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**Walking on water:African American male freshmen mastering transition for the purpose of retention and persistence at a midwestern university**

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WALKING ON WATER: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE FRESHMEN  
MASTERING TRANSITION FOR THE PURPOSE OF RETENTION  
AND PERSISTENCE AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Educational Leadership

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Oscar J. Dowdell-Underwood

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Keywords: African American male, college retention, graduation

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the postsecondary experiences of African American college men at a Midwestern university. This study explored their college transition and endeavored to understand their lived experiences. The intent of this study was also to understand the coping strategies that African American men employ to achieve and succeed in college. The goal of this study was to describe the higher-education experiences of eight Black men in order to ascertain what major and minor themes emerged that could contribute to the literature concerning African American male transition, retention, and persistence at postsecondary institutions. The data from the transcripts of the focus group interviews of eight African American college males revealed five major themes that emerged as influential factors in the college experiences of the majority of these Black males. The themes were (a) the impact of being perceived as leaders; (b) the influence of possessing a perception of being a burden of hope for significant others; (c) the impact of a decision to overcome personal habits that could threaten achievement and college success; (d) the influence of having success connections with family, mentors, and campus organizations, whether cultural or otherwise; and (e) the influence of possessing a no-failure option college success strategy. Implications for African American college men, college leadership, student affairs leadership, faculty, and campus groups and organizations were discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.

## PREFACE

To the committed many who remain in the trenches,  
tirelessly working to bring about equity in educational access,  
equity in educational delivery,  
and equity in educational achievement  
for all people, including those in this study and  
those whose paths I've yet to cross; who continue to hunger to taste  
of the vast benefits of the American Dream.

I never imagined at the beginning of this process that I would be replaying the film of my life through this research. Throughout my life I have been asked, and indeed often wondered, how I made it through college. I was a husband, father, and senior in high school at the age of 17. No one in my family had ever gone to college, let alone graduated; I would be the first. I was a young Black man with a desire to succeed for all that reasons that men and women throughout the history of our country have wanted to succeed: I wanted the American dream of a better life for my children and my children's children. I wanted to buy my mother a house deserving of a woman who had worked all of her life to provide for me and my siblings. I wanted to be more than the naysayers said that I could be. I wanted to be someone.

I had many teachers and administrators throughout my pre-college years who encouraged me to pursue my dreams. They told me that I was smart and capable and that I would be

successful someday if continued to study hard and never quit. It was their voices that I would often hear in my head as I sat in those college classrooms, although often never seeing an image of anyone who looked like me. There would be times when I would falter, but I never gave up because I was determined to be a teacher. I was determined to be the voice of in the ears of other young black man who don't know how much greatness is resident in them; hence began my 40 years in education and the reason that I find myself so passionate about the research that you will read in these following pages.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to God, whose grace guided and sustained me throughout this process. I thank my children, Stephanie, Tracy, Tiffanie, Pat, Bobby, Tonya, Dwayne, Tyree, Apryl, Michael James, and Jylian, for your love and support. May this work inspire you to pursue your dreams, and once you've reached them, to dream again. I would also like to thank Dr. Steve Gruenert, Dr. Mary Howard-Hamilton, and Dr. Terry McDaniel for encouraging me to find my voice as it relates to this area of research. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my fellow educators who work tirelessly to develop the potential of others. May this research aid you in the process of changing lives.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Trevon Martin, a young African American man who will never experience the joy of college success and the life that it has the power to produce because of the lethal nature of unchecked marginalization that historically has destroyed far too much human potential, none more so than young Black males, thus, disenfranchising from their right to also benefit from the American dream.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. A world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1903)

For African Americans in general and African American males in particular, trying to navigate between two worlds is akin to “walking on water,” which is a phrase that means to attempt an impossible task (“Walking on Water”, retrieved from Dictionary.com, 2011). This description mirrors the documented experiences of African American males at institutions of higher learning, which may explain why transition, retention, and persistence for a large number of them are characterized by struggle and conflict. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) defined a transition as any “event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). The way in which a transition is handled determines to a large

degree whether the individual in transition will be able to persist to the point of fulfillment of an identified goal. Du Bois's (1903) description of a twin-consciousness that is the lived experiences of African Americans in the United States, although theorized over 100 years ago, appear to be prophetic. Having one's identity shaped through the eyes of another is at the root of the many problems that plague African American transition into mainstream American society and all levels of American education also. Dubois's belief that African Americans' double burden of transition in all segments of American society necessitated a navigating between the self as perceived by Whites and other cultures and the self as perceived by African Americans has serious implications for retention and persistence in higher education.

Transition is difficult for most people, but considering Du Bois's (1903) theory of a dual consciousness that African Americans must deal with it makes it even more of a "walking on water" event. Perhaps Du Bois's "two-consciousness" sheds light on why African American males, especially, have a difficult time engaging in the organizational culture of the institution, thereby not benefiting from the power of institutional involvement that research reveals strengthens retention and persistence. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) research revealed that when an institution focuses on communicating mattering to students, including African Americans, greater student involvement results, which in turn strengthen retention and persistence. Their research suggested questions for the institution to ponder, such as

- Do institutional policies assure students that they matter, that their presence is valued?
- Do programs and services encourage campus involvement in every area of the institution?

- Do institution programs and services emphasize the uniqueness and importance of each student?
- Are there new initiatives that can be implemented to draw marginal students, such as the case with African American males, in positive engagement with the institution's organizational culture?
- How can campus life place greater emphasis on issues of mattering and marginality?
- What does a mattering institution of higher education look like?

Mattering is concerned with creating a campus community that allows each student, especially those who are marginalized, to form perceptions of belonging and being cared about as well as feeling importance in their connection to the institution (Schlossberg, 2011).

The documented struggle in general for the American population is normally more exaggerated for African Americans and African American males in particular. From the beginning of the African American arrival in America, transition has been challenging, and to this day, it remains a cause for great concern. The incompleteness of the African American transition into the mainstream of American society accounts for the fact that their benefits from opportunities of American life have been marginalized to a greater extent than other ethnic groups and cultures. Perceptions of marginality impede transition. Whether the beliefs are true or erroneous, messages of doubt concerning mattering are enemies of success and achievement in any field of human endeavor. Schlossberg (1989) defined marginalization as a perception of not belonging or fitting the course; the marginalization is even greater regarding the lived experiences of African American males. This is true in most segments and institutions of American society, including education. Harper (2005) revealed that more than two-thirds of all African American males who enroll in post-secondary institutions will not persist to the point of

degree attainment. He further added that this fact is simply indicative of other negative headlines that characterize the marginalized experiences of African American males.

Schlossberg (1989) purported that mattering is an important component of persistence at institutions of higher learning. In fact, students, such as African American males, who have been victimized by marginality can have their persistence enhanced by experiencing greater perceptions of mattering. Schlossberg theorized that mattering consisted of five aspects: (a) attention, (b) importance, (c) ego extension, (d) dependence, and (e) appreciation. Attention is what occurs when one feels noticed and not invisible. Importance speaks to the belief that one is cared about. Ego extension is the feeling that others celebrate one's victories and sympathizes when one experiences failure. Dependence is the feeling of being needed by others. Appreciation is the sense that one's efforts are recognized and appreciated (Schlossberg, 1989).

Higher education has an enormous responsibility for our society's well-being. Education determines not only earning capacity but also the very quality of human life. Even longevity is correlated with educational achievement. In the broad sense of how well we live our lives-both individually and collectively-higher education is a public-health issue. (Davis, 2001, p. B16)

Horace Mann is quoted as saying that education is "the great equalizer" (Brainy Quote, 2011). Therefore, if educational transition is not addressed, it could deny any individuals or groups the ability to experience the opportunity for a better life. If not corrected, transition can become a general struggle as well (Bailey & Alfonzo, 2005).

Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in many regards bears striking similarities to the era of the struggle for equal rights for minorities in the United States, especially African American males. The fight for civil rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century left many issues unresolved, one of which is the issue



of equal access to higher education, which also has implications for employment, income, and standard of living. This is borne out by the proportion of 24 percent of African Americans living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Though Blacks comprise only about 13 percent of the U.S. population, they are overrepresented in regards to the chronic poor.

According to Hertz (2007), 17 percent of Whites who were born in poverty remain there as adults, but 42 percent of African Americans do so. The median income for Blacks is 62 percent of the median income of Whites; the average Black family has only one-tenth of the wealth of the typical White family. In addition, Blacks are three times more likely as Whites to be poor; furthermore, Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed (Hoffman & Llagas, 2003). African Americans have a jobless rate that is twice as much as that of the rest of the American population. In addition, the annual median income for Black households experienced a 2.8 % decline from 2007 to 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Although the statistics for African Americans in general are staggering, they are even more serious for Black males, which cause them to have to confront overwhelming obstacles en-route to improving their lot in life. Some of these formidable challenges are low achievement in core subjects, disproportionate placements in special education, disproportionate experiences with school suspension, and victimization of lowered expectations by teachers and other education professionals (Hertz, 2007).

Schlossberg (1989) posited that the plight of the African American male experience in America is of much greater concern than simply economics and education statistics reveal. Eckholm (2006) indicated that the fact of the matter is that it has worsened in recent years, even when the rest of the nation has experienced significant economic improvement. The author of

*Black Men Left Behind*, Ronald Mincy is quoted as saying “there is something different happening with young Black men and it’s something we can no longer ignore”.

Education is a non-negotiable necessity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Colleges must do a better job in recruitment and retention of African American males so that diversity can be strengthened in every segment of higher education. The continued underrepresentation of male minorities, including African Americans, in institutions of higher learning must be addressed (Nealy, 2009). About half of the students who desire better lives through the attainment of postsecondary education never see those goals realized (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Swail, Redd, & Perna observed that education does have a crucial impact on not only the individual, but also society as a whole. Individuals with a bachelor’s degree earn, on average, twice that of high school graduates, and those with a professional degree earnings are twice that of those with a bachelor’s degree. The urgency and necessity for higher education has increased sharply over the past several decades, demonstrated by enrollment that is up tenfold since the mid-1900s (Swail et al., 2003).

There are several important benefits associated with the attaining of a college degree; from a societal perspective, those with a college degree are far less likely to commit a crime and about 30 percent less likely to be unemployed (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The economic gains that come from a college degree are important for all people, even more dramatic for minorities. The U.S. Department of Education reported that African Americans who earn a four-year degree have incomes that are substantially higher than African Americans who have only some college experience without attainment of a degree

Higher education represents an entrance way into economic empowerment. Earning a college degree is known to produce greater gains in work-occupation respect and prestige (Lin & Vogt, 1996) as well as economic dividends (Leslie & Brinkman, 1996) as compared to those who only attained a high school diploma. Tinto (1982) reported that persistency was a prerequisite for attaining the benefits of a college education.

The American economy is directly affected by globalization, which in turn has significant implications for employment as well as higher education (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Carneval and Desrochers reported that America's successful competition in a global market necessitated a workforce that was more highly educated and skilled than presently is the case. Currently, six out of every 10 jobs require postsecondary education or training (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). It was projected that by 2012, the number of jobs requiring increased skills will grow at twice the rate of those jobs requiring only basic skills (Hecker, 2004; U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). If America is to maintain its competitive edge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it must educate and train its workforce beyond attainment of the high school diploma.

Higher education is the key component to the development that bolsters America's economic and political position in the world and for providing the highest quality of life for its citizenry (Barfield & Beaulieu, 1999). In order to remain competitive, America cannot afford to only educate a portion of her people; a greater percentage of every segment of the American populace must have access to postsecondary education and degree attainment (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Low college retention rates rob not only the individual of a better life but also the nation of the needed talent and human resources to secure America's future.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The most recent projections of college graduation rates are that approximately six out of 10 Black males enrolled in college will fail to receive a degree, which indicates that African American males experience serious difficulty in transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher learning. Although some colleges have implemented retention initiatives that appear to be making a difference, the overall college graduation gap between minorities and non-minorities and in contrast to Black males continues to widen in alarming numbers. Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) noted that in experiences for African American males appear to enjoy engaging experiences in regards to HBCU schools. Benefits associated with a college degree are many. Statistics reveal that those with a college degree are less likely to be involved with criminal activities and are more likely to be employed (Lochner & Moretti, 2003).

The statistics support the fact that there is a strong relationship between income and advanced levels of education. This is even more evident in the case of African Americans. The U. S. Census Bureau (2009) reported that those with a bachelor's degree can earn about 77% more than those with a high school diploma; a professional degree earns individuals more than 50% more than those who hold a bachelor's degree. These statistics confirm that African Americans and Hispanics are more adversely affected, on average, than Caucasians. The U. S. Census Bureau also revealed that the median income for those with a high school diploma was \$21,000 as compared to \$58,000 for those with a bachelor's degree. The mean for African Americans with only a high school diploma was \$18,396 as opposed to \$36,694 for those with a bachelor's degree (Arcidiacono, 2005). The research substantiates the reality that if African American males could achieve greater college retention, their experiences with exaggerated

unemployment or underemployment could be greatly reduced. In order to facilitate this, transition would need to be drastically improved.

Recruitment as well as retention of minority college students, especially African American males, is a crucial concern for American higher education. America's survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century necessitates that none of its people be left behind. Swail et al. (2003) stated the following in *Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education*: "Education has a profound impact on both the individual and society at large, and is one of the surest ways to increase one's social and economic levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and deprived social conditions" (p. 4).

Research reveals that students leave college for a plethora of reasons. The reasons reported most commonly are student-institution culture clash, students' previous academic success, faculty expectations, low engagement, and inclusion. Some research even purports that race as well as racial-gender are both predictors of persistence and retention (Kaba, 2005).

It is true that the level of Black male enrollment in college experienced a slight increase in the 1990s; however, it overall remains acutely low (Roach, 2001). Research proves retention among Black college males is lowest of all ethnic groups. It has been observed that the proportion of Black males who graduate from high school, earn a minimum of a bachelor's degree, enter the job market, or become business professionals do so at a much lower proportion than most other ethnic groups.

Therefore, the problem of this study is how to increase the incidence of African American men mastering the transition in their freshman year of college in order to bring about increased retention and persistence at institutions of higher learning.

### **Research Question**

In order to determine what factors predict transition and retention for African American males in colleges and universities, it is essential to examine the experiences that affect college life in regards to Black males. Therefore, this study endeavored to examine the following question linked to Schlossberg's transition theory: What are the experiences of freshman African American males at institutions of higher education? An interview protocol was used supported by salient issues found in the literature review, such as academic, social, family, and personal challenges. The interview consisted of eight structured questions that allowed the African American male participants to give comprehensive descriptions of the African American male experiences during their freshman year at their universities. The eight questions were

1. What are your experiences as a first-year or freshman, African American male at this university?
2. Have any experiences made you feel important or not important? Explain.
3. What supports did you experience that strengthened your success and achievement?
4. In what ways could the university have helped you experience greater success on campus?
5. How would you describe "success" for a first-year student?
6. In what ways did the university make our success more difficult?
7. What experiences did you have prior to coming to college that influenced your success?
8. What suggestions would you give incoming African American freshmen at this university?

These questions framed the discussions and observations of a cohort of first-year students who matriculated through their first semester of college. A small focus group of African American males was asked to meet to be interviewed and to discuss the supports and pitfalls they experienced during their freshman year of college.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since the early 1980s there has been a disturbing regressive trend in regards to the enrollment, academic performance, and retention of African American college students. There is an even greater disparity in regards to African American males. Minorities, including African Americans, are less likely to graduate within five years, have high GPAs, experience low attrition rates, or enroll in graduate programs at comparable rates as Whites or other minorities (Harrell, Myers, & Smedley, 1993). The under-representation of Black males in higher education is a serious dilemma, not only for African American males, but for America in general.

Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2002) reported that whenever any segment of the American population is not interacting and succeeding at high levels, the nation is stripped of the abilities that could positively affect the entire populace. The authors went on to state that America is compelled to question the unacceptable rates in regards to Black males' lack of access to institutions of higher learning, and determine the factors as well as policy initiatives that are needed to bring about improvement in academic success (Hagedorn et al., 2002).

