motivator to attend college. For those participants who had educated parents, they witnessed the financial and cultural benefits experienced by having possessing a college degree. These parents now possess the cultural and social capital needed to teach their children how to persevere in their educational goals. This is consistent with those researchers who argue that achieving this type of capital is vital to the success and growth of underrepresented groups (Banks, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Carter, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1992; Mehan et al., 1996; Stanton-Salazar et al., 1996; Worth, 2002). These students identified their parents as role models

and adopted an attitude that education is always connected to success and mobility in society.

For those participants who did not have parents that stressed the value of education, their lives were initially regulated to working in low-income jobs and not advancing, mirroring their parents' socioeconomic situation. With these participants, their families did not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to change their environment. This is consistent with the research arguing that lower-class youth often fail to advance educationally and socioeconomically through society (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Mehan et al., 1976). It was after the participants became older and parents did they realize the capital they needed to possess for their careers and families.

Feeling Connected to Campus

Many participants reflected that being an African American man (at times the only one in class) created a distance between them and some students. Participants felt the campus was not always a welcoming environment for African American students. The attitudes of the participants were consistent with literature that argues the community college system does little to attend to the cultural and academic needs of African American students (Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Bush, 2004; Ellis, 2002; McNairy, 1996; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Perrakis, 2008). As a result, when participants felt this way, they were often tempted to abandon their school goals and leave the institution altogether. This is consistent with literature that speaks to the need of students feeling connected and being

integrated into the college (Bowers, 2007; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Peper, 2007; Tierney, 1999; Tinto, 1993) to prevent isolation and attrition from occurring.

Tinto's work provides much discussion of the issues that make students withdraw from an institution. However, Tinto's research (1993) has been criticized for only looking at traditional (i.e., white, middle-class) students, not students of color (Peper, 2007; Tierney, 1992). More research is needed to uncover specific issues that affect African American students and their academic performance. Participants endured some of the aspects Tinto discussed in his work but also discussed their attitudes surrounding ethnic identity and mainstreaming into the dominant culture, areas not discussed in Tinto's work. This work strove to address and understand attitudes around ethnic identity for these men. It is imperative researchers and practitioners see this population through a new lens to assess specifically what is needed for their success.

The process of social and academic integration into the community college was clearly not easy for the participants. Consistent with the literature, these students expressed difficulty since community college students commute to the campus and often have additional family and work responsibilities (Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Coley, 2000; Dougherty, 1994). Participants expressed frustration that they could not connect to their school because of their other responsibilities taking them away from school. Two participants in particular indicated they wished support groups for African American students existed on their campuses. These groups would help connect African American students on their campus and help them see the educational and institutional challenges they are facing. Participants felt peer relationships would have a substantial effect on their

success. This is supported by literature that supports the idea of networking and the development of an extended family network that allows students to discuss issues such as finances and academic support (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Davis, 1994; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Lang & Ford, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

All participants believed the use of African American faculty would help creating a family network and thereby connect students with the campus community. Participants were overwhelming grateful and appreciative e-of their relationships with faculty members of color. They believed faculty took an interest in their academic and social development and would remain present and influential as they continued in school. Their responses validate the research about the important role faculty of color play in the academic and cultural development of these men (Astin, 1993, 1999; Castagna & Dei, 2000; Davis, 1994; Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1996). Six of the participants indicated their faculty members became mentors to them as well. These relationships are critical to the success of participants. The majority of students remarked how faculty welcomed them into the institution and into the classroom. When asked questions, they felt their answers were respected and appreciated by the faculty member. The participants' perceptions in this study expressed about the role faculty play in their learning process and as a mentor are consistent with research that argues for faculty members to "listen" to their students and see how their academic and social needs are tied to their classroom experience and ability to grasp class material (Braxton, Bray, & Berger, 2000; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

One student expressed difficulty relating to students. Some of these feelings led

him to be somewhat standoffish toward his classmates. He felt that a HBCU would

provide for him the ideal environment (largely African American) where he could thrive

and succeed academically. His feelings are consistent with supporters of HBCUs that

believe these institutions provide a healthy environment conducive to learning (Allen,

1987; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Davis, 1993; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Ross, 1998).

This student was the only one who discussed HBCUs in his interview. The other

participants discussed trying to adjust and succeed at their community college and

ultimately transfer to a 4-year institution. However, when asked where participants

wanted to transfer, only the one student mentioned a HBCU. The other participants

believed if they could continue to have the same type of faculty involvement at their

future institutions, they would succeed academically in a nurturing environment.

Financial Commitment

Financial security was a common theme expressed by all participants. All of their

responsibilities (academic and family) were centered on having the financial means

necessary to survive. Many students attributed their financial concerns from living in an

expensive city and trying to pay for the bare minimum to survive: housing (rent or

purchase), transportation (gas, public transportation), and utility bills. As a result,

working long hours, having multiple jobs to provide money for families often pushed

academics down the list of priorities. Students expressed frustration at how money

influences their decisions and actions, sometimes providing obstacles while trying to take

classes consistently each semester. The issue of financial resources and its effect on

African American student achievement is consistent with the literature identifying factors that shape college student success (Braxton et al., 2000, Galloway & Swail, 1999; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Tinto, 1993; Seidman, 2005; Smith, 2001).

Financial responsibilities were not limited to only paying for academic costs. For those students who did not have families or significant others, they were still supporting themselves financially. Bean (2005) posits existing research on student finances center on education, ignoring other financial responsibilities and obligations, mirroring to what the participants stated in their interviews. Moreover, these students were also providing income to assist their families. Respect and responsibility to the family was a common theme expressed throughout the interviews. Bean's research is consistent with the participants' list of financial bills and obligations: in addition to their cell phone, car payments, gas bills, students knew they had to contribute toward mortgages, rent, cable, and utilities. Moreover, their presence in the homes also provided babysitting opportunities for siblings and younger relatives, saving money for the family as well.

The participants in this study showed how their financial obligations are vital to their survival. In doing so, they also revealed the pressures put upon them to survive financially and academically. They cannot abandon their financial responsibilities and consequently, their academic progress risks suffering as a result. The struggles these men face compliment the literature on identifying factors that hinder the academic progress of African American men and argue for a better understanding of this group (Bean 2005; Feldman, 1993; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Three of the participants felt trapped in their obligations and wondered when their financial situation was going to change, if ever.

Participants expressed sadness and remarked their biggest fear was tothat they would struggle financially like their parents.

Racial Identity

For those students who are athletes, they felt negative assumptions were made of them by students and faculty, often referring to them as *dumb jocks*, and thinking that athletics was the only path these men could take to finish college. Participants felt that their hard work academically was largely being ignored by stereotypes and expressed their anger throughout the interviews. These feelings from participants are consistent with research on the stereotyping and racial profiling of African American male athletes in college (Edwards, 1984; Gerdy, 2000; Sperber, 2000). Participants felt these attitudes contributed to their feelings of low self-worth and sometimes made them reluctant to become part of the college community.

All participants at some point felt discriminated by society. The men further believed that due to the portrayal of African American males in society, they had even more barriers to overcome than other ethnic groups. These feelings are similar to the feelings expressed by literature on racial identity and marginlization (Cross, 1995; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1978, 1983).

The phase "feeling isolated" came up frequently in the interviews. For six of the men, they often felt that in their jobs and education, there were few, if any, African American males present and visible. In other words, there were no males that could understand or relate to their challenges and struggles. In addition, these six men needed to have people around them that could provide an ear to listen and then advise. Similar to

the research discussing cultural isolation and alienation of African American students, these men often felt alone in many facets of society (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 2000). These men rarely have the community to share their experiences withand receive guidance and mentorship. Due to the fact these men are often the only African American representation in a class, office, or group, they often feel punished for their presence and consequently, become the spokesperson for their race.