Cuyjet (2006a) looked at demographic data regarding African American male college students and reflected on its significance. Of particular concern to him was the apparent absence of Black male retention in institutions of higher learning. According to Hagedorn et al. (2002), there is not a great deal of research that has been conducted in regards to college retention for African American males. It is especially problematic when searching for explanations in regards

to the disproportionate gap between Black male and non-African American male college retention and graduation rates (Roach, 2001).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are provided for the purpose of clarity and consistency. Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1989) is used to explain many of the terms related to transition:

*Academic preparation* – students' high school success, i.e., GPA, ability to read and write appropriate for college success.

*African American* – of American of African descent.

*Anticipated transitions* – are transitions that occur predictably (Schlossberg, 1989).

*College graduation gap* – refers to the documented rates of the occurrences of college graduation among minorities and their non-minority counterparts. This gap is even wider in regards to African American males.

*Context* – refers to one's relationship in the transition (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Engagement* – students' commitment to the academic pursuit of a college degree, i.e., including attending class, completing assignments, participating in any other behaviors culminating in graduation.

*Family support* – the family's ability to provide assistance, whether it is monetary, intellectual, emotional, or coaching, along with any other support that aids the student's academic success.

*Grade point average (GPA)* – this study, the letter grade of A is equivalent to 4 points, and the scale progresses down to zero for the letter grade of F.

*Impact* – is determined by the degree to which a transition alters one's daily life (Schlossberg, 1989).



*Marginality* – perceptions that bring into doubt whether one matters to another (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Mattering* – a belief that one's life, success or failures matters to another (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Mentor support* – the support of successful people who can serve as a source of strength and encouragement for student persistence until a college degree is attained.

*Minorities* – a group of people who are different from the majority group because that difference may include but is not limited to race, culture, religion, and speech.

*Nonevents* – are transitions that are expected, but do not occur. They can be classified as personal, which relate to desires, ambitions, and hopes. They can be classified as ripple, which is felt due to the nonevent of another person. They can be resultant which is caused by an event, or they can be delayed which is the result of still anticipating an event (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Organizational culture* – the institutional environment, social and academic, values, beliefs and unwritten rules that guide behavior of members.

*Persistence* – the ability to continue to point of degree attainment.

*Poverty* – low socioeconomic status based on family income that is defined by U.S. Census as below the poverty line in 2009.

*Resiliency* – the ability to come back and bounce back from setbacks.

*Retention* – refers to the persistence of college students to continue until degree is attained.

*Role of perception* – a transition exists only if it is defined by the individual experiencing it (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Self-efficacy* – the belief that one is capable of achieving one’s goal: to persist until college graduation is realized.

*Spirituality* –students’ personal faith in a deity or higher power, e.g., Jesus Christ, or a force that is bigger than themselves.

*Teacher expectations* – student perception, in regards to trust, for faculty having the student’s best interest as part of the academic and social components of the college experience.

*Time* –refers to the duration or intervals of time that it takes for someone to progress through an identified transition. By definition it is composed of three stages, which are referred to as *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out*, (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Transition* –refers to any event or non-event which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Unanticipated Transitions* – are transitions that are not predicted (Schlossberg, 1989).

*Walking on Water* – this idiom succinctly refers to the documented, lived experiences as of many African American males in regards to transition at institutions of higher learning. This phrase means to feel extremely uncomfortable, and or out of place, as not belonging to an environment one finds oneself in.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 included the statement of the problem, research question, significance of the study, definition of terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature that addresses the issues of college transition and retention as it relates to African American males. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and procedures that will be used in completing this qualitative study. Chapter 4 reveals the findings of the focus group interviews in regards to the research question and subquestions. Chapter 5

discusses the major themes and subthemes that emerged from review of the focus group interview transcripts. Chapter 6 discusses implications of the research as well as recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Statement of the Problem**

This chapter provides a review of literature related to the factors that influence college retention for African American males. Schlossberg's (1995) research, as well as research by other scholars, can help to explain the persistence and retention struggle that African American males experience in postsecondary education. If African American male retention and persistence is to improve, impediments to smooth transitioning must be identified, monitored, and addressed. College retention and persistence rates for African American males are dismally low. In reviewing the literature, it is important to note that Black men are one of the most stereotyped groups on college campuses; therefore, it is often erroneously assumed that all of their experiences are the same and that they share common backgrounds (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

Literature relevant to this study is provided in this chapter, including (a) statement of problem; (b) African American male experience in the United States; (c) African-American male experience; (d) African American male experience in public education; (e) dynamics of African American male and female experience in college; and (f) potential factors that may improve success for African American males in college: poverty, self-efficacy, spirituality,

organizational culture, teacher expectations, academic preparation, family support, and mentoring.

These potential factors fit into Schlossberg's (1995) four– Ss situation, self, support, and structure that have been identified as four major factors that influence African American males' or any other cultures' power to transition smoothly and effectively. They are an individual's assets and liabilities, which determine the degree that successful coping with transition will occur. Schlossberg's four– Ss can explain why these factors don't have the same effect on different people or groups for the assessing of lived experiences. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) explained how the following will influence perception in regards to the transition situation:

*Trigger:* What appears to be the catalyst for the transition?

*Timing:* Does the transition take place at a beneficial time: “off time” or “on time?”

*Control:* To what extent does the individual have control over the transition?

*Role change:* Have roles changed, if so, is the changed perceived as a gain or loss?

*Duration:* How permanent is the transition; is it perceived as temporary or vague?

*Concurrent Stress:* Is parallel stress occurring in the individual's life?

*Assessment:* Who or what is identified as the source of the transition; what are the effects of the transition on the one in the transition?

*Previous experiences with a similar transition:* is a prior transition experience able to positively or negatively influence coping with a new transition? (p. 113)

College persistence rates for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans have traditionally lagged behind those of White and Asian students. This is also the case for students who have had significant experiences with poverty or disabilities (Swail et al.,

2003). In 2000, 11% of Hispanics and 17 % of African Americans in the United States had attained at least a bachelors' degree, compared to 28% of Caucasians and 44% of Asians (Swail et al., 2003). Further evidence of the seriousness of college persistence for American minorities is seen in the fact that, between the years 1995-1996, 46 % of African Americans and 47 % of Hispanics completed a bachelors' degree within six years as opposed to 67 % for Whites and 72 % for Asians (Swail et al., 2003).

The limited research that is accessible in regards to minority college retention, especially for African American students, reveals the complexity of the challenges that minority students must face. The literature consistently reveals the seriousness of the college graduation gap between non-Asian minority students and their White counterparts. Access and retention rates for African American, Hispanic, and Native American college students have traditionally been lower than for non-minorities and Asian students. This is also true for low-socioeconomic students as well as those with disabilities (Swail et al., 2003).

Colleges and universities are experiencing a continual struggle with various issues pertaining to the recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority students. This literature is replete with comprehensive analysis for incoming students and their data prior to enrollment. Despite significant gains in minority undergraduate and graduate enrollments in America's colleges, the rate at which African American and Hispanic students attend college continues to trail that of White students (Marklein, 2006). This is evidenced by a rise in minority enrollment by 50.7 % to 4.7 million between 1993 and 2003, while the number of White college enrollment increased 3.4 % to 10.5 million.

Non-minorities are more likely than Blacks or Hispanics to enroll in college. This is demonstrated by the fact that 47 % of White high school graduates attend college, as compared

to 41.1 % of Black and 35.2 % of Hispanic high school graduates (Marklein, 2006). According to 1995-96 figures, 36.4 percent of Blacks and 42 % of Hispanics earned a bachelor's degree within six years as opposed to 58 % of Whites (Marklein, 2006).

Braxton (2008) found that significant progress had been made over four decades in enrolling greater numbers of minority students in institutions of higher learning; however, about half of high school graduates were unprepared to succeed academically in college. The report further revealed that about 29 % of all first-year students at four-year postsecondary institutions and about 41 % of students entering community colleges required remedial instruction. The six-year graduation rate for African American and Hispanic college students in regards to attainment of the bachelor's degree was only about 46 percent, which was about 14 % lower than that of White college students (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, (2002).

Nationwide, the Black college graduation rate remains a disappointing 43 %. The Black White gap in college graduation rates remain extremely wide, with little progress being achieved in narrowing it (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education [JBHE], 2005). This article stressed the fact that throughout the nation African American enrollment in higher education is at an all-time high, but the performance of African Americans in higher education is quite low, even more so for African American males. Though retention of African American college students has been a topic of discussion and research for some time, Black higher education retention continues to be a serious concern. Recent statistics reveal that only about 40 % of African American students persist to the point of degree attainment in a six-year period of time (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997).

After reviewing the literature in regards to word combinations such as "African American males," "retention," and "persistence," it was apparent that there was a scarcity of information in

regards to identified aspects of the subject areas. However, I was able to access an adequate amount of literature in regards to the identified variables that influenced college retention of African American males. For purposes of maximizing available information, this literature review was organized into fourteen sections: (a) African American male experiences in the United States; (b) African International males experiences internationally; (c) African American male experiences in public schools; (d) The state of college retention for African American males; (e) potential factors that may improve academic success; (f) poverty factors; (g) self-efficacy factors; (h) spirituality factors; (i) organizational culture factor; (j) teacher expectation factors; (k) academic preparation factor; (l) family support factor; (m) mentor support factor; (n) Resiliency Factor, and (o) a summary. These particular variables were consistently mentioned in literature as factors that influenced retention and academic achievement of African American students in institutions of higher learning. These variables also fit into Schlossberg's (1995) four Ss which are categorical factors that influence transitioning. The total organization of the study was on the identified variables and research.

Since the late 1960s colleges and universities have attempted to transform predominantly White institutions of higher learning to multicultural havens of learning. Although, higher education institutions have become more diverse, in reality not much has changed in the overall approach to teaching and retention of Black students and other students of color, especially Black males. Although some research reveals that Black men have better learning experiences at HBCUs, Cokley (2003) revealed that the problem is still of major concern. Hermanowicz (2003) indicated that Blacks leave institutions of higher learning at two times their proportion in comparison to Whites, with attrition rates being even worst at schools with great numbers of African Americans. Five-year graduation rates reported were Morehouse at 62 %, Howard at 57



%, Florida A&M at 44 %, Grambling at 31 % and Cleveland State at 28 %, suggesting that the issue of African American retention is much more than a racial dilemma (Hermanowicz, 2003).

Findings from the American Council on Education (ACE, 2006) reveal that rates of African Americans attending institutions of higher learning increased 42.7 % during the period of 1993-2003. None would argue that these data provide good news; rather, the data suggest that there is a serious gap that yet exists in regard to the participation rates of Black men and Black women in higher education.

An academic gender gap is not unique to African American men and African American women; however, it is exaggerated in comparison to other ethnic groups (Cuyjet, 2006b; Hale, 2001; Roach, 2001). In *Shaping Success among African American Males in HBCUs*, Robert Palmer (2009) also concluded that African American males are absent in great numbers in regards to K-12 post-secondary education and American society in general.

Current literature, for several reasons, strongly suggests that African American males are seen more and more as an endangered species (Palmer, 2009). The disproportionate college experiences of African American men and African American women are a source of confusion for researchers and an impetus for institutions of higher learning to strategize to improve the academic experiences of African Americans in general but African American males in particular (Cuyjet, 2006b).

The research continues to show that minorities are underrepresented in colleges and universities. Persistence in higher education is problematic for African American males. Research has identified several factors that could influence retention for Black males at institutions of higher learning.

### **African American Male Experiences in the United States**

An ever-increasing number of African American males are less likely to engage in mainstream society due to their lack of education and subsequent unemployment (Mincy, 2006). According to Schlossberg (1989), African American males' difficulty engaging in mainstream society is due to problems with transition fueled by questions of mattering and issues of marginalization. Statistics point to the seriousness of the African American male experience in the United States: 16.6 % of adult Black males had been incarcerated at least once, compared to 4.9 % for White males. Death by homicide for Black males is over seven times the rate for White males (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).

The lived experiences of African American males in all segments of society point to greater incidents of marginality than mattering. Schlossberg (1989) explained marginality as a person's perception of not belonging or having value of centrality. The five aspects of mattering reveal possible explanations for the African American male lack of successfully engaging in the mainstream of American society. The often perceived invisibility of the Black male struggle, the perception that the Black male's value to society is often called in question, the feeling that few care about Black male successes or failures in persisting through life, the perception that the Black male is not needed, even in the African American family, and the perception that the Black male efforts to persist are not noticed or appreciated have serious ramifications in regards to any possibility of African American males improving their lot in life or at postsecondary institutions (Schlossberg, 1989).

The underrepresentation of African American males has serious repercussions for the entire nation (Seidman, 2003). Black males account for less than five percent of the total enrollment of four-year institutions of higher learning (Horn, Burger, & Carroll, 2004). The

African American male condition in the United States is far more serious than employment or educational statistics reveal.

The African American male experiences in the United States are what set them apart from the experiences of males of other ethnic groups (Moore, 2001). This is borne by the fact that the economic experiences of the Black male has worsened in recent years, even when the rest of the nation experienced economic empowerment (Eckholm, 2006). The demographics for Black males are appalling when one considers the statistics that point to the increasing numbers of African American males who are undereducated, underemployed, and not likely to be included in mainstream American society (Mincy, 2006).

Current research strongly suggests that something serious is happening with young Black men that is far different than anything before; therefore, it must be addressed (Mincy, 2006). The African American male inability to graduate from high school has an impact on their literacy and employment ability (Hale, 2001). Further exasperating this phenomenon is the fact that American culture has created a tendency to discourage African American males from developing a penchant for education by seeing it as a feminine association. Hooks (2004) revealed that in many Black families, a boy who likes to read is perceived as not being masculine. Statistics reveal that 50 % of Black males 15-24 years of age who die will die as a result of a homicide. It is even more alarming when one examines increased suicide rates for Black males have jumped 105 % as opposed to 11% in other cultures (Hutchinson, 2002).

The issues that face African American males in America are vast. Lee (1991) reported that something as simple as reaching manhood is cause for celebration, since the plight of African American males is rooted historically in racial complexities and challenges. Corner (1995) reported that African American slaves were forced to hide emotions and live without the

dignity of self-esteem and respect that are requisites of functional manhood. Lee cited that many studies revealed that social conditions that African American men face appear to influence other issues that they experience, such as low life expectancy, increased risk of incarceration, poverty, lack of or inadequate educational opportunities, involvement in substance abuse, involvement in gang violence, and chronic health issues.

The demographics for African American men are more appalling than for members of other ethnic groups, including reduced access to education, employment, and inclusion in the mainstream of American society (Mincy, 2006). More than 50 % of African American males fail to graduate from high school (Orfield, 2004). In 2000, 65 % of African American male high school dropouts were unemployed or incarcerated. By 2004, the rate had increased to 72 %, compared to 34 % for Hispanic high school dropouts. Even more staggering is that when high school graduates are included, still 50 % of African American males lack employment or are incarcerated (Western, 2006). According to Schlossberg (1989) when African American males begin to experience movement from marginality to mattering, persistence will be enhanced greatly.

### **African International Male Experiences**

When African-born Black males are studied in regards to retention and persistence, the struggles that African American males experience appear to be a factor in their transition in American society as a whole or at postsecondary institutions. When African-born immigrants, whether U.S. citizens or internationals, are added to the achievement gap equation, the disparity between African Americans and Whites in general, and African American male achievement in particular, appears to be more a function of culture than a function of race. By no means does the literature suggest that there is an absence of an achievement gap, but it appears to favor African-

born Blacks more than White or other ethnic Americans (Williams, 2005). Because of the documented gender disparity in African educational attainment that appears to systematically favor African males, it is obvious that African male immigrants outperform African American males in regards to incidents of success in institutions of higher learning (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2008). Following Schlossberg's (1989) transition model, it can be concluded that African males have greater experiences with mattering than African American males; therefore, transition and persistence for the African male is stronger and compromised for the African American male due to greater incidents of marginality. Kunjufu (1997) noted that for many African American males, excelling academically threatens perceptions of masculinity. These in-group stereotypes must be combated and healthy masculine identities promoted so that African American male leadership and engagement on college campuses can be protected from marginalization (Harper, 2004).