Students also discussed society's fear of black males in general. Participants expressed disbelief that people were scared of them, perhaps thinking that they were going to rob them or date their daughters. The men recognized the unfair treatment practices they have to endure but believed they will prove people wrong and hopefully change perceptions if they remained focused on their educational goals. The feelings of the participants were consistent with Agnew's (1992) general strain theory. Students believed that to survive academically and socially, they would have to adopt positive attitudes and defense mechanisms to combat the discrimination.

Overall, the participants' responses contrasted Ogbu's (1978, 1983) deterministic view of African American discrimination by society. Ogbu believed African Americans will never gain acceptance to society and their efforts will continue to fail. These men believe differently—their hard work and persistence to their academics and other family responsibilities will provide future economic stability for their entire family. These men believe they will succeed, no matter what the costs or challenges they face. The positive attitudes of the participants are in agreement with research that shows the connection

between being an active participant in school activities and dedication can shape success and identity (Giddens, 1984; Martin, 2000).

However, for participants, going to school and being African American often resulted in them being labeled as "white" or "acting white" by other African Americans. Their feelings are consistent with the research on how African American students are perceived by their peers when trying to succeed academically (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1992; Weissert 1999). A few of the students stated during the interviews they were accused of this by white students but that did not affect them as much as when participants from their own race voiced these sentiments. Attacked by their fellow brothers, students expressed sadness and at times became emotional. Participants already felt unaccepted by other groups in school and society, but now felt abandoned by their own race. In addition, participants were frustrated about the perception that "acting white" meant wanting to succeed in school. Many of the students remarked this accusation was insulting and disrupting to the entire African American community.

At the same time, participants felt torn and conflicted between achieving their goals and meeting the expectations of their friends of the same race and at times even family. One common attitude expressed in the interviews was despite the challenges endured as African American males, students were proud of their race and heritage and adopted attitudes that would help them succeed academically. Participants wanted to understand how to navigate through cultural divides and identify resources. validates the literature on African Americans learning how to adjust and thrive in various environments (Ainsworth & Wiggan, 2006; Carter, 2005; Jang & Johnson, 2003). Their

racial and cultural backgrounds were a motivation to succeed and confront the stereotypes that continually surrounded them.

Unanticipated Findings

The study uncovered a few surprising findings that added to the richness and depth of the responses. The age of the students (20-51 yrs.) had a substantial effect on their responses in a few areas. All participants identified the election of Barack Obama as president a milestone for the country. The younger students perceived Obama as hopeful for giving African Americans a strong role model in society. However, the older students expressed caution in making Obama the *hope for everyone*. The older students were more cynical of his presidency, saying his administration was the result of a *perfect storm*, a financial situation so bad in society that anyone different than the current administration would be elected president. They believed Obama would not have been elected president if the economy was in a better financial situation. The younger students were optimistic about race believing his election as president would help address and even eliminate possible racial concerns and discriminatory practices. However, the older students gave contrasting responses, believing race will be more of an issue than ever before, because the new face of our country is different, once again giving the black man another burden to carry. These responses were surprising since the expectation was that the responses for this question would be consistent across all students interviewed since they all shared the same ethnicity.

For the older students, acquiring a college degree was almost an obsession in their lives. Many of the students expressed fear that not getting that degree would classify

themselves as a failure, primarily in their own eyes. The older men possessed jobs, had families, but believed their lives would be of less value if they fail to obtain a college degree. A surprise finding of the research was how vivid and frightful failure was to these men. These men seemed to center their lives on college as their only goal to achieve. The burden these men place on themselves can be attributed to the negative perceptions and assumptions that society places on them (Celious & Oxserman, 2001; Gordon, 1999). Existing literature validates the fear these men have to not end up incarcerated and unemployed, and look at education as their only means to combat these challenges (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999; Dyson, 2001; Eckholm, 2006). For the older students, they do not want their children to move toward a life of economic failure.

The younger group saw college as a way out for them to succeed academically and financially. Like the older participants, they were fearful of not helping their families (parents, siblings) succeed in their lives as well. They realized their families' successes (and failures) were based on their academic progress. The researcher was not anticipating the connection students made between their academic success and their families' financial well-being. However, the participants' various academic and financial pressures are consistent with research that helps understand how critical their education is to their economic survival and possibly elevate to the middle class (Cuyjet, 1997; Ferguson & Mehta, 2004; Orfield, 2002). These students know if they fail, the repercussions will be severe for their entire family. To even have a chance to gain membership in the middle class, it is imperative these men possess a college degree. All students interviewed

viewed education as a benefit for their entire community; it was not necessarily an

individual goal.

Another surprise from the study was the positive outlook all students had of their

futures, in spite of all the challenges and barriers they will continue to face in society.

Many students indicated that after they received their bachelor's degree, they would

pursue a graduate or professional degree. Everyone looked toward their future as bright

and fruitful for their families, and for their present and future careers. Achieving their

educational goals, the men believed would increase their sense of self-worth,

accomplishments, and design a framework to set additional future life goals. This finding

was similar to the Cross (1995) identity model's fourth and final stage—internalization,

in which African Americans are comfortable with their identity and are ready to confront

all forms of cultural oppression in society. I assumed at least one student would not view

his future as bright and positive given his struggles. Instead the findings of all participants

were overwhelmingly positive about their futures, regardless of age, financial, or

educational situation. The findings reveal an acceptance of themselves as hard-working,

successful (although many would not specifically refer to them as such) African

American men who will continue to persist in all their goals despite all obstacles.

Questions and Implications for Future Research

The study conducted gave an insight into the lives of African American male

community college students. Their lived experiences allowed the researcher to explore

and help understand a population that often felt devalued, disrespected, and ignored in

society. Their responses were local and specific to the nine students participating in the

study. However, the participants provided rich, detailed data in a narrative that after the

researcher concluded all interviews, more questions arose from the data. These additional

questions can help student affairs professionals and administrators at community colleges

understand their specific needs and create an environment at their institution that is

conducive to the learning of these men. These questions also provide recommendations

for future study and additional research opportunities.

Why Is There a Lack of High School and College Level Programs Dedicated to the

Achievement of African American Male Students?

Participants' recommendation for cultural and academic support, and ethnic

groups (student organizations and clubs) that involved African American male students

would not only strengthen their connection to campus but would make new students

assimilate at the beginning of their college careers. The findings of this study are

consistent with the literature supporting the theory that institutional forces critically shape

African American males experience in college (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; D'Augelli &

Hershberger, 1993; Davis, 1994; Lang & Ford, 1992). These groups and activities would

help promote community building between staff, faculty, and students, as well as creating

and strengthening positive images of African American males trying to succeed

academically (Clements, 2000; Pope, 2006).

Research has explored what builds community for traditional students (Tinto,

1987, 1998), but what defines community for African American males is still unclear.

Existing literature argues African American males need a campus climate to be a

welcoming place in terms of infusing diversity into its curriculum, programs, and services

researched and understood more by administrators to truly understand the magnitude of the

African American male's daily activities and their challenges to feel connected on campus.

Why Are Some African American Men Successful Academically While Others Fail?

This study looked at nine students who are labeled successful due to their

persistence and dedication to education. In this study, students supported the literature

indicating that being African American challenged them in society, but gave them the

power to persist and work hard to achieve their goals (Cross, 1991, 1995; Giddens, 1984).

However, some students do not possess the power to persist due to lack of acquiring

educational capital in school, economical hardships, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986;

Galloway & Swail, 1999; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Mehan et al., 1976). Lack of capital is a

major factor for withdrawal and student dropout (ECS, cited in CCSSE, 2003; Smith

2001). There is little research that interviews those students that have not succeeded

academically. It is unclear why more studies have not been conducted. My belief is some

students would be reluctant to share their stories with a stranger or faculty member if they

do not feel comfortable or know that person. With African American students, males in

particular, who often feel society views them in a negative light (Polite & David, 1999;

Stevens, 2006), I would argue this would be a major challenge to hearing their story.

Where Are the Studies Done on Older African American Male Community College

Students?