African immigrants in the U.S. are more likely to have a higher level of education compared to other U.S. immigrants. The literature points out that of African-born immigrants, age 25 and older, 81 % had acquired a high school diploma in comparison to 62 % of the total foreign-born U.S. population. In addition, more than 40 % had acquired a college education. African-born Blacks are 16 % of the U.S. foreign-born Black population, but are on average vastly more educated than other immigrants. The Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research reports that Black immigrants to the U.S. are more likely to hold a post-secondary degree than immigrants from Europe, North America, or Asia (Nesbett, 2002).

The majority of the literature reveals that between 43.8 and 49.3 % of all U.S. African immigrants hold a college diploma. This is four times higher than that of African Americans, and more than eight times that of Hispanic Americans (Nesbett, 2002). Rates of college graduation

for African immigrants in the U.S. are more than double than for the U.S. born native population (Williams, 2005). Internationally, the literature appears to report similar findings. In England, African immigrants had the highest incidence of years of education than that of Indian and Chinese immigrants. On average, second-generation African immigrants did better than their parents and substantially better than their White peers in most socio-economic indicators and outcomes (Dustmann & Theodoropoulos, 2006).

### **African American Male Experiences in Public Schools**

Although there is wide concern about the state of high school graduation in general, it is even more a concern for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Again, if Schlossberg's (1989) transition model is followed, it can be argued that African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans have greater experiences with questions of marginality and fewer incidents with perceptions of mattering, which causes their transition to be weakened and persistence to be less than desirable at any level of American education, whether primary, secondary, or postsecondary. According to a report released in 2006 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation entitled *Silent Epidemic*, the condition of American high school dropouts was deemed to be epidemic. This report revealed that one-third of all high school students would not persist to graduation, with statistics being even worse for Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, with about only 50 % persisting to the point of diploma acquisition.

Because Black males experience even lower high school graduation rates, their persistence in institutions of higher learning is dramatically weakened by their under-preparedness in high school both in regards to low GPA and low scores on standardized testing (Hale, 2001). Researchers agree that there need to be initiatives in place that bring about better

academic preparation for African American men in order for them to experience greater academic success at the college level (Garibaldi, 2007).

Unfortunately, in the case of African American males, their lack of academic preparation begins much earlier than high school; rather, their disenfranchisement from academic success begins as early as their elementary school years (Davis, 2003). This points to possible problems with transition early in the African American males youth thus developing expectations that life will give them greater experiences with marginality than with mattering. Schlossberg's (1989) five aspects of mattering and marginality can give great insight as to the effect of the early lived experiences of African American males, shaping perception that hinders transition and persistence rather than aiding them. In order to see Black male student persistence enhanced, the Black male must experience greater incidents where their perception of lived experiences is characterized by mattering and less by questions of marginality (Schlossberg, 1989).

The five aspects of mattering are (a) attention, (b) importance, (c) ego extension, (d) dependence, and (e) appreciation (Scholossberg, 1989). If African American males' experiences with these aspects are viewed in a negative sense, then marginality will impeded transition, persistence, and achievement (Scholossberg, 1989). It is interesting to note that some literature reveal, that the Black male adversarial relationship with education is rooted in a belief that it will not benefit their lives as it would males of other ethnicities (Kunjufu, 2001). In fact, part of the "cool pose" paradigm in Black males attributes to the Black male disconnect from education because it is seen as a detractor from their masculinity (Davis, 2003; Hooks, 2004). In order to effectively combat continued African American male illiteracy, it is important in K-12 education to expose Black males to a better paradigm of the benefits of education so that they can equate academic success with meaningful life enhancement (Garibaldi, 2007). It is interesting to note

that African American male perceptions of marginality is further documented by the fact that as is the case in most elementary, middle, and high schools, male students, including Black males, are disproportionately sanctioned for violations of policies, violence, and disruptions more so than their female counterparts (Harper & Kimbrough, 2005).

Since the mid 1980s, the educational performance and progression of African American boys and men have received a considerable amount of local and national attention. When examined from both local and national standards, African American males continue to demonstrate significant underachievement as a group (Garibaldi, 2007). Statistics reveal that African American males have the highest rates of school suspensions, expulsions, non-promotions, dropouts, and special-education placements. In addition, African American males have the lowest rates of high school graduations or labels of being gifted or talented in research compiled from 16,000 U.S. school districts (Garibaldi, 2007). It would be good to note that the academic struggle and failure for Black males begin early in their educational experiences which restricted their ability to persist to the point of high school graduation (Davis, 2003).

### **The State of College Retention for African American Males**

Postsecondary institutions are highly concerned about the challenges that African American males experience in their rates of retention and persistence at their colleges and universities (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Again, following Schlossberg's (1989) transition model, a major influencer could be the fact that Black males' lived experiences are characterized by greater incidents of marginality and fewer incidents of mattering, which are crucial ingredients in persistence and retention. When considering Schlossberg's five aspects of mattering, it becomes apparent from documented literature that African American males experience greater incidents of marginality in regards to all five: (a) attention, (b) importance, (c) Ego extension, (d)



dependence and (e) appreciation. Dismal retention is of great concern for African American males in higher education (Palmer & Young, 2009). The number of African American males entering postsecondary institutions experienced increases in the 1980s and 1990s (Cuyjet, 2006c). Presently, African American males experience fewer incidents of persistence than their counterparts in other cultures at institutions of higher learning (Polite & Davis, 1999). Black males account for less than or 5 % of student enrollment at postsecondary institutions (Horn, et al. 2004).

Cuyjet (2006c) stated that the numbers for African American males are not improving in reference to college persistence. In fact, he noted that their graduation rate was lower than any other ethnic group. There are alarming statistics which reveal that Black men are more prone to die in an act of violence, be incarcerated or drop out of high school than to enroll in an institution of higher learning. Researchers have noted that a high incarceration rate is a factor in the dwindling enrollment of African American males in college (Wilson, 1987). This author further reported that the African American male has been described in some ways as endangered to the point that when a Black male succeeds, he is seen as some kind of anomaly. Hagedorn et al., (2002) noted that retention rates for African American males were also the lowest of any American ethnic group. The under-representation of African American men has serious repercussions for all of American society; to lose the talent of any group is to weaken the entire society as a whole (Hagedorn et al., 2002). These authors went on to say that the status of Black male retention was compelling and, therefore, required further research into the causes and the subsequent policy steps that needed to be taken in order to bring about better results.

Over the years, many ethnic groups have made important progress in becoming part of the mainstream of American society, but this has not been the reality for African American males

(Locke, 1999). Much of the disenfranchisement that Black men face is due to inherent qualities that are impossible for them to divorce themselves from; (a) their blackness and (b) their maleness (Majors & Billson, 1992). Statistics confirm these liabilities by revealing that in comparison with their White male counterparts, African American males have extremely high rates of incarceration or involvement with the judicial system, substance abuse, homicide and suicide, unemployment, and mental disorders (Austin, 1994). Majors and Billson (1992) reported that Black males experience greater rates of dropout rates, academic failure, and alienation than Whites.

In the crucial area of previous academic preparation and success, Black males are more prone to be recommended for remedial instruction and special education than placements in college preparatory courses. It is a documented fact that Black male enrollment and retention in higher education has experienced serious decline (Hrabowski & Pearson, 1993). Hrabowski and Pearson (1993) observed that fewer African American males are enrolling in college and persisting to degree attainment. Cuyjet (2006b) points out two general reasons for poor college retention of black males: (a) factors that prevent Black males from entering college, and (b) those factors that leave Black males not prepared, or underprepared when they successfully enroll in college. Majors and Billson (1992) identified obstacles, such as high school dropout, involvement with the justice system, and substance abuse as factors that oppose Black male's entrance into higher education. Hrabowski and Pearson (1993) pointed out that the lack of academic proficiency and success at the high school level become important factors in college retention failure. Although academic achievement and retention continue to be major concerns for all African Americans, Black college males appear to be achieving less success than their collegiate counterparts Cuyjet (2006b). The college retention gap for Black males is widening,

with no clear solution in sight. Cuyjet (2006b) reported that the growth of this gap threatens to erode the earning power of African American men and further undermine their status of respect and influence in the African American family.

A study of community college data from the California Chancellor's office revealed that African American males are the lowest-performing group in regards to the percentage of degrees earned, persistence rates, and GPA (Bush & Bush, 2005). Kaba (2005) found that although African Americans had made substantial progress and improvement in college access and retention since the 1970s, African American men have not achieved as well as other ethnicities. The research added that Black males do achieve well in postsecondary education and in the workplace but not at desired levels in post-secondary education. Farmer (2009) reported that African American males have not kept pace in higher education. Black males experienced an increased by nine percent, and stand at a dismal overall 37 %rate for college retention and degree attainment. Black male retention is a serious problem in higher education, and it is exasperated by a lack of adequate academic preparation (Palmer & Young, 2009). Even the retention rates for African American college athletes are seriously low. This is demonstrated by the fact that their graduation rates are considerably beneath those of White college athletes. Cuyjet (2006a) pointed out that one in every nine African American males in college were athletes, with most of them coming from the lowest socioeconomic levels, most of their homes headed by females, and, in most cases, most of them first-generation college students. The author found that the majority of these Black college males scored in the lowest quartile of the SAT or ACT and were in the lowest quartile of college GPA.

The college completion rate for African American males was 34 percent in 1997, compared to 65 percent for Asian American students and 58 percent for White students (Jones,

2001). Collison (1987) reported that fewer African American males were choosing to attend college, opting instead to enter the military, attend vocational schools, or enter the labor force. He went on to say that African American males were less likely to apply to college and then enroll in classes. Among those who did enroll, a great number failed to achieve college retention. Collison went on to say that between 1978 and 1986, the percentage of African American males that finished even a year of college credit fell dramatically, with even fewer persisting to the attainment of a bachelor's degree. The author concluded that the decline in Black male achievement has serious implications for long-term economic, political, and social consequences for not only the individual, the race, but the entire American society (Collison, 1987).

College retention for Black males is increasing in its overall importance for all institutions of higher learning, whether historically Black colleges and universities or predominantly White institutions (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Studies point out that Black male college students needed to be nurtured and monitored in order for them to persist to degree attainment. It should be noted that the graduation rate for African American students, and even more so for Black males is disappointingly low even in Americas historically Black colleges and universities; sometimes even lower than that for Black students at predominantly White institutions. However, the graduation rate at many HBCUs is significantly higher for Black college students than the nations average for African American college graduation rates (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2005).

African American students continue to be challenged by obstacles that oppose and block their entrance and retention to the point of college graduation. The picture is even gloomier for Black males, which causes grave concern as to why a trend is appearing that demonstrates that increasing numbers of Black males are choosing not to even apply or enroll in institutions of

higher learning (Roach, 2001). In his exhaustive review of college student retention, Tinto (1994) surmised that there were many factors that contributed to a lack of degree attainment, including lack of commitment adjustment issues, perception of isolation and lack of inclusion, obligations to family, and financial concerns. There is an overwhelming body of knowledge that reveals that an increasingly large segment of the African American male populace is failing to persist in obtaining a college degree (Cuyjet, 2006a). The crisis of African American male college students is well documented in literature; certainly a reoccurring theme is that this only fuels the overall bleak prospects for improving their lot in life in contrast to that of other ethnic groups (Hrabowski & Pearson, 1993). These problems not only are indicative of the challenges facing African American males, it is crucial that factors that strengthen retention among their cohort be identified and recovery initiatives be implemented.

Gender disparity in college enrollment is not an attribute only of African Americans; however, it is significantly exaggerated in the higher education dynamics for African American males. Cuyjet (2006c) suggested that when the proportion of Black males on college campuses is significantly low, it presents serious obstacles to Black male relationships (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006).

African American males as well as other minorities face institutionalized racism, beliefs, and attitudes that are rudiments of slavery and racial and poverty caste systems; however, American culture appears to be more hostile to the education of the African American male (Gavin, 2009). Perhaps the improvement that other minorities have experienced in persistence and retention can be studied to see how to best improve mattering in institutional organizations' relationships with African American males. Research states that student persistence can be enhanced through movement from a sense of marginality to greater mattering (Schlossberg,

1989). The achievement gap between Whites and Blacks in general and Black males and other ethnicities in particular points to deep roots of racial and class inequity still influencing the prospects of a better future, especially for the Black male. Research suggests that early in life, the Black family is forced to develop self-reliance skills that put them in a mindset that alleviates any dependency on the Black male (Ross, 1998). Because of cultural hostility that rears its head in the lives of American males, other minorities appear to choose life paradigms that allow them to survive despite the pitfalls that pose serious threats to the survival of the Black male (Ross, 2003). Although African American boys choose sports in order to pursue the prospects of a better life, other minorities pursue education in order to improve their lot in life (Ross, 2003).

The literature further reveals that African American mothers tend to teach their daughters self-reliance, but their sons be dependent on their mothers for their protection and survival in a culture that demonstrates hostility to the Black male (Ross, 2003). The dominant image of the Black mother or grandmother's overprotection of the young, Black male is an impression that works against the Black male (Ross, 2003). In the face of the majority of Black families being headed by Black females, the Black mother gives her Black daughters the gift of her strength, but the Black male the gift of her hopelessness (Ross, 2003).

Swartz and Washington (2003) observed that since emancipation from slavery, it is the African American male who has attained fewer benefits from education, affording them little self-improvement and racial uplift. The Black male has developed little social adaptation that appears to be an important factor in success in higher education (Swartz & Washington, 2003). Along with greater occurrences of success in higher education, Black males appear to be on the path to little significant progress in life (Garibaldi, 2007).

Perhaps the African American male anemic penchant for education as a means to a better future explains the ever-widening gender gap between Black males and other ethnicities that exists in regards to the rates of persistence in higher education. Although, progress of African Americans in higher education has been evidenced; yet the literature overwhelmingly reveals that Black males have not kept pace (Kaba, 2005). Proportionately, these differences are cause for alarm, since the nature of the gap is wider for African American males than with any other cultural group. African American males are the only racial group in which they appear to experience fewer benefits than their minority, female counterpart in regards to educational outputs (Seidman, 2005).

In general, women represent 51 % of the population, with a ratio of men to women in college being 51 % to 43.9 %. This is extremely skewed in regards to the dynamics of African American males and other minority females in higher education (Cuyjet, 2006a). Garibaldi (2007) reported that although there is a gender gap in all cultures, it has become extraordinarily wide for African American males over the last 25 years in reference to their minority, female collegiate counterparts.

### **Potential Factors That May Improve Success for African American Males in College**

Identifying embraceable factors that improve African American achievement and retention is of great importance. A great number of African American males in higher education must face formidable challenges in their persistence to the point of attainment of degrees. The purpose of this research was to describe the higher education experiences for African American males in regards to nine potential factors that may explain the exaggerated college persistence gap that exists between black males and their collegiate counterparts. It is important to reference Schlossberg's (1989) transition, mattering and marginality model in order to glean possible

insight into which factors hold the greatest promise for improving African American male transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher learning. By categorizing each of the nine factors in one of Schlossberg's (1995) four Ss, it is possible to see how mattering and marginality can influence the effect of these nine factors on African American male retention and persistence at institutions of higher learning. Schlossberg (1989) revealed that mattering and marginality do influence transition, which in turn, influences persistence. Since research has revealed that African American males who perceive a sense of mattering to the institution of higher learning experience greater transition, persistence, and retention (Schlossberg, 1989), it is important to research the extent that mattering and marginality influence the factors that in turn can improve overall retention and persistence.

Schlossberg et al., (1995) identified four major sets of factors revealed to strengthen transition, which in turn will strengthen persistence and retention. Referred to as the "4 Ss", they are situation, self, support, and strategies. Summers (2002) noted that perception is of great importance in assessing the influence of Schlossberg's 4 Ss. The students' perceptions of their lived experiences regarding transition at institutions of higher learning determine Schlossberg's 4 Ss will be "assets or liabilities" concerning their transition, persistence, and retention (Summers, 2002). Evans et al., 1998) revealed that people interpret the situation by evaluating the following factors.

- *Trigger*: What was the cause of the transition?
- *Timing*: Is the time of the transition advantageous for the individual's transition?
- *Control*: To what degree is the individual able to manage the transition?
- *Role change*: Has there been a change of roles? Is the change advantageous?
- *Duration*: What is the permanency of the transition?



- *Concurrent Stress*: Is there parallel stresses being experienced by the individual?
- *Previous experience with a similar transition*: Does the individual have a history with transition; this particular type of transition?
- *Assessment*: What is the individual's perception of who is responsible for the transition, and how does it affect the individual's behavior? (Evans et al., 1998, p. 113)

Of the nine predictor factors being addressed in this research, poverty and academic preparation can be categorized as situational in assessing the transition and persistence of African American males at institutions of higher learning.

Schlossberg et al, (1995) second S was identified as self. It is divided into personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics include gender, socioeconomic status, stage of life, state of health, ethnicity, and age. Any tools used by the individual to cope with transition, such as ego/personal empowerment, perception, optimism, resiliency, determination, and personal beliefs and values can be considered to be psychological resources. Self-efficacy, spirituality, and resiliency can be categorized as compartments of self in regards to Schlossberg's four S's model.

The third S is support. It refers to the degree to which support resources are available to the individual who is experiencing transition. It is social in nature and can include relationships, family, the friends one is most influenced by, communities of residence, and institutions.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) believed that support needed to be categorized as either foundational or flexible; family support, mentoring, and teacher expectations as well as organizational culture can be considered as components of support in Schlossberg et al.'s model.

The fourth 'S' is strategies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) purported that there are three primary categories by which transition is able to be managed: responses that modify a situation, responses that control the meaning of the problem, and responses that manages stress in the aftermath. Schlossberg et.al, suggested four coping strategies: (a) direct action, (b) information seeking, (c) inhibition of action, and (d) intra-psychic behavior. Of the nine factors being addressed in this research, although assigned to other four S's categories for the purpose of this research on Black male persistence at colleges and universities, spirituality and resiliency can also be viewed as components of Schlossberg, et al.'s strategies category.

Schlossberg, et al. (1995) argued that these four Ss serve as "assets and liabilities" in determining to what extent transition and consequential persistence occurs. It can be argued that each of the factors: (a) poverty, (b) self-efficacy, (c) spirituality,(d) organizational culture, (e) teacher expectations, (f) academic preparation, (g) family support, (h) mentoring, and (i) resiliency can be identified with at least one of the four Ss. The degree to which mattering and marginality occurs will determine the degree to which transition and persistence is strengthened. Many of these identified factors influence college persistence for African Americans in general. Because research has established that African American males have not benefitted from higher education in comparison to their collegiate counterparts, it is assumed that these factors have been of greater benefit to the college experiences of other cultural groups than Black males. These potential factors are: (a) poverty; (b) self-efficacy; (c) spirituality; (d) organizational culture; (e) teacher expectations; (f) academic preparation; (g) family support; (h) mentor support; and (i) resiliency.

It is important to note that there is research that purports that teacher expectations in some cases favor African American males, which questions the potency of teacher expectations

as a factor that explains negative, Black male college persistence (Strayhorn, 2008). There also seem to be questions concerning the power of institutional culture as a factor that can predict college persistence for African American students in general and African American males in particular. Since the culture at historically Black colleges and universities mirrors African American culture in general, it could be argued that Black male students would find it easier to persist in those environments. However, graduation rates for African American males are disappointingly low even in America's HBCUs; sometimes, even lower than that for Black students at predominantly White institutions of higher learning. Although the graduation rate at many HBCUs is significantly higher for Black college students than the nation's average for African American college graduation rates (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2005).

### **Poverty Factor**

For the purpose of this research, poverty is categorized in Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) four Ss situation category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' description of their lived experiences regarding poverty and their perceptions of its impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. Due to greater incidents with poverty, a large number of African American males enter college with the stress of being an under-resourced learner. Intergenerational poverty is a serious concern for African Americans (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008). Seidman (2003) reported that although African Americans make up 12.8% of the U.S. population, they constitute 40 percent of the generationally poor. The demographic statistics for African American males are equally disappointing (Seidman, 2003). According to 2008 United States Census statistics the annual median income for African Americans declined 2.8 % from its level in 2007. In 2008, the poverty rate for African Americans was twice that for the general American population.

According to Swail et al. (2003), for many low-income and minority students, college enrollment and persistence are fueled by financial resources, especially in the form of financial aid. In 2001, the median household income for African American families headed by a householder of 45 to 54 years of age was \$36,824; for Hispanics, the figure was \$41,652 and for Caucasians combined income was \$51,643. It is apparent by these figures that financial assistance influences the ability of African American males to persist in college to the point of degree attainment. Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to depend on grant aid in order to attend college (Swail et al., 2003).

African American children are more prone to negative experiences with poverty than Caucasian children (Wagmiller, R. L., Lemon, M. C., Kuang, L., Alberti, P., and Aber, J. (2006). Adults who experienced poverty lifestyles as youth are more likely to be poor as adults as opposed to those who never experienced childhood poverty. This is especially significant for African Americans (Wagmiller et al, 2006). Harper and Griffin (2011) noted that post secondary education has expressed concern regarding the regressive enrollment of Black males. Much of this decline is attributed to lack of access to highly-selective, high-cost colleges and universities due to many of these students being under-resourced.

### **Self-Efficacy Factor**

For the purpose of this research, self-efficacy is categorized in Schlossberg et al. (1995) four Ss self-category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' description of their lived experiences regarding self-efficacy and their perception of its impact on their transition, retention and persistence at institutions of higher education. More often than not, successful persistence in higher education for African Americans is not so much a matter of cognitive-related factors, but rather non-cognitive factors, such as self-efficacy, motivation,

commitment, and a personal decision to persist. Accordingly, the literature reveals that adjusting to higher education can be categorized into 4 factors, two of which are: (a) social adjustment, which involves a plethora of inter-personal relationships, and (b) personal-emotional adjustments, which includes the need to independently manage one's emotional and physical well-being (Moore, 2001). Since social adjustment and personal-emotional adjustment are part and parcel of one's own self-efficacy, failure to adjust can cause students to question personal worth as well as academic ability (Moore, 2001). Academic self-concept consistently is identified as the most reliable predictor of potential collegiate academic success, for all students, including African American males (Swartz & Washington, 2002).

To be African American in general and an African American male in particular is to be subjected to a barrage of stereotypes and stereotypical messages of intellectual incompetence when enrolled in predominantly White institutions of higher learning (Moore, 2001). Research suggests that these types of experiences can negatively influence college African American college achievement and persistence to the point of degree attainment (Moore, 2001). College persistence for African Americans involves an intensified awareness of one's own ethnicity and minority status (Jones, 2001).

### **Spirituality Factor**

For the purpose of this research, spirituality is categorized in Schlossberg et al. (1995) four Ss self and strategies categories. From those lenses it is better to ascertain research participants' description of their lived experiences regarding their personal faith from which they draw in order to gain strength and encouragement, along with their perceptions of its impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. The influence of spirituality or personal faith in college persistence has received little attention; however, with the

ever-increasing dilemma concerning the under-serving of African American, Hispanic American, and Native American college students, the area of personal faith is one that also deserves examination. Research suggests that spirituality and personal faith is a factor that needs to be considered in the attempt to improve college persistence. Some research has found that religion appears to have significant influence in college persistence and degree attainment for minority students (Lee, 2007).

Cuyjet (2006b) believes that the significance of spirituality and personal faith in strengthening college persistence for African American males cannot be ignored. Watson (2006) reported that personal faith in the lives of African American college males has received little attention in research literature. The author defined spirituality as a “belief in some external, animating force” (p. 10), and religion as “the adherence to an established system of beliefs and practices grounded in spirituality” (p.113). Watson (2006) stated that both could play a crucial role in the perceptions of responsibility in regards to persistence among African American male college students and can not only affirm personal identities but also aid in college persistence and retention to the point of degree attainment.

Research notes that minority students ranked religion as an important factor in their persistence to the point of attainment of their college degree. Walker and Dixon (2003) reported that spirituality tends to influence GPA for college students in general. Asplund (2009) reported research that suggests that active engagement and commitment to organized religious activities tend to result in higher educational expectations. Asplund (2009) also reported that the role of an active, personal Christian faith was documented to be a frequently identified factor in African American male college persistence to the point of degree attainment. Watson (2006) referenced what C.F. Stewart referred to as “a resistant soul-force” that was identified as an important

element in helping Black males persistent in America in general and its potential influence in improving Black male retention at institutions of higher learning in particular.

### **Organizational Culture Factor**

Research has revealed that institutions that focus on mattering and greater student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately where their institutional loyalty for the short and long term future is ensured. (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 5)

For the purpose of this research, organizational culture is categorized in Schlossberg's four Ss support category. From that particular lens it is advantageous to better understand the research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences regarding organizational culture of the institution and their perception of its impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at postsecondary institutions. The institution's culture plays a big role in the academic and social adjustment that brings about collegiate success for black students (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2001). When students come to college, they bring their cultures with them; therefore in the case of minority students, a culture clash can ensue (Guiffrida, 2006). What happens to or for students after they arrive on their college campus significantly impacts college achievement and self-efficacy (Cokley, 2000). Research reports that many first generation students come to college with no background knowledge of the unique culture of American higher education (Lundberg, et al., 2007). This is further exacerbated in the case of first generation minority students who have to cross cultural boundaries to succeed in a middle-class White cultural context (Guiffrida, 2005). Persistence in higher education requires cross-cultural sensitivity and competence (Asplund, 2009).

Most researchers agree that culture manifests itself through climate, and in and of itself, it can be qualitatively measured. However, climate, which is the surface manifestation of culture can be quantitatively assessed (Glick, 1985). The variable of culture must be examined to ascertain the extent to which the lack of Black male college retention is due to organizational cultural differences and perceptions of isolation as well as disenfranchisement.

African American males on predominantly White college campuses are often the victims of culture clash—the students' culture and the college institution's culture (Wells, 2008). Culture, whether in the form of in-class validation as well as out-of-class validation can influence college persistence for African American students. In-class validation includes course content, instructional methodology, student feedback and evaluation, student–teacher interaction, and achievement reinforcement (Holmes et al., 2001). This validation includes campus climate, residence hall experiences, peer relationships, university recognition, faculty student interaction both in and out of class, and faculty ethnicity (Holmes et al., 2003).

Watson, Terrell, and Wright (2003) reported that a large percentage of African Americans find that the mono-cultural reality of a predominantly White college campus was disappointing and far below their expectations. Literature suggests that students' persistence to the point of degree attainment is influenced by the degree to which students have experienced successful social and academic integration into the institution's culture (Jones, 2001). A number of African American students report that the institution's campus environment has power to influence student persistence (Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 1998). Achieving a fully-inclusive college experience in terms of campus climate needs to be placed as a high priority for institutions of higher learning (Taylor, 2005).



Research continues to show a strong connection between active engagement in the total institution culture and desired educational outcomes among African American males and other students. Emphasis must be placed on sensitizing the culture to strengthen Black leadership on campus so that it can flourish and be minimized (Harper, Davies, Ingram, & Platt, 2011).

### **Teacher Expectations Factor**

For the purpose of this research, the factor of teacher expectations is categorized in Schlossberg et al. (1995) four Ss support category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences regarding the power of teacher expectations to impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. Research suggests that faculty-student interaction is a useful predictor of college persistence to the point of degree attainment for African American students (Schwartz & Washington, (2002) Harper (2009b) noted that African American males are resistant to what they perceive on college campuses as racial stereotyping and cyclic low expectations for Black males in regards to leadership and achievement. He went on to refer to this perception that many African American males hold toward faculty, administrators, and even researchers as "niggering." Not surprisingly, beyond parental influence in some cases, teachers were reported to have been important, positive sources of support and influence in regards to college persistence of African American females (Hrabowski et al., 1993). Some research suggests similar finding in regards to teacher expectation benefits for African American collegiate males, stating that, on average, teachers were reported to hold positive expectations for Black males (Ferguson, 2005). Some research purported that 26 % of Black males, compared to 19 % of White males, reported that their teachers demonstrated interest in their academic achievement. Some research reported that Black

males stated that they received praise from their teachers for their academic efforts (Strayhorn, 2008).

Other research has reported that this is not the case for most African American males, many of whom report negative experiences in regards to teacher expectations (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). The literature suggests that the low teacher expectations experienced in Black males' K-12 education appear to describe their experiences in institutions of higher learning (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). One study was cited by Garibaldi (2007) that stated that six out of 10 Black males believed that their teachers had doubts as to whether they were academically capable of going to college. Strayhorn (2008) cited research that reported that 20 % of Black males, as opposed to 4 % of White males, held perceptions of experiencing in-class, public humiliation by teachers.

Harper (2009a) cited research that purports that African American males are victims of low expectations of teachers. The research reported that collegiate Black males, like many other students of color at predominantly White colleges, are expected to have significant experiences with psychological stress that comes with college adjustment (Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). Black male students report perceptions of being overwhelmed by academic standards and academically underprepared to meet their teachers' expectations. Moore (2001) citing research by Howard and Hammon, stated that perceptions of Black-inferiority influences every segment of society and across all academic disciplines. Moore (2001) also referenced research by the noted Stanford University psychologist Claude Steele that stated that the African American achievement gap was not the result of lack of academic or intellectual ability but more so due to negative stereotypes concerning African American academic capacity. Research by Moore (2001) appeared to agree by suggesting that many White professors harbor negative stereotypes in regards to the ability and potential of African American students, in fact, reporting that

professors paid less attention to or ignored Black students altogether. Richardson (2002) stated that the potency of teacher-student relationships through understanding, sensitivity, and persistence of teachers, can directly influence student learning.

### **Academic Preparation Factor**

African American males begin their relationship with frequent academic failure early in the educational process (Davis, 2003; Garibaldi, 1992). African American males face incidents of discipline, expulsion, and suspensions for greater periods of time than their counterparts of other cultures; thus, this time out of school causes them to receive less instruction and experience less learning, perhaps even leading to African American males' anemic GPAs (Hale, 2001). African American males experience disproportionate placements in special education and tracking into low academic classrooms (Epps, 1995). For the purpose of this research, the academic preparation factor is categorized in Schlossberg et al., (1995) four Ss support category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences regarding the power of teacher expectations as an impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. Generally speaking, between 30 to 40 percent of incoming college freshman are academically underprepared or unprepared for collegiate level reading and writing (Swail et al., 2003). The level of precollege preparation as identified by high school GPA is a powerful predictor of probable college persistence through the first three semesters of college attendance (Seidman, 2003). In fact, the literature suggests that the most influential predictor of college persistence for African American males is to have their retention vulnerability identified early and be given constant monitoring of their academic progress (Seidman, 2003). Cuyjet (2006a) stated that regardless of culture, the rigor and intensity

of the high school curriculum were stronger predictors of college success than high school GPA, SAT scores, or ACT scores.

Research constantly suggests that the lack of academic preparation is a significant factor in student persistence (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2005). African American male college persistence is weakened by their insufficient academic preparation, which is the lowest of all college students in regards to both high school GPA and standardized testing, such as the SAT and the ACT. (Hale, 2001). Because academic disenfranchisement appears to begin at an early age for African American males, research stresses that there needs to be a greater importance given to college preparation for Black males (Davis, 2003). Many African American students are educationally unprepared or underprepared during their K-12 experiences, which robs them of the needed educational foundation to succeed at institutions of higher learning (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2005).

Research reveals that about 44 % of students who enroll in college or universities need to take a minimum of one remedial course in mathematics, writing, or reading as many are not prepared for the rigor of post-secondary education (Garibaldi, 2007). The literature correlates retention probability for minority students with adequate precollege academic preparation (Swail et al., 2003).

The lack of appropriate academic preparation is directly related to a lack of persistence among minority college students (Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa, 2005). The lack of academic preparation has often been cited as the primary cause of the discrepancy between rates of academic performance and subsequent college retention in regards to Black and White students at predominantly White institutions of higher learning. However, additional research reveals that the issue is more complex.

Some literature strongly suggests that academic preparation is influenced by the level of the parents' education. First-generation college students are less likely to be academically prepared to persist in college to the point of degree attainment (Choy, 2001).