The majority of the participants were under the age of 30. Four participants were

between the ages of 30 and 53. The older students' responses suggested a completely

different experience than the other group. Their perspectives came from the standpoint of

being a husband, father, and grandfather, and seasoned career individual. For these

participants, they are clearly focused and engaged in their studies but do not remain on

campus once classes end, leaving little time to socialize and become integrated into the

community (Carter, 2005; Cuyjet, 2006). The older students felt like they had very little

time to manage all of their family and job responsibilities and to maximize time, they had

to make academics a priority. The older students reflected back on their lives as children

and how their families' socioeconomic situation impacted their upbringing and

educational paths. Now with some of men having families, they see education as the only

path to economic and social mobility in society (Cuyjet, 2006; Grubb, 1999; Phillippe &

Patton, 2000). Due to their life experiences, their responses reflected a sense of urgency

and motivation to obtain a college degree as fast as possible.

When I first began this research, I was curious if having a diverse age group of

participants would provide various perspectives since the majority of African American

students receive bachelor degrees later in life compared to white students (Dicroce, 2005;

Price, 2004; Smith, 2001). For the older participants, their life experience and resiliency

to persist in school was linked to their self-esteem (Finn & Rock, 1997). To maneuver

successfully through school, they adopted positive behaviors and remained focus on

achieving their goals. However, what are (if any) the differences between a 19-year-old student and a 51-year-old student striving to achieve the same degree? Are the motivations between these two age groups similar or different? For researchers, qualitative studies could be conducted to understand their definitions of academic success and campus community connection while comparing their responses to the younger students. This research would help understand the experience of African American male students on community college campuses through another important but unknown perspective.

Can Non-Faculty of Color Be Successful in Mentoring Students of Color?

Six participants indicated their faculty of color had a significant impact on the college careers. Students indicated those faculty who shared the same race made them feel more comfortable to express their feelings and goals. The connection between faculty and students of color is consistent with literature that argues African American students often feel marginalized in school when they do not see them represented in faculty and often feel pressured to be the spokesperson for their race in classroom settings (Castagna & Dei, 2000; Gossett et al., 1996). However, is race the only factor that connects these two groups? Faculty of color are present on campus but not always in high numbers. Is it possible for these males to connect with faculty that are not of color? One participant in particular indicated having faculty that cared about his academic growth was more important than the faculty member's ethnicity. For the other participants, ethnicity was the most important factor. What creates comfort and acceptance for the students: dress, talk, attitude, age, gender? Additional research is needed to see what exactly connects

these groups together and whether or not an African American student can embrace and

benefit from a faculty member outside of their race.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Officers and Administrators

Attend a Welcome/Orientation Session at the Beginning of the Semester

All students should be required (or strongly recommended) to attend this event,

preferably held prior to the beginning of classes. All students could be introduced to all

the student services offices (counseling, EOPS, financial aid) on campus as well as

meeting key administrators. The university president would give a welcome and discuss

their commitment to serving and hearing the needs of students. Participants indicated

getting involved on campus and building relationships was key to being successful in

college. By setting a positive and welcoming tone in the beginning, faculty/staff/

administrators can show incoming African American students that they are important,

respected, and supported through their time at the community college (Braxton et al.,

2000; Castagna & Dei, 2000; Cuyjet, 2006; Davis, 1994; Grossett et al., 1996; Kuh et al.,

2005).

The Financial Aid Office Should Create Focus Groups with the Students

The majority of the participants indicated their difficulties with getting access to

money, not understanding the rules and policies of how financial aid works, and what

exactly financial aid would cover in terms of their education. Research has shown the

financial aid as a significant factor for student retention (Bean, 2005; Braxton et al., 2000;

Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Participants indicated due to miscommunication from the

office, they had to drop classes or withdraw from school in some cases. The financial aid

office can be proactive and seek and hear the problems and concerns from African American students. Their concerns might be consistent with other groups on campus as well. The office should also offer educational workshops on how to access all types of financial aid: scholarships, loans, work study. Students would be able to understand how all types of money do not necessarily create debt. And as these students transfer to a 4-year college, they can use this financial capital acquired in the community colleges at their next campus when looking for aid.

Create Programs That Service Students Who Also Are Parents

A few of the participants in the study discussed at length the challenges of balancing parenting responsibilities with their jobs and academic studies. There are few services that assist these students. Colleges can create support groups that allow students to meet others that share the same frustrations and pressures. This will create some community between the students and a better connection to the community college. An example of such programs are daycare programs, a social night for the entire family, and even a "bring your kid to school day" that reinforces for children and their parents (students) that education should be a priority for everyone.

Colleges Should Look for Creative Ways to Connect with Diverse Student Populations

Current students should be sent a survey from the student affairs office (via email) that asks them about their experience at the college, what services/programs have helped them, and how their experience could be improved on their campus. This survey could be sent each semester or yearly. And for students who withdrew from college, contacting them as well to see if they plan to return or the reasons why they withdrew from classes.

All communication could be done over email or phone; however, due to students

changing contact information, email communication might be the most consistent way to

reach the students. If colleges want to understand the experiences of African Americans

on their campuses, they have to be consistent in their communication and follow-up with

each student once they enter and exit their campuses.

Connect All Faculty and Staff with Students from Diverse Populations

A majority of the participants identified faculty and counselors as their mentors

and role models. Workshops should be created for faculty to help, remind, and renew

their knowledge of the challenges students face and how they vary group by group. And

faculty/staff mentoring does not always have to put people of the same race together.

Administrators could create a student/faculty mentoring program on their campuses and

recruit faculty and students to participate. Through questionnaires, the similar interests of

both student and faculty member could be identified and paired together. Race would not

always be the determining factor and the men have a mentor they could begin to trust and

not view college as an unwelcoming, hostile environment for them as the literature

suggests (Bohr et al., 1995; Clements, 2000; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006).

Researcher Reflections and Limitations

As an African-American male, I am viewed as educated in the eyes of my friends,

families, and colleagues. Working in higher education for over 15 years and pursuing this

doctorate, many have remarked I am a role model for African Americans, and in

particular, African American males. When I started this journey 5 years ago, I began to

look at issues of equity, agency, and discrimination of this population, my population. I

found myself angry at times that my fellow brothers struggled and thought they were not worthy of acquiring an education. I was tired of hearing "I can't" out of their mouths. And I was tired of hearing negative comments about African American males out of many individuals in positions of authority and influence that supposedly were there to assist these men. Like many of the participants, I was introduced to their negative, harmful attitudes. However, I survived and wanted to find other survivors as well.

I wanted to hear the voices of these men. And for all of these men, they wanted someone to hear them for once. All students were happy to participate in this study, many times remarking that *they* have never been asked about how *they* feel and what *they* want in life. If these conversations ever took place, participants said they were behind closed doors with their friends. No one in a professional capacity ever asked them about their lives and experiences until now.

I have to understand these nine men do not represent all African American men. These results cannot be generalized to everybody. This was one community college district out of many throughout the country. I began to ask myself "Would another community college district offer different viewpoints?" "If I had more participants, would the results be any different?" These were some of the limitations of my study.

Getting the students to participate was a challenging task. The beauty of doing qualitative research is the ability to provide rich, detailed data that differs from statistical information. However, while these individuals wanted to participate, many students were not interested. It is hard, often difficult for these men to discuss their lives. Their stories

are personal and painful. I respect their choice. I started with 11 students and two dropped out. These nine students were quite powerful with their words.

I was affected in different ways. Seeing these men become vulnerable and express and sometimes cry their stories to me was amazing and heartbreaking at the same time. I remember driving home from an interview, remembering the students who desperately wanted people to not see them as a failure, sellout, the dumb jock, and the white boy. I began to cry and just kept driving, reminding myself how fortunate I have been in my life but how I must strive to continue this type of work long after this dissertation.