### **Family Support Factor**

For the purpose of this research, the family and peer support factor is categorized in Schlossberg, et al., four Ss support category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences regarding the power of family and peer support to impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. Family and peer support are significant factors in retention and persistence of African American college students (Palmer & Young, 2009). Research reveals that the family is crucial to academic success and is mentioned as the most-important and most-frequently reported source of strength for African Americans (Hrabowski et al., 2002). Herdon and Hirt (2004) indicated that family support for African American students was primarily in the form of financial and moral support.

Cuyjet (2006c) noted that family support, which enhanced positive family influence, was influential in helping African American males persist to the point of college graduation. Black male college persistence and retention are strengthened by family socioeconomic status and the support nexus of family and friends. The importance of family has emerged as a strong indicator of Black male college retention and success (Palmer & Young, 2009). The authors reported that in interviews conducted at a HBCU, family support surfaced as a salient aspect of Black male college persistence.

The U. S. Census Bureau (2009) revealed that 63 % of Black families were headed by single parents, most of whom are females. Therefore, by sheer absence of one parent's

contributions, the extent to which the Black family can provide maximum support to Black males as they persist in college is compromised. Palmer & Young (2009) noted that the importance of family support as a salient component of collegiate success cannot be underestimated. With the absence of the whole nuclear family, the extended family becomes an important factor that influences college persistence to the point of degree attainment. Moore (2001) reported that European and African American students alike cited family support in the form of guidance, encouragement, and assurance as having significant influence on college persistence and retention.

### **Mentoring Factor**

For the purpose of this research, the mentoring factor is categorized in Schlossberg, et al., four Ss support category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' descriptions of their lived experiences regarding the power of mentoring's impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education. Mentoring is a viable factor that can influence student persistence and retention for African American males in post-secondary education (Cuyjet, 2006c). Cuyjet suggests that predominantly White institutions of higher learning need to recruit and train sensitive White mentors who can relate to African American male culture and social characteristics (2006c).

Having supportive relationships, such as mentoring support, has been shown to be a strong predictor of college persistence in first generation minority students. Mentoring relationships between Black students and faculty, including White faculty, has been cited to be important in student college persistence (Strayhorn, 2008). This is of even more importance in the case of African American males. Since African American males tend to isolate themselves on college campuses, the presence of a supportive mentor can positively influence their college

persistence and retention (Cuyjet, 2006a). Other minorities join college clubs and other social activities more frequently than Black males, who are drawn to the student union and athletic areas of the campus.

Research has examined the importance of mentoring in relationship to college success for African American males. The literature generally tends to report that mentoring programs have shown positive results in reference to Black male recruitment, persistence, retention, and degree-attainment. Sutton (2006) suggested that mentoring programs that were developmental in nature as opposed to instructional were more effective and resulted in less dependency on the mentor and more self-reliance in African American male students. The researcher went on to say that developmental mentor programs were able to relate to the Black college male students in various capacities: gatekeeper, teacher, guide, and consultant (Sutton, 2006).

### **Resiliency Factor**

Resiliency has been examined as a possible resource to bring about meaningful improvement in for African American males. Research continues to reveal important insight concerning resilience and academic achievement at all levels. Resilience suggests a paradigm that can possibly explain why some students are able to persist in education and others fail to do so. When resilience is an attribute in a learner, academic success and improvement has resulted (Kemp, 2006).

Resiliency is a source of empowerment that needs to be understood in order to ascertain its possibilities for bringing about meaningful growth in the transition, retention, and persistence experiences for African American males at postsecondary institutions. For the purpose of this research, the resiliency factor is categorized in Schlossberg et al (1989), Four Ss strategy category. From that lens it is better to ascertain research participants' descriptions of their lived

experiences regarding the power of resiliency's impact on their transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher education.

Resiliency is a strength that needs to be studied in young, African American males (Kemp, 2006). Resiliency is defined as a healthy adaptation in the face of adversity (Bernard 2004). Resiliency has the power to order success through the use of recovery, problem solving strategies that not only influence the success of individuals, but also the family and peer support network. Resiliency has been explored as a possible tool to improve the academic human condition of young Black and other males of color (Kemp, 2006).

Research has demonstrated that resilience can potently influence academic progress and life outcomes for young people, including academic success, even if the learner is experiencing situational stresses in other areas of life. Resiliency can be learned, assessed, and have permanent influence on overall academic progress (McLemore, 2010). Because that resiliency research points to it as a key component of social emotional learning, it fits appropriately in Schlossberg et al., (1995) research concerning mattering and marginality's impact on student transition, retention, and persistence. In a longitudinal study, it was discovered that there is a strong correlation between resiliency and GPA. Although the study was concerned with middle and high school students, it can have great implications for higher education persistence and retention, especially among African American males (Hanson & Austin, 2002). Hanson and Austin's (2002) longitudinal study of students in California discovered that almost every assessment of resiliency was directly related to improvement in test scores, whether in low or high performing students or schools.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of African American males in their freshman year at a Midwestern university. The experiences of participating African American males were documented through interviews to reveal common themes, to provide insight into the issue of college persistence among African American males, and to identify the supports and barriers to success. Chapter 3 describes the research questions, qualitative research design, research site, population, data collection, and data analysis of this particular research study.

#### **Research/Interview Questions**

This qualitative study researched the following question, which is linked to Schlossberg's transition theory: What are the experiences of freshman African American males at institutions of higher education? I developed an interview protocol that is supported by salient issues found in the literature review, such as academic, social, family, and personal challenges. The interview consisted of eight structured questions. The questions allowed participants to give comprehensive descriptions of the African American male experience during their freshman year at the university. Questions were structured so that the meaning each participant applies to his reality is revealed. With the consent of the participants, each session was recorded, with transcriptions shared with participants for validation of those conversations.

The following questions framed the interviews:

1. What are your experiences as an African American male freshman at this university?
2. Have any experiences made you feel important or not important? Explain.
3. What supports did you experience that strengthened your success and achievement?
4. In what ways could the university have helped you experience greater success on campus?
5. How would you describe “success” for a first-year student?
6. In what ways did the university make your success more difficult?
7. What experiences did you have prior to coming to college that influenced your success?
8. What suggestions would you give incoming African American freshmen at this university?

### **Qualitative Research Design**

This study was qualitative in design, using focus groups to interview and “gain essence of the students’ experiences as described by the participants” (McMillan, 2008, p. 291). The participants’ reflections were in the context of their freshman year at a Midwestern university. It was determined that qualitative interviews would be the best way to examine the college experiences of African American males. This study emphasized the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, which studies “the lived experiences of the research population” (McMillan, 2008, p. 271). The goal of the research design was to identify themes found in the analysis of all interviews. Creswell (1998) reported that qualitative research designs allow researchers to gain a detailed understanding of an issue that is being examined.

I used open-ended questions in order for the participants to have the liberty to adequately describe their various college experiences. The complex nature of lived experiences of African American males could not be succinctly described through quantitative methods; therefore, qualitative questions were used to capture the essence of their perceptions and comments. This study necessitated identifying meaning, thus qualitative research design is the best fit (Creswell, 1998).

### **Research Site**

The participants were full-time, African American male students at a Midwestern university. According to The U.S. Census (2009), the city in which the university resides has a population of about 60,000, one of the five largest universities in the state.

Face-to-face, focus group interviews were conducted with participants at location of the participants' choosing to ease their capacity to respond to the questions. Participants were asked a series of questions that allowed them to describe their perceptions of their university experience during their freshman year.

### **Population**

A purposeful sample of eight African American males was selected from a Midwestern university to be interviewed in order to ascertain a comparative analysis of what appears to support or interfere with African American male college persistence and retention. Creswell (1998) states that a purposeful sample helps the researcher to gain the information needed from a population that has had relevant experiences to inform the research question.

To identify potential participants, I contacted various individuals who administer venues where the participants may "hang out," such as university student services, the African American Culture Center, or the student recreation center. I employed a snowballing selection method as

initial participants knew of additional individuals who may be eligible to participate. I made contact with potential participants at these venues until eight students had volunteered to participate.

All reporting of demographic information, responses and describing of experiences were recorded using pseudonyms. The selected eight participants became a focus group who met with me in order to be interviewed concerning their lived experiences during their freshman year.

### **Background Information of Participants**

Actual names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Billy is a special education major and a freshman with a 2.6 GPA. Preston is a psychology major with a 2.5 GPA; he is a senior. Duane, an information technology major, is a sophomore with a 3.3 GPA. Avis, an automation engineering major, is a freshman with a 2.1 GPA. Darryl, a corporate engineering, technology and criminology major, is a sophomore with a 2.4 GPA. Tyree, a business and music major, is a sophomore with a 2.5 GPA. Jason, an accounting major, is a freshmen with a 2.9 GPA, and Kendall, a forensic accounting major is a junior with a 2.5 GPA.

### **Data Collection**

I served as the primary instrument for collection and analyzing data, since data collection involves field work (Creswell, 1998). I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with eight participants at an agreed-upon designated location. Prior to any interviews, participants were advised of their rights along with assurances of their safety. To protect identities, each participant was referred to by a pseudonym in the transcriptions. This protocol was followed throughout the entire study. Interviews were recorded along with my field notes. Notes attempted to capture any additional descriptions, inflection, or animation worthy of note.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and read through each interview many times to become familiar with the text. Open coding was used to help reduce the data into manageable chunks. Axial coding followed, as this process further reduced the data and began the process of theme development. I looked for dominant themes to be used to bring summary to their experiences. These themes were compared and contrasted with current literature to further our understanding of the experiences of the African American male participants. This process allowed me to capture the essence of the students' experiences that made the data analysis and conclusions more meaningful.

### **Researcher Statement**

One limitation in qualitative research is the bias the researcher brings. I have testified before the United States Congress to passionately emphasize the need to eradicate all forms of educational disenfranchisement in our nation. As a former Indiana State Teacher of the Year, I have endeavored to empower humanity with their inalienable right to learn as much as they can for the purpose of maximizing human potential. As a child I was intimately acquainted with the lethality of marginality, which almost convinced me that I was incapable of learning and making significant contributions in life that would impact the lives of countless others.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of African American males in regards to their freshman year of transition at a Midwestern university. Chapter 4 exists for the purpose of reporting the findings and themes that emerged from the research study and focus group interviews. The design of the study helped to identify themes that emerged from a focus group of eight African American males in the discussion of their lived experiences that could shed light on what factors could impede or strengthen college transition and persistence for Black males.

The primary intent of this research was to describe the higher-education experiences for African American males in regards to nine potential factors that may explain the exaggerated college persistence gap that exists between Black males and their collegiate counterparts, in the hopes that it could contribute to the literature concerning African American male transition and retention at postsecondary institutions.

#### **The Participants**

The focus interview group was composed of eight, full-time, African American male college students, which included four freshmen, two sophomores, one junior, and one senior. The emphasis was targeted toward gaining an understanding of the freshman transition experiences of Black men at institutions of higher learning. Among the similarities of the participants was the

fact that each was required to be an African American male. Also each was required to share experiences peculiar to their freshman year transition in college, although four out of the eight participants were sophomores, juniors, or seniors. There were some similarities that were worthy of noting, such as the fact that two of the eight reported GPAs between 2.0 and 2.4; five of the eight reported GPAs between 2.5 and 2.9; one reported a GPA between 3.0 and 4.0. It is also worth noting that four of the eight members of the focus group were first-generation college students. Of the eight focus group participants, five of them said that they had to make radical, personal changes in their freshman year in order to succeed in college. Of the eight participants, six held part-time employment while maintaining full time enrollment status. During their freshman year, six of the eight belonged to one or more African American campus organizations that existed to strengthen African American transition and retention. In fact of the three who described their freshman year as positive, all of them attributed involvement in Black cultural organizations on campus.

Table 1

*Focus Group Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>Graduation Year</b>	<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Employment</b>
Duane	20	Information Technology	3.29	2015	SGA/LEAF	Information Desk
Darryl	18	Corporate Engineering Technology & Criminology	2.40	2015		
Avis	18	Automation Engineering	2.09	2015	AACC/Athletics	
Tyree	20	Music/Business	2.50	2014	Music Association Phi Beta Sigma	Assist. To V.P. Student Affairs
Billy	19	Special Education	2.60	2016	TEAM SPEAK AASA	Photographer for campus newspaper and Marketing Department
Kendall	21	Accounting & Forensic Accounting	2.50	2013	SAAB	Program Analyst for MAPS/AACC
Preston	23	Psychology	2.50	2012	Union Board/Student Government Association	Residential Life Assistant
Jason	19	Accounting	2.90	2015	NAACP/Black Student Union	African American Cultural Center Assistant



### **Interview Themes and Sub-themes**

Targeted Leadership: the relationship between perceptions of being thrust into leadership roles, perceptions of importance, and college success

- Leadership Influence: participants shared how being perceived as leaders increased their desire to achieve and succeed in college
- Personal Capital: participants shared experiences of perceived importance and its influence regarding their college transition.

Burden of Hope: the factors that led participants to enroll in and desire to succeed in higher education

- Family Obligation: the role that family expectations and need played in the participants' desire to experience successful college transition.
- Family Support: the role that the participants' college success and residual support and strengthening of their families prior to degree attainment,

Overcome Me: the necessity that participants found to change personal habits in order not to sabotage their own transitions.

- Success DNA: the connection between the participants' ability to describe college success and achievement of college success
- Success Bank: the relationship between academic success prior to college attendance and college achievement and success
- A Chosen Few: making the odds work to strengthen college success
- Self-empowerment: the connection between rehearsing previously experienced college success and achieving new college success

Success Connections: the relationship between the participants' perceptions of importance in terms of relationships with family, mentors, the college institution, and subsequent, college staying-power.

- Family Connections: the participants discussed the influence of perceptions of importance in terms of family support and encouragement and college achievement and success.
- Mentor Connections: the participants discussed the influence of perceptions of importance in terms of mentors and college survival and success.
- College Connections: the participants discussed their perceptions of importance in relationship with the university and college achievement and success.
- College Disconnections: the participants discussed their perceptions of non- importance in relationship to the university and college achievement and success

Limited Options: the participants shared their experiences in regards to the influence of adopting a no-failure strategy regarding their college achievement and success.

- FINAO: employing the no-failure option in the pursuit of college success
- Brother to Brother: members of the focus group offer advice to incoming African American freshman males.

Table 2

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes with Subthemes	Definition
<b>1. Targeted Leadership</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Perceived Influence</b></li> <li>• <b>Personal Capital</b></li> </ul>	<p>The impact of being perceived as a leader. The most elementary form of mattering is the feeling that one commands the interest of another person (Rosenberg &amp; McCullough, 1981)</p>
<b>2. Burden of Hope</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Family Obligation</b></li> <li>• <b>Family Support</b></li> </ul>	<p>The influence of having the perception of being a burden of hope for significant others. Schlossberg's (1989) "Ego-extension" purported as the feeling that others are proud of what one does strengthens transition and achievement.</p>
<b>3. Overcome Me</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Success D.N.A.</b></li> <li>• <b>Success Bank</b></li> <li>• <b>A Chosen Few</b></li> <li>• <b>Self-Empowerment</b></li> </ul>	<p>The impact of a decision to overcome personal habits that could threaten achievement and college success. Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) reported that those in transition who believe that they have greater control over their lives tend to experience greater achievement and academic success.</p>
<b>4. Success Connections</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Family Connections</b></li> <li>• <b>Mentor Connections</b></li> <li>• <b>College Connections</b></li> <li>• <b>College Disconnections</b></li> </ul>	<p>The influence of having successful connections with family, mentors, and campus organizations whether racial/cultural or otherwise. Creation of educational environments that clearly indicate that all students matter, influence greater involvement and consequently greater academic achievement and success (Astin, 1994)</p>
<b>5. Limited Options</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>FINAO</b></li> <li>• <b>Brother to Brother</b></li> </ul>	<p>The influence of possessing a "no-failure option" college success strategy. Psychological resources such as self-efficacy, confidence, and optimism concerning college transition will influence achievement and college success (Schlossberg et al., 1995)</p>

**Theme 1: Targeted Leadership**

One of the themes that emerged from the participants was concerned with perceptions of being targeted for leadership and greater increased motivation for and realization of greater college success. The majority of the participants talked about the factors led them to enroll and

remain in college. The theme Targeted Leadership was divided into two sub-themes: Leadership Influence and Personal Capital.