Being so close to this project has taken an emotional toll on me. My emotions have ranged from happiness to guilt to sadness to embarrassment. These men shared these lives with me and I became close to them in such a short period of time. This was another limitation of my study—the desire to hug these men, tell them everything will be okay in their lives, to become their friends and role model. I had to take a step back and constantly remind myself that out of respect for all of us, I needed to remove myself as much as possible from wanting to make things immediately better and focus on their stories for this work. My work is their voice.

In the end, I have learned a lot about myself and where my strength and determination has come from throughout life. Similar to the participants, my parents, friends and mentors have had a significant effect on my life. My positive or negative experiences with them have shaped me to serve others in my career and life. I am a proud African American man who has a story to share and a story to help create for those men and women who want their voice heard.

Conclusion

The state of the African American male is in crisis. African American males are viewed most often in terms of their failures rather than their successes (Thompson, 2005). Critics continue to write about why these men continually fail in journals and workshops, discussions groups, seminars are constantly created to discuss this underachievement. Conversations are happening around these men but not *with* these men. The tendency to focus almost exclusively on the failures of these males is a debilitating feature of extant literature, and cripples the understanding and societal path of African American men. It is imperative African American men be part of their conversation and their story. How will we understand their lives and what they need if we fail to hear from them?

This study heard from African American males. The participants gave beautiful narratives that were filled with tragedy, anger, frustration, but also persistence, pride, and hope. The themes from their stories can help all of society understand their lives and how to better assist these men socially, culturally, and academically. Instead of focusing on what is wrong with African American men in school, we need to focus on the positives in their life. These nine individuals have succeeded in spite of struggles and challenges. To understand how they succeeded, we need to understand how they fell along the way and how it can be preventable in the future.

However, the issues surrounding African American males do not offer any quick fixes or solutions. Underachievement in academics and society has long been the tragedy of African Americans. This is a complex and overwhelming problem. It will take more than higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and researchers to gain a grasp of

understanding the lives of these men. As a society, giving voice and human agency to these men is the responsibility of friends, parents, teachers, and mentors. It will take much dialogue across various disciplines, ownership of unfair treatment and assumptions, and an unconditional acceptance of this population to begin the process of understanding these stories.

Without these stories, today in 2009, these men are fading out of the higher education degree attainment landscape without understanding, mentoring, and a solid educational foundation. They remain devastating statistics of a population and powerless to a society that continually surrounds them with barriers to succeed. I argue the possibilities of educational attainment for all African American male community college students should be researched, embraced, and respected. The goal is to break down the barriers in the community colleges through an understanding of the lived experiences of African American men, in order that societal inequities are not perpetuated. We need to take responsibility for the development and treatment of our men. However, this goal will not happen in a vacuum where their voices are never present.

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Appendix A
Invitation Letter

Dear Student,

I hope that this email finds you well. As a current doctoral student at the University of San Diego, I am working on a dissertation entitled "From Strain to Success: A Phenomenological Study of the Personal and Academic Pressures on African American Male Community College Students." My research seeks to discover the experience of African American male community college students and its effects on their academic progress.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study by speaking with me in two in-person interviews. I anticipate that the interviews will last approximately one hour apiece; it will be conducted at a time, date, and location convenient for you. The interview as well as your decision to participate will be confidential; participation is completely voluntary and will not have any impact on your current student status. Your identity will remain anonymous.

Your knowledge and insight will serve to strengthen support and services for all community college students. In addition, the information you provide will be very helpful and insightful to other administrators who are attempting to understand how to best serve and address the needs of African American male community college students.

If you are interested in contributing by sharing your experiences and would be willing to participate in this much-needed effort, please email or call me so that we may make an appointment for your interviews. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your consideration,

John R. Mosby

Jmosby-08@sandiego.edu

619-507-5025

Appendix B
Email Invitation to Prospective Participants

Dear Student,

I hope that this email finds you well. As a current doctoral student at the University of San Diego, I am working on a dissertation entitled "From Strain to Success: A Phenomenological Study of the Personal and Academic Pressures on African American Male Community College Students." My research seeks to discover the experience of African American male community college students and its effects on their academic progress.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study by speaking with me in one or two in-person interviews. I anticipate that the interviews will last approximately one hour apiece; it will be conducted at a time, date, and location convenient for you. The interview as well as your decision to participate will be confidential; participation is completely voluntary and will not have any impact on your current student status. Your identity will remain anonymous.