**Leadership influence.** The majority of the participants reflected on how being perceived as leaders and being sought out by others for help, guidance, and support actually increased their desire to achieve and succeed in college. In sharing their transition experiences in regards to perceptions of importance, the majority of the participants talked about their unwittingly being cast in leadership roles en route to their individual transition. Not only did this create feelings of importance, but it became an unexpected, important resource for their own successful college transition. Many expressed the fact that their sense of being needed by others actually created a personal sense of importance, which in turn increased their desire to achieve and succeed in college.

When asked what experiences gave him a sense of importance, Jason said that being offered the opportunity to be the leader of the track team. He went on to say, “me being a freshman telling other juniors and seniors what to do.” Preston, a senior, said, “the recognition from getting, seeing what they needed out of me is an important experience.” Kendall, a junior accounting major, organized a peaceful protest around campus. “We did sit-ins instead of just sitting there, we just actually studied to show that as upperclassmen we made it to the next level and that we wanted to show underclassmen that they needed to study before their finals.” Kendall said that particular experience made him feel that someone actually cared about him.

**Personal capital.** Not only did many participants remark that being needed by their peers increased their sense of importance, but also coming to the realization that their family’s need for them to succeed in college also caused their perceived importance to grow significantly. For example, Preston, a senior said,

In my previous statement, I also stated that I have a brother and a nephew and without a father figure actually consistent in our lives, I was kind of the father figure my brother had. He had recently shared with me, and I feel like I've always known this, but he recently got married actually two weeks ago, he said its funny how growing up I looked to please you more than my own parents; and I read that and I kind of like I was about to start crying but I didn't because I had my door open (laughter) but I didn't actually realize how important I was to him. It made me realize how important I am to my nephew as well and then to have other people look at me and to see the reaction between me and my brother and my nephew, but more importantly my brother, because he actually goes here. It just made me wonder how many other people thought the same way in another capacity. Also being the first-generation male and my whole family is like, man, you got to do this, so any time I show that I can't do something or that something is challenging they get right on me.

To their surprise, several of the participants remarked that they discovered a sense of personal importance as the result of being perceived by other students as one who could offer guidance and help. This leadership role increased their feelings of self-worth, which in turn increased their desire to succeed and achieve in college.

Billy, a freshman, said that being a person friends could come to when they had problems, being able to tell them the right things to do, and seeing that it actually helped them is what made him feel important. In reflecting what increased his sense of importance, Tyree, a sophomore, said, "I really don't know how or why, but lately a lot of people [have been] coming up to me, asking me questions about random stuff like about campus and just about life in

general.” After a pause, he continued, “I really cannot even explain it, just seems like all of a sudden people just started coming to me.”

## **Theme 2: Burden of Hope**

Another theme that emerged from the focus interviews was that much of the college success and achievement of the participants was attributed to them seeing themselves as a burden of hope for their families and friends. Their college attendance and retention were fueled by their perceptions that those who mattered to them needed them to succeed in college. Tyree’s remarks are an example of the participants’ sentiments.

I think I am definitely a burden of hope to my dad and his family because out of him and his seven brothers and sisters and his mother, none of them either went to college or graduated from college. They all chose the armed forces or something else [to do] with their lives instead. My dad’s daughter that he had from his first marriage dropped out of college after her sophomore year and she has two kids and is living with her boyfriend in Chicago. So I would have to say, [I am a] burden of hope for my father; just to see for his namesake that the [family] name actually graduate from college and I actually see it every time I look into his eyes. He’s counting on me to do a lot of different things, not for him but he wants to work with me and through me for those things that he was unable to accomplish in his life, and I am more than willing to take that responsibility. But I feel like I need a lot of help with those responsibilities, because my father and I have always have a good relationship and we’re both very competitive, especially when it comes a basketball videogames. Of course I always beat him (laughter) and he always gets mad, but me and my father are just real tight and just best friends and there is nobody I would rather succeed for other than him.

**Family obligation.** The majority of the participants perceived themselves as a burden of hope for many, especially their families. Because the majority of them are first-generation college enrollees, they feel a sense of obligation to succeed for their loved ones. Preston reflected on his need to succeed in college as an obligation to those he considered part of his nuclear family or intimate friends. Like many of the other participants in the focus interview group, the perception that his success mattered to those he loved increased his desire to experience college success.

My girlfriend kind of snapped on me and she said “Look you need to get things together, you are letting me down,” and I was like, I wanted to cry, but you know, there again, I can’t cry in front of people, so I had to hold it in. So that helped me get back on track. Even now, you should actually do your best all the time. It shouldn’t take a bad moment to make you realize that people look up to you.

Avis’s remarks further emphasize the participants’ burden of hope perceptions. He stated that he feels a burden to be a role model for his six cousins and those back in his home church.

I have six cousins, they are little and I feel like I am a burden of hope for them. I have to do well and come to college and kill it; they come to me and tell me to get on track if I get off, and my church too.

Some of the participants, such as Kendall, saw themselves as a burden of hope: They needed to succeed in college in order for those they loved to see that there are better options available; hopefully, that would cause them to stop trying to make a living through illegal means.

I feel like I’m a burden of hope because I have a brother who is actually 19 years old and he should be in school now. We were raised in the same household since we were both

born, but we chose two separate, different routes. I went the education route and he went the street route; he's actually selling drugs and it hurts me to see that because I know that he has enemies back at the city, people that I am actually cool with. It hurts my mom and that's why I know she wants me to succeed out here so bad. I also want to succeed for him, because if I can make enough money I can actually help him. I've always wanted to be a positive role model for him and go the educational route. You know I would bring him around my positive friends but he wanted to do his own thing. I couldn't make decisions for him.

**Family support.** Some of the participants remarked that being a burden of hope, which created and strengthened their desires to succeed in college, actually became a form of support for their families. Through their successes, their families were being strengthened and experienced residual success while the participant was yet in college. Darryl's comments are examples of this perception.

I feel like I'm a burden of hope for my cousin who's like a brother to me. Before I left for college, we spent basically every weekend and every day together-we actually only live like a block away from each other so that made it better. Before I left [for college], it actually hit him that I was leaving. He had no hope or plans of going to college, and last semester towards the end he sent me a picture of his report card and he's getting As and Bs, he used to be a D and F student. When I got back, his mother told my mother to tell me thanks, because I inspired him to do something with his life. He actually wants to go to college and something with his life, he wants to major in, I believe, graphics. I was really proud of him.



### **Theme 3: Overcome Me**

As the result of the Billy's comments, the participants began to reflect on things that they had to overcome since enrolling in college so that they could achieve college success. What emerged was a major, theme in which the group acknowledged that, in essence, they had to overcome the self that they had evolved into prior to enrolling in postsecondary education. Billy remarked that he decided to break old habits by making a decision to change.

I had some bad experiences coming into college. You cannot continue some of the same habits you had at home because it's a new environment, new settings and rules you have to follow. You know old habits are hard to break, that it's a bad experience. I overcame my problem with accepting that I have one and then you know, I guess, looking at it from different angles as how it affects me and when I got out of it, you just come to a point where you know you want to change and you see you need to change.

Tyree chimed in and said that he had to overcome what he perceived were the disadvantages associated with being an African American on a predominantly White college campus.

I am a sophomore; now my freshman year, I had a lot of ups and downs. I would say coming from a predominantly Black community like I did and then coming here... Well I'm from Chicago, first of all, but coming down here was a major difference from that lifestyle and just [compared to] the culture that's down here. I went to an all-Black high school and I grew up in all-Black home in an all-Black neighborhood. But then to come where the percentage of black people is, I don't know, roughly the last time I checked, about 15% African American students, and that was just a big-time challenge for me and even deeper, that my being a music major, I am like one of less than 10 African

Americans out of 200 students. So it's really hard to make friends in the major with the people that I see every day. That's why I had to step back and join other organizations.

It's just really helping me expand my horizons, I am kind of you learning how to interact with both groups in ways that I have not before: So it's tough but at the same time I am learning and I believe that I'm getting better at it.

Avis continued the reflection, sharing his own experiences in reference to overcoming the things that he had been accustomed to doing that might be adversarial to his college success. He noted that a source of strength for his transformation was his personal faith, as did other participants at some point in their interviews. He also noted that he overcame the learned self that needed to change by deciding to ask his professors for help as opposed to waiting for them to approach him as was the custom in high school.

My experience was a little rocky like everybody else's. [I] was just starting out trying to do the same things that I did in high school, but they didn't work here so [I] got in [a] little trouble, but I'm picking [myself] back up now trying out for football and working out. And then I go to [a] kind of church thing, I go [to] Bible study so my experience started out bad, but now it's getting better. I just needed to start talking to teachers and asking questions, because they don't come to you like they did in high school, so I have to do it myself and put the weight on my shoulders and go to them. I just started praying a lot more. Prayer helps me. It was helpful to a lot of situations, academic or social, that I needed help with. On top of that, I started talking to my mother in ways that I never had before.

Kendall's remarks identified procrastination as a former trait that he had overcome in order to achieve college success. The fact that he held a part-time job during his freshman year made it even more necessary to overcome this negative habit.

My freshman year, even though I worked five hours a week, every time that I had a chance to take a nap during the day and I put my homework off till the last second. That was something that I realized I needed to get out of the way; procrastination was my biggest enemy. It has gotten better over the two years I've been here. It's got really good 'this year because I'm actually doing all of my homework over the weekends and I have the week to do what I need to do socially.

**Success DNA: Identification makes pursuit more successful.** Continuing in the theme of personal habits that needed to be overcome, the participants began to share their personal definitions of freshman-year college success. The majority of the participants had relative ease in articulating their perceptions, emphasizing what each had to do personally in order to achieve effective transition. Jason began with a description of academic success as personal responsibility in the completion of homework as well as becoming a positive standard for others. Duane's comments revealed that one's ability to perceive and describe college success is an important dimension of goal-setting for pursuit of college achievement. "But if you want to succeed, make goals for yourself. [When] I came here, I [said] I want a 2.5, 3.0, and above. I would just say that to myself every day: I want to succeed."

Jason said that he would describe success for a Black male college freshman as doing homework, helping others and being a positive role model. He went on to say, "I think that's success, [also it is] staying on top of your homework. Don't worry about parties or who's doing what; stay on top of your game." Preston, a senior, revealed that he had a scale of success for not

only his freshman year, but his sophomore, junior, and senior years as well. Obviously, his ability to reflect on what he wanted his success to look like was crucial to its achievement.

I also have a scale of success for each level. I would actually say freshman success level is actually coming back because retention rate is so low for freshman period, especially for African American males. Coming back is a success for the first year, and for sophomore and junior year, I would say maintaining a good GPA, you know; a lot of people say 3.0 but actually a 2.5 or higher is actually acceptable. And as far as your senior year, [it is] getting out, going on to grad school to further your education; doing what you have to, but getting out [is the] most important thing for the senior.

Avis's comments pointed to the fact that many of his friends were not able to overcome their negative habits; as a result, they could not achieve a successful transition. He chose to echo some of the comments of other participants and take it upon himself to succeed. His comments were "I would say go to class, do your homework, like Preston said. A lot of my friends left so just stay in and do your best, that's it."

Kendall went on to say that he saw success for a first year African American male as, "definitely coming back you come out here like Billy said, and you have freedom to do whatever you want and nobody is watching you use your time effectively." Billy, a freshman participant rode on Preston's comments and said "making it back but not on academic probation" is what he termed to be college success in the freshman year for an African American male. Darryl said that success is getting up out bed each morning without depending on someone else to do it for you. Duane closed this segment of the discussion by sharing his definition of college success:

I would say success is basically what you make of it. If you want to come here and party, that's up to you; you're not, most likely, going to succeed. If that's what you want, do it,

but if you want to succeed, make goals for yourself. [When] I came here, I [said] I want a 2.5, 3.0, and above. I would just say that to myself every day: I want to succeed. I would study, make my grades, and study for my test.

**Success bank: Get all you can and can all you get.** Another important sub-theme of the necessity of overcoming an old self emerged as the participants discussed the successes that they experienced prior to enrolling in college. The majority of them equated much of their successful college transition with having experienced academic success prior to entering postsecondary education. Kendall's statement illustrates the importance that the participants placed on having a bank of prior academic success, especially during one's first year in college.

Some experiences coming to college that influenced my success was an experience to show me what not to do when I got here, and [my] high school preparing me the right way. I can never thank my teachers and how they prepared me to come the college.

Taking all those hot-track classes really helped. I guess that's it for what influenced me for success.

Tyree's sentiments echo Kendall's. In his case, his high school teachers were not only his instructors, but also his mentors. They allowed him to bank success experiences that served him well in his pursuit of college success.

The experiences that I've had prior to coming to college were definitely just having all my high school teachers on my side. They kept on pushing me to reach the next level, and they were just really there for me. All of my high school teachers were my mentors.

For Darryl, having a keen interest in technology was a valuable success experience that empowered him to succeed in college.

The experience that I had prior to coming to college that influenced me and motivated me for success was my love for what I'm trying to study now. I have always loved technology and [am] interested in criminology. I live in a community, although it is not the best, it is full of police officers that go to my church, and I speak to them and they always inspire me. Like a good friend of the family gave me a computer, like a desktop. I opened it up and looked inside, and it was barely anything inside. He wanted me to open it up in front of him so he could tell me that [it] was for me to learn technology and build my own computer the way I wanted to. People motivating me gave me the ability to go out and know that I wanted success.

For Preston, the prior experience that fueled his college success was having college graduates in his family. The fact that they were all women created a desire in him to prove that the men in the family were also capable of attaining a college degree.

What also influenced me was my family, how all the women went to college and got their degree and did what they were supposed to do. So I really wanted to show them that the men could do it.

Negative prior experiences are what some participants, such as Billy, cited that actually fueled his college success as opposed to immobilizing it. The fact that he did not want those experiences to be his future motivated him to not only enter college but also overcome any personal habits that would sabotage his college success.

My experiences that influence me for success, I would have to say my community. You know that saying they say in high school; they say, what's the saying? They say about your friends: half of y'all gonna graduate and some of y'all ain't and it's true. Graduation

summer was an ugly summer, seeing everybody get locked up or die just silly stuff. It kind of motivates you to do the right stuff. It scares you.

**A chosen few: Make the odds work in your favor.** The majority of the participants were keenly aware that their presence in college as young, African American males was one that goes against the odds. However, they appeared to have decided to maximize their opportunities to succeed and achieve as opposed to using it as a reason to quit. Tyree's experiences shed much light in this concerning these dynamics, out of all of his comments, one that stands out is "do whatever someone said you can't do."

One of the first things they said to me at orientation was to look to your left and look to your right, one of these people will not be here when you graduate. A guy on my right [is] not here, a look to my left: not here. I am the only one still here out of my group. I didn't believe it when they said it, but it's true. So just to come back [for the next year] is a success in itself. But when you come back, [don't] just stop at that. Come back and finish what you started or [set a] goal to build upon foundation you already have. If you had a 2.5 go for the 3.0, the 3.5. Make the Dean's list. Graduate. Go for valedictorian. No one said you could not be valedictorian just because you're an African American, or short or something. Do whatever somebody said you can't do. I just thought of this saying I heard back in high school: I believe they said, "I do because I want to, I want to because I can, I can because you said I couldn't." That was one of the most powerful things I had ever heard because it doesn't matter what anybody says to you or did just get done what you need to get done and you will be successful.

**Self-empowerment: Rehearse the reason for previous college success.** The participants began to share what they had deposited in their success bank that they can point to,

in the form of previous college success, in order to achieve more college success. The majority of them expressed that college success in the freshman year is the ability to return during the next semester or year without being on academic probation. Darryl shared his experiences in this regard, citing the fact that, although his freshman year was not a wake-up call, it was a time of discovery of what he needed to do in order to succeed. He acknowledged that there were times that he felt like giving up and returning home but found strength in knowing that his family were all pulling for him. One of his comments that stood out was, "I need to do this for myself, so it has been an emotional experience and as long as I have family. I stay motivated, it should continue to be a good experience.

As far as college experiences go educational wise, it's been not a wake-up call but something new for me a new experience from when I was at home definitely it kind of knocked me off my feet if first but now I know what I need to do in order to improve myself. As far as last semester, there were times [when] I was like maybe I should go home; maybe this is not for me and I remember my uncle's words and when he said you get those feelings like when you want to come home, but you got to stay, you got to do this. I have people back at home that are supporting me and kind of want to keep me in college.

Jason said, "I made it back because I joined organizations got involved on campus and did my homework." Billy said, "I think I made it back because I leveled stuff off what the studies the activities the partying everything else just time management schedule and everything I executed it." Avis shared, "I think I'm making it now because I realize college is not like partying all the time. You could do anything just to get by but lying to your teachers. Just by realizing that and get your grades right you can do it." Keith remarked,



The reason I came back, I think my high school prepared me well. They had a balanced curriculum and I think with that curriculum, [I was able to make] the transition going to college. But I really didn't know that I felt like I'd really learn much more in my freshman year; I felt like it was just more detail of my senior year.

Duane said that he made it back because he did not want to be another statistic. He continued, saying that he had to learn to have a drive and the determination to not be a failure. Darryl remarked that he decided to be dedicated to learning. He picked his major and decided that he wanted to continue to learn.

#### **Theme 4: Success Connections: Importance, Involvement and Staying-Power**

The participants shared their experiences regarding the source of their staying-power in college. The majority of them acknowledged that their involvement with their family was crucial as well as their involvement on campus. Some of the participants expressed a belief that much of their transition success in college was due to healthy connections and relationships that were formed with their families, mentors, or the university through its various cultural and/or campus organizations. The vast majority of the participants shared that membership in these groups was beneficial in terms of college staying-power.

**Family connections.** Most of the African American male participants identified their family connections as a primary source of their college staying-power and support. Many of them expressed a belief that their families supported their enrollment, transition, and retention in college. None of them indicated that their families were opposed. Five of the eight participants were first-generation college students and, therefore, they were encouraged by many of their families to persevere and succeed. Darryl stated that the first semester almost “knocked him off of his feet” and that at one point he seriously thought about quitting and returning home;

however, his family encouraged him to stay in college. Avis said that his freshman year was rocky, but he found help from his sister who was herself in law school. He attributed his relationship with her as a source of his college achievement and success. Tyree stated that his mother's emotional support was a tremendous resource in regards to his college staying-power. Avis reported that his desire and strength to succeed in postsecondary education came from his connection to four, strong, college-educated women in his family who raised him. He said that all four of these women led extremely successful lives; therefore, his relationship with them was a source of personal strength, because "they expected a lot from me so I have to work on everything."

An interesting additional sentiment that Avis shared was the fact that he receive staying-power also from his relationships with the members of his family who failed to achieve their dreams. Billy, a freshman African American male, reflected that much of his drive to succeed in college came from his family as well as the community and their high expectations for him. Jason said that his connection with his family and awareness of their failures were prime sources of transition power. He said,

I didn't come from a family that did a whole lot: high school dropouts, college dropouts. Some of my sisters got pregnant during high school and college and couldn't make it all the way. I just don't want to be in that category; I want to graduate with a college degree. Looking from where [I] come from is what helps me [and] gives me what I need to keep going forward.

Preston said that his family, as well as his mantle as the first-generation male to graduate from high school and enroll in college, was an important contributor to his desire to achieve and succeed in postsecondary education. Duane stated that essential to his success was the fact that

all of his family, but in particular his dad, encouraged him to be a leader and stay in college. Kendall credited his mother's encouragement, his uncle's failures, and his desire to one day be a good father to his own children as the driving forces that propelled him to succeed in college.

My support is definitely my mother; she is the only one that has ever been there for me. I have an uncle that [went] to college on a full track scholarship. He won state in Illinois and got to go to the Olympic trials in Australia, and then all the sudden he came to college and got hooked on drugs and girls, and he ended up ruining his life. He was my role model growing up. I used to watch him run and I wanted to be just like him. He influenced me to go to college and do the right thing. My mother always told me she saw the same qualities in us, but she told me not to follow all the way in his footsteps. I could never tell my mom that I failed because she gives her all to make sure I can come here. Every semester, [she] takes out loans in her name. I don't have a father; [I] never met my father so that [is] also an experience and support to know that I could do better than he did and get somewhere [in life so] that one day I can have children that I can be... Therefore that's my biggest support.

**Mentor connections.** Most of the participants discussed the importance of forming connections with mentors in order to succeed in college. Some of these mentors were not necessarily professors, administrators, or other adults. Many of the participants cited upperclassmen, clergy, friends, high school teachers, or college staff as those who enriched their transition and retention success. Avis said that his pastor's support is a tremendous source of strength. He also mentioned an upperclassman who serves as his resident assistant as a key mentor and valuable resource in college. Duane said, "People I met were positive role models like my RA, [who] kept me out of trouble and helps me keep a good head [and] stay ahead in my

classes” In sharing his experiences with mentors who have contributed to his college success, Kendall said,

Being involved in MAPs, which is Mentors Assisting Prospective Scholars, really helps because we actually have students pair up with a faculty member and we take time each week to go meet with that faculty member and tell them of our progress we are making in our class with our professors. They keep track of us [and] tell us what we need to do. Things like that really helps.

Tyree, a sophomore, music major said that being mentored was an important contributor to his college achievement and success. In fact, he pointed to one of his fellow focus group participants as an upperclassman who helped to fuel his success.

But in terms of here on campus I would actually have to say this man sitting next to me, Preston, was definitely one of my main influences. One of my fraternity brothers, he has always been there for me as a mentor, as an older brother, and as a friend, just keeping me on the right path. Another one is [a college female] who was also one of the most positive African American women that I’ve ever met in my life. She is a senior this year on campus; she works here at the cultural center and she's just like, definitely a big sister to me, a mentor and a friend that I've always needed. It is just great to see those people that you could look up [to] and see that [they] are doing something positive and have come from the same place you came from, but are actually doing something with their lives. It just makes you a push that much harder.

Billy, a freshman special education major, said that remembering where he came from helped him to persevere and achieve because of a desire to never have to return to live there. He credited two African American women who directed the Black cultural center as being strong

mentors who he can count on for reality checks whenever there is a need. He added that knowing that different people have high expectations for him keeps him motivated.

**College connections: Perceptions of importance and college success.** The majority of participants cited their involvement in cultural or campus organizations as strong connections that contributed to their college achievement and success. A statement by Kendall that was supported by most of the focus group was that there is a connection between being involved on campus and being able to find the power to succeed and achieve in college. The majority of the participants indicated that racial and cultural campus organizations were key components of the institutional success assistance offered to them. Preston, a senior psychology major, said that his freshman year transition was positively reinforced by this mentor's suggestion that he become actively involved in campus organizations. He followed his mentor's advice and found the strength to experience successful college transition. He added,

I think the campus could do a better job with the expansion of what it already has in reference to the African American Cultural Center. They need a bigger building. Certain organizations could consolidate instead of competing to have a larger organization. In terms of rates of young males getting involved, it takes certain leaders within the organization to help get them involved. [Those young males] need that friend, or the leader, or an extra push to get them to come [and get involved]. I think to expand what they have could actually be better, I think a bigger focus on that would be a tremendous help.

Jason said the organization of successful scholars influenced his college success. Billy indicated that by becoming a reporter for the college newspaper, he found greater access to what was available to him on campus and a better knowledge of the college's institutional culture.

Tyree indicated that when he initially entered college, his transition was adversely affected by his inability to meet new people and form new friendships. By joining various African American campus organizations, he found the support needed not only to focus on academics, but also to achieve and succeed. The focus group members began this discussion by sharing their experiences with institutional support and what more needed to be done. Darryl said that he was not sure if the university could do anything more to help him achieve greater college success, because he believed he had yet to exhaust all of the resources that the college already provided.

Duane stated that the university could do a better job of identifying and publishing resources that are available to students so that they could be easier accessed. Tyree felt that the university should not duplicate programs through many different organizations but rather unify them. Preston agreed with Tyree and added that the university needed to expand some things and consolidate others. He also said that minority recruitment efforts needed to be expanded. Jason said that the university already provides needed resources, but the students needed to do a better job of asking for help. Avis agreed that doing a better job of publishing available resources would make them more accessible to the students who needed them. Billy said that more explanation of the importance of using available resources needed to be given to incoming freshman African American males. Kendall agreed that the university already did much to facilitate student success, but the African American college males needed to be more proactive.

The university actually does do a lot of things for us, all kind of tutor groups and the writing center. There's all kind of resource centers around the campus, but you have to go find them. My mentor Ms. V. always says a closed mouth never gets fed. The difference between college and high school is high school teachers search for you when there's an assignment missing, but in college they care, but they're not going to tell you they care.

They have too many students to worry about; so if you know if you're messing up, you have to go talk to [the professors] and tell them what's going on with your situation and let them know what's going on with you. On last semester I spoke up to my accounting professor and I told him why I was missing so many quizzes and he let me retake all of them and it really helped me out a lot. We just have to go out there and find the help that we need. We have to speak up and go look for it.

**College disconnections: Perceptions of non-importance and college success.** The participants in the focus group discussed their perceptions of what institutional practices were in place that actually opposed their college success and achievement. The overall theme that was voiced over and over again in this segment came from comments related to the African American college males' perceptions of not being important to instructors. The majority of the participants indicated that they didn't consider the university as a whole having success hindrances, but the vast majority of them did consider the professors as being the primary success inhibitors. Preston remarked that the university didn't make success difficult for him. But he said,

The only thing I could think of from university standpoint would be bad teachers that are organized unprofessional teachers. It's a re-occurring thing. When you get the college you find out just how bad they can be. They can have a study guide with 1,000 things on it and have a test with 10 of those things on it.

Jason added that instructors who were unorganized and give students perceptions of not caring actually hinder student success. Billy stated that he wished his teachers had shown a greater interest in his success by offering him more guidance. Kendall, on the other hand, stated that guidance was not the teacher's or university's responsibility. He added that his instructors

were all very helpful to him. Darryl said that having professors who don't teach in a way that allows students to understand is problematic in terms of college achievement and success. Avis, a freshman, engineering major, said that an instructor once made a statement that a teacher's pay does not depend on whether students choose to learn or not. "One of the teachers actually did say, you could do the work or you can fail, I'm still getting my paycheck. So basically you could drop out, for like care, I'm still getting my money."

Although Avis also shared comments about negative experiences with some college professors, he emphasized that, in the end, it is the student not the teacher who ultimately determines college achievement and success. Tyree had similar sentiments. He said that both the student and the teacher are accountable for the student's success; however, ultimately the greatest responsibility lay on the shoulders of the student. Duane also believed that the student and teacher both affect college achievement and success.

### **Theme 5: Limited Options**

**FINAO: Failure is not an option.** Tyree began the emergence of this theme by sharing his learned strategies for dealing with failure. He stated, "failure is not an option." Then he shared that his mother had introduced that success strategy to him when he was quite young.

My mother instilled that in me all the time since I was a baby. I have that tattooed on my arm and it's an acronym right now. FINAO: failure is not an option. No matter what I put my mind to, I know that I will succeed because I just know that quitting is never even in the books for me; everything that I've done in life I have succeeded at, and I am going to keep succeeding until I am on my death bed.

In general, most of the participants also stated that they, too, had in place a limited option protocol that did not allow them to accept failure as a viable alternative in pursuit of college and



life success. Preston shared his experiences in regards to following a no-failure option in his pursuit of college success. When asked if he had additional comments that he would like to include in the research, he, like other participants, stressed the importance of spirituality and personal faith in finding the power to enforce decisions to persist to the point of degree attainment. His comments were,

I think the last thing you should put in there is to remind everybody that they can't do anything without God's grace. To pray and talk to God, and pray definitely while you're in college. And to also remember the word "can't" should not be in your vocabulary. Never say you can't do anything; have the mindset that you can do anything you put your mind to and can do anything people say you can't do.

Avis commented that he believed that one should never give up. Kendall continued the discussion:

I would have to say don't let anybody stop you. The only person that can stop you is yourself so give it your all. Don't let anybody tell you no [you can't]. You can do whatever you want.

Jason's comments also revealed his belief in a no-failure option strategy: "Don't let anybody tell you can't do something."

Darryl's comments also revealed his agreement with the pursuit of college success through a no-failure option strategy: "Experience what you can, whether good or bad; you can always turn that bad thing into a positive thing, no matter what has happened." Duane closed this segment of the discussion by saying that he believed that one should always shoot for the stars and strive to do the best he can.

**Brother to brother.** In this segment of the discussion, the participants began to share their advice for incoming freshmen, African American college males. Landon commented that it is important for freshmen, Black males to get involved in various campus organizations.

The best thing I would say to African American freshman here is just to get involved and explore; don't get bottled up within the first year, don't get overwhelmed. Enjoy your year once you make it something you can enjoy. You make it fun and you [will] be able to focus more on what you are supposed to be going.

In general, most of the advice that the participants offered for incoming, freshmen African American males was in the vein of the no-failure option strategy, Avis's advised,.

What suggestion I have to give to African American freshman is don't give up. Stay at it, try your best stay on it. If it doesn't work the first time, try, try again. It may work [at] one point in time and probably always will.

Kendall's suggestions were the result of what his mentor had taught him: "Closed mouths never get fed. If you need help, go to tutoring sessions; ask your teachers for help." He also advised that the incoming freshman, Black males needed to help look for their resources and use those resources to their advantage my suggestions would have to be the same words my mentor said all the time.

Jason's advice reiterated the participants' general theme of the need to break old habits in order to achieve and succeed in college as well as in life. He said that incoming freshman, African American males needed to be careful not to become intimate with minors on campus. He warned that it could lead to serious legal repercussions as well as negative implications for many years of life. Billy's advice was that incoming freshmen needed to know themselves and be at peace with themselves before entering college. He went on to voice that it would protect the

freshmen males from being pressured to put themselves in compromising positions. Darryl said that it was crucial for incoming freshmen, African American males to understand that everything will be completely new for them; therefore, they would need to get to know people and experience things. He added that whatever they learn will mold them and change them for the better. Duane's advice turned to the importance of finding mentors and role models in order to experience college success and achievement.

For incoming freshmen I would just tell them to look at who the role models are: See what they're doing right; see what they're doing wrong so they'll know all the right things to do to become like the role models or even better than the role models.

Tyree concluded the focus interview comments by advising freshman, African American males to exercise and keep personal control in order to experience the college success that is desired.

Some suggestions I would give to incoming freshmen just coming here is to stay focused, come with your focus in the right places. If you come in with a focus on all the parties, trying to hang out with all the females, all the Greeks, you're not going to be here for long and you're not going to be able to do what you want. Some people just come [to college] to join organizations, [such as] Greek letter organizations and are not able to do that because they don't have the grades. They don't come back and end up at a community college somewhere. Focus on academics first; it will be amazing how everything else falls into place.

### **Summary**

The data from the transcripts of the focus group interviews of eight African American college males revealed five major themes that emerged as influential factors in the college

experiences of the majority of these Black males: (a) the impact of being perceived as leaders; (b) the influence of possessing a perception of being a burden of hope for significant others; (c) the impact of a decision to overcome personal habits that could threaten achievement and college success; (d) the influence of having success connections with family, mentors, and campus organizations, whether cultural or otherwise; and (e) the influence of possessing a no-failure option college success strategy.

The next two closing chapters reveal the implications of these findings and suggestions for future research studies.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

#### **Discussion**

The primary discussion in Chapter 5 is on the findings of my results after analysis of the data and relating these findings to the literature review. Once I organized the results of this study, I revisited the research question in relationship to the five major themes and fourteen sub-themes and discovered some claims were in harmony with the literature. In the following pages I will address how the research question and sub-questions lived through the literature and my analyses and defend the themes that emerged. Chapter 6 will provide implications and suggestions for African American males coming to college and make recommendations for future research.