I hope you will be willing to speak with me and help me with my dissertation research. I will be hosting an information session at your campus on (DATE). I strongly encourage you to attend the session and receive more detailed information about my research goals The information you provide will be very helpful and insightful to other administrators who are attempting to understand how to best serve and address the needs of African American community college students. Please email or call me to let me know if you are willing and able to participate in this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your time,

John R. Mosby

Jmosby-08@sandiego.edu

619-507-5025

Appendix C
Research Participant Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of the Personal and Academic Pressures
on African American Male Community College Students

John Mosby is a doctoral student in the Department of Leadership Studies in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research project he is conducting for the purpose of exploring the experience of African American male community college students in the context of personal and academic counter-pressures on achievement.

The project will involve multiple interviews that asks questions about the personal and academic counter-pressures on achievement for African American male community college students. Each interview will last about 60 minutes and also will include some questions about you, such as your age, class standing, and your experiences at (XXX) community college. The interviews will take place at your college in the fall. Participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to answer any question and/or quit at any time. Should you choose to quit, no one will be upset with you and your information will be destroyed right away.

The information you give will be analyzed and studied in a manner that protects your identity. That means that a code number will be used and that your real name will not appear on any of the study materials. All information you provide will remain confidential and locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years before being destroyed.

There may be a risk that participating in the interviews may make you emotional. Sometimes people feel anxious or sad when talking or reflecting on the things you will be asked about. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings, you can call the San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339. Remember, you can stop the interview at any time for any reason.

The benefit to participating will be in knowing that you helped educators learn how to better understand the educational experience of African American male community college students.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact John Mosby (619-507-5025, jmosby-08@sandiego.edu) or Dr. Athena Perrakis, Assistant Professor, Department of Leadership Studies, School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego (619-260-8896, Athena@sandiego.edu).

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Name of Participant (Printed)

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date

Appendix D
Interview Questions

In what ways do interactions with family influence African American Community College students to succeed academically?

How encouraging is your family in getting a college degree?

How encouraging is your family of you attending XXX?

What is the highest education of your mother? Father?

If you have siblings, have they attended college? If so, what is their highest level of education completed?

Did you initially want to attend XXX immediately after high school? How much did your family influence you to attend XXX?

How do non-academic responsibilities for African American Community College students affect their academic experience? (family, work responsibilities)

Do you attend full-time or part-time? Why?

What is your most pressing outside obligation?

Considering your outside obligation(s), is it ever challenging for you to keep up with all the demands on your time?

How many hours per week do you study? Do you feel that is adequate given your academic demands?

How do you handle all the demands on your time?

Do you feel your pressures are different based on your gender? Race? Financial situation?

Do you feel people have realistic or unrealistic expectations of you in terms of your education?

If you could describe a typical day, what would it look like?

Are you progressing toward your educational goals at the pace you expected?

How do students interact with their university and peer communities? Do these communities ever conflict with the other?

Are most of your friends in school or have a college degree?

Have you made social contacts at XXX?

Do you feel comfortable asking questions in class?

Do you ever feel out-of-place at XXX?

How different are your friends outside of school versus your college friends? Do they vary in by race?

How supportive are your friends with you attending xxx?

How accepted do you feel by your faculty?

How accepted do you feel by your classmates?

Additional questions:
What is your main reason for attending XXX community college?

What has been the best part of attending XXX community college?

What has been the most challenging part of attending XXX community college?

What is the highest degree you intend to earn?

Do you feel you adequately participate in campus activities (workshops, programs)? If not, how do you feel you can get more involved?

What does Obama mean to you?

If you were President of XXX community college, what would be your first priority to do as President?

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date