The participants of the focus group, like a great number of African American males in higher education, faced formidable challenges in their persistence to the point of attainment of degrees (Washington, 2002). The intent of this research was to describe the higher education experiences of eight African American males in order to ascertain what major and minor themes could contribute to the literature concerning African American male transition and retention at postsecondary institutions.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Of the eight African American males who composed the focus group, four were entering into their second semester of their college transition, three were moving through their college

transition, and one was at the end of the college transition. The nature of the transition was multi-faceted; although all of the participants were in college transition, each of them was also going through different transitions at the same time: change in behavior, change in attitude and perception, change in economics, change in relationships, change in responsibility, change in academics, and, in many ways, a change in life itself. Some of the participants described their transition as positive, such as Preston, but others portrayed it as challenging and initially rocky, as Avis did; however, none of the participants described his college transition as dreaded. With family encouragement, all voluntarily entered into college and expressed desires to achieve and succeed.

The major question this study was: What are the experiences for African American males in college? I examined the transcripts from the focus group interviews of eight African American males-two freshmen, two sophomores, one junior, and one senior-who were full-time students enrolled at a Midwestern university. The transcripts of this focus group revealed five major themes as influential factors in the participants' experiences regarding achievement and college success. The themes are: (a) the impact of being perceived as leaders; (b) the influence of having the perception of being a burden of hope for significant others; (c) the impact of a decision to overcome personal habits that could threaten achievement and college success; (d) the influence of having successful connections with family, mentors, and campus organizations, whether cultural or otherwise; and (e) the influence of possessing a "no-failure option" college success strategy. Each of these themes is summarized in the following pages.

### **Theme 1: Targeted Leadership**

The emergence of Targeted Leadership as a major theme surprised me; however, when it is viewed through the lens of transition literature, it becomes evident that there is much support

for the participants' perceptions. The literature states that the most elementary form of mattering is "the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). The majority of the participants' lived college transition experiences included being targeted for leadership. They talked about incidents of being approached by other students for advice, guidance, and help. Many expressed surprise at being cast in leadership roles, which intensified their desires to achieve and succeed in college. Literature substantiates that when one holds a perception of importance and mattering, it makes transition more successful (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

The participants also experienced an increase in their perceived personal capital, enabling them to use their sense of value as empowerment for pursuing a successful transition. Not only did many participants remark that being needed by their peers increased their sense of importance, but realizing that their families placing a high value on their college success also caused their perceived importance to grow significantly. This is consistent with literature that reveals how African American males who perceive a personal sense of mattering experience greater transition, persistence, and retention (Schlossberg, 1989).

## **Theme 2: Burden of Hope**

In relationship to perceptions of being a Burden of Hope, the majority of the participants expressed how their college enrollment and transition personified them as a burden of hope for significant people in their lives. Many of the members of the focus group stated that the belief people who mattered to them needed them to succeed actually strengthened their desire to achieve and succeed in college. Since many, if not most, young African American males have more lived experiences with marginality than mattering, they enter college transitions with submerged assets that are covered up by marginalization. Beliefs of mattering and importance to

others are assets that aid transition and college success. The participants' perceptions of being burdens of hope for others became assets in the transition process. This is consistent with the literature regarding ego-extension, which purports that the feeling that someone else will be proud of what one does is an important component of successful transition and success (Schlossberg, 1989).

I was very surprised at the emergence of Burden of Hope as a major theme. The participants' comments revealed a strong correlation regarding their perceptions of significant others being dependent on their college success and their actual achievement. Preston said that he feels that he is a burden of hope for his brother and nephew. He stated that he didn't realize how important his succeeding in college was until he had a conversation with his brother prior to his brother's wedding and discovered that his brother decided to return to college because he was inspired by Preston's college success. The majority of the participants' perceptions of themselves as a burden of hope for their families created unwritten yet heart-felt obligations to achieve and succeed. The literature reports that affection and affirmation strengthens college transition; however, most of the studies have been from the perspective of receiving affection and affirmation, as opposed to giving it, which is the essence of the major theme of Burden of Hope (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

If receiving help and assistance is documented in literature as strengthening transition, then it is possible that, as in the case of some participant experiences, perceptions of *giving* help and assistance to one's family through one's college success is also a form of affirmation that consequently can bring about increased achievement and success. It is interesting to note that in the same regard, many of the participants spoke of family support in a rare sense of the term, in that many of their lived experiences consisted of them noticing that their families were being



helped and assisted simply by them succeeding in college even before they graduate from college.

### **Theme 3: Overcome Me**

High school graduates entering college are not sure of their new identities; the final phase of their transition may include embracing an identity that is not related to their high school roles and relationships that had identified them in high school (Schlossberg, 1989). Due to one participant's comments, the majority of the other members of the focus group began to share their experiences that caused them to realize that they needed to overcome habits formed in their pre-college years in order to achieve college success. Billy remarked that he had some bad experiences coming into college and realized that he could not continue to exhibit some of the bad habits that he had before entering college. He said that some of the habits were hard to break, but he came to a point where he wanted to change because he saw that he needed to change. Avis added to that statement, saying that he started out trying to do the same things he did in high school, but he discovered that they didn't work in college. As a result, he got in a little trouble but then decided to change and was able to pick himself back up.

These sentiments are supported by the literature, reporting that a successful transition, whether college or otherwise, is influenced by the assets and liabilities that the one in transition brings with him. The participants' desire to overcome habits inhibiting their college transition was basically a decision to minimize liabilities and maximize their assets. The emergence of Overcome Me as a major theme was also a surprise to me. The participants began to talk about the personal habits that they needed to overcome in order to achieve college success. After rereading the focus group's interview transcripts many times, it became apparent that the

message in overcoming bad habits was actually a decision to minimize their liabilities and maximize their greater assets.

There was a consensus among the participants that they needed control over their college transition in order to reach the success that they desired. This is consistent with literature in that those in transition who believe that they have greater control over their lives tend to experience greater achievement and academic success (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995). The fact that the participants were able to describe what they believed was the essence of college success was evidence of the fact that they were consciously controlling their pursuit toward realization of the achievement that they desired.

#### **Theme 4: Success Connections**

The emergence of Success Connections as a major theme did not come as a surprise to me because the literature consistently reported a connection between college involvement and college success (Schlossberg et al., 1989). The vast majority of the participants talked about the influence of various connections or relationships in terms of their college transition experiences. They expressed beliefs regarding their involvement and connections being important variables to achieving desired college success. The primary connections that they spoke about were family connections, mentor connections, college or institutional connections, and college or institutional disconnections. Avis saw institutional success connections that were not working to help his college transition; therefore, instead of leaving the power for his success in others' hands, he decided to disconnect his dependence on those (professors) and tap into his own belief and power to achieve and succeed. Avis stated that although he had some teachers whose teaching didn't provide him with what he needed to be successful, he didn't allow that to stop him but chose to hold himself responsible for his success. He decided that it was he who had the power to

make it difficult for himself to succeed. Tyree also expressed a similar resolve when he stated that as a student, he holds both the instructor and himself accountable for his college success, but believes that, ultimately, it is his responsibility to succeed in college. These experiences are supported by the literature, which purports that having supports from family, friends, co-workers, and supervisors strengthen successful transition. Inherent in these connections were the participants' sense of being connected with their own pursuit of successful transition by being able to describe what they believe college success in one's freshman year might look like.

The fact that all of them were able to paint a picture of their perceptions of college success with little difficulty could account for the fact that all of them had achieved a degree of successful transition, whether it be one semester or several semesters. This provides some overlap with the theme of *Overcome Me*, in which a vision is clearly articulated. They have an idea of what it will look like when they have reached their goals.

The majority of the participants indicated that their mentor connections also influenced their college transition and success. Some of the mentors were administrators, faculty, staff, other adults, and/or upper classmen. The majority of the participants indicated that the primary institutional hindrances to their college success were some professors. They voiced perceptions of marginalization in their relationships with some of their instructors, which negatively influenced their college transition. Literature is very clear that marginalization is a greater threat to successful transition when the student has a history of cultural and societal marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989). The literature is very clear when Schlossberg (1989) stated that marginalized students will not succeed unless they perceive that they have importance to someone.

The participants' ability to describe college success with little effort indicated that they had a degree of intimacy with it. Also, being able to describe it gave them added resources and affirmed the ultimate control for pursuing it because they had conceptualized college success and removed the abstractness from it, which was another affirmation of having control of their college transition. Literature states that the creation of educational environments that clearly indicate that all students matter will influence them to have greater involvement, which in turn will bring about greater success (Astin, 1994).

### **Theme 5: Limited Options**

As the result of one of the participants sharing the transition strategies that were employed in order to experience college achievement and success, the other participants began to talk about also possessing retention and persistence strategies that were anchored on a foundation of some kind of no-failure option. The majority of them had made decisions to remove any quitting options from their psychs in regards to their postsecondary education experiences. This was either due to their families' influence or their own experiences. In general, most of the participants indicated that they had limited options in regard to leaving college until their degree was achieved.

The data from the transcripts revealed that a no-failure college success strategy was pivotal in their college transition. The participants' adoption of "failure is not an option" was part of their strategy for coping with their college transition. It was also a statement of self-confidence in reference to their perceived ability to succeed and achieve. Literature indicates that psychological resources, such as self-efficacy, confidence, and optimism concerning college transition, will influence actual achievement and college success (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

### Connecting Themes to Schlossberg's Transition Theory

After reading through the focus group interview transcripts several times, I was able to identify the major themes that emerged and made some connections with the literature, especially in regard to transition theory. Since the influence of *perceptions of importance and non-importance* emerged in each of the themes, it is important to reference Schlossberg's (1989) transition model, a mattering and marginality theory, to add insight into which factors hold the greatest promise for improving African American male transition, retention, and persistence at institutions of higher learning. Schlossberg explained how a transition may be any event or non-event which brings about significant change in one's life. Her studies revealed that when perceptions of non-importance or marginality exist, it makes transition difficult. The individual's effectiveness in coping and maximizing transition is dependent on what Schlossberg calls their assets and liabilities.

These assets and liabilities support the findings of the data in this study regarding the participants' lived experiences of being perceived as leaders. Most of the participants expressed how being perceived as leaders, whether in giving direction to a group or offering help on an individual basis, positively influenced their desire to succeed in college. Tyree stated that the fact that people on campus notice him as a good example to follow and seek him out for information and guidance makes him feel important. Tyree went on to say that he didn't know how or why it happened, but people simply started seeking him out for assistance, and it caused him to feel important. Billy said that being a person who friends feel that they can come to and receive help makes him feel important. Kendall stated that he believes that the work he did in organizing peaceful protests on campus inspired others and has made him feel better about himself. The majority of the participants reflected on experiences where they were sought out by others for

help, guidance, and support, which in turn positively influenced their desire to achieve and succeed in college. None of the participants were discouraged by being targeted or not targeted for leadership. However, many did express a sense of personal importance that resulted from perceptions that others not only needed their help, but desired it. This finding is supported by the literature which describes students who perceive that they matter enjoy greater college transition success than those who battle perceptions of marginality (Schlossberg, 1989).

By categorizing each of these themes in one of Schlossberg's (1995) four Ss, it is possible to understand the dynamics of perceptions of mattering and marginality in strengthening college transition, retention, and persistence for African American males. Schlossberg (1989) revealed that mattering and marginality do influence transition, which in turn influences retention and persistence. Since research has revealed that African American males who perceive a personal sense of mattering to the institution of higher learning experience greater transition, persistence, and retention (Schlossberg, 1989), it is important to recognize how mattering and marginality have a comprehensive impact—affecting most aspects of their lives that in turn can improve overall retention and persistence.

Schlossberg's et al.(1995) four major sets of factors have been revealed to strengthen transition, which in turn will strengthen persistence and retention. Referred to as the four Ss, they are situation, self, support, and strategies. Summers (2002) noted that perception is of great importance in assessing the influence of Schlossberg's four Ss. The student's perception of their lived experiences regarding transition at institutions of higher learning determine whether Schlossberg's four Ss will be “assets or liabilities” (Summer, 2002).

**Research Sub-Questions 1 and 2.** Using questions related to Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory four Ss, situation, self, support, and strategies, Research Sub-Questions 1 and 2

attempted to delve into how African American males perceive their college transition experiences—how perceptions of personal importance were part of those experiences that worked to influence their transition success. These questions examined participants' perceptions of their college transition along with the experiences that caused them to perceive personal importance and identify the nature of the transition. For all focus group interview participants, the major aspects of the situation were the same: four were beginning transition in college, three were moving through the college transition, and one was in the end of the college transition. For most, the transition was challenging; for some it was described as basically positive. By examining their responses, I was able to ascertain by their description of their situations what was happening, if the timing was conducive for the transition, whether role changes had to take place, what stressors were present, and how the participants were affected by the transition process (Evans et al., 1998).

In general, all eight participants' reflections indicated that although there was agreement concerning the transition in the emergence of the five major themes, none of their transition experiences was exactly alike. For some, their transition was characterized by multi-faceted transitions: change in behavior, change in achievement expectations, change in perceptions, change in relationships, change in economics, and for some, a total life change.

**Research Sub-Questions 5 and 7.** Using questions related to Schlossberg et al., (1995) four Ss: Research Sub-Questions 5 and 7 attempted to ascertain whether participants were coping with the transition. College transition is not the same for everyone, since each person has unique characteristics along with different experiences and perceptions of the transition, levels of support, and coping strategies (Schlossberg, 1981). The self variable looks at what kinds of strengths the participants brought to the transition, along with whether they perceived they had

viable options in order to effectively cope with the transition. The self variable also looked at whether the participants were optimistic and if their personal characteristics helped frame their perceptions. Schlossberg (1981) separated situation and self (for coping), but the focus group interviews revealed a connection between the two, especially in the reoccurring perception of personal importance and its influence on the participants' college success and achievement. The self variable also looks at whether participants had psychological resources, such as ego development, self-efficacy, optimism, socio-economic status, commitment, values, spirituality, and resiliency, that could be useful in effectively coping with their college transition.

**Research Sub-Questions 3, 4, and 6.** Research Sub-Questions 3, 4, and 6 looked at how the participants perceived the idea of supports in regard to their college transition. These questions examined what supports the participants experienced that strengthened their success and achievement, along with identifying possible ways the university could have helped them experience greater college success. Finally, these questions looked at what experiences were perceived as attempts by the university to hinder successful college transition.

The support variable, Schlossberg et al., (1995) through these questions, was investigated to examine not only the family supports but also any campus connections that the participants participated in. A success connection in the form of an accountability partner was a sub-theme that emerged from the focus group transcripts. It was voiced by four of the eight participants and holds promise of being a practical way to increase achievement and success for Black college males. Schlossberg (1989) stated that a sense of not fitting in can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression. Schlossberg reported that for minority groups, these feelings can be permanent conditions. Clash of institutional and student characteristics, such as race and gender can cause perceptions of alienation and disconnection, questioning ability and self-worth, and



feelings of inferiority. Astin's (1994) research stressed how campus student involvement is crucial to achievement and success. He emphasized that African American males, as well as other students of color, often feel marginalized on predominantly White campuses. Thus, an accountability partner, someone who is there to check on you, especially during stressful times, is helpful.

The support variable addresses the social support provided not only at the university but also from the family and other significant relationships, such as mentors and campus racial/cultural groups and organizations. It also looks at campus connections that in actuality may have felt like disconnections in that they are actually viewed as hindrances to the participants' college transition and success (Schlossberg, 1989).

**Research Sub-Question 8.** Research Sub-Question 8 attempted to find out what coping strategies are employed by African American college males. This strategy variable focuses on the coping modes participants used, such as information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, or intra-psychic behavior (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Information seeking is trying to understand the context of the situation. Direct action is defined as taking steps to confront the situation. Inhibition is blocking or suppressing the situation, and intra-psychic (which is an attitude that allows forward progress to be realized in the transition), is a mindset that is used to resolve problems that arise, such as denial, wishful thinking, and misrepresentation (Astin, 1994).

This chapter was designed to help the reader understand the development of the major themes and how they related to the relevant literature. Alignment was made between Schlossberg's work and the findings of this study. Chapter 6 will provide implications these

findings may have for African American success in university settings along with recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS

#### **General Implications for Practice**

Although Schlossberg's (1981) transition model has been used to address college transition in previous studies, this study found its application useful to address the transition dilemmas of college African American males. It is obvious from the transcripts of the focus interviews that Schlossberg's transition theory has enormous implications for providing conditions to change the dismal success that characterizes the college transition of the vast number of African American males.

Hopefully, what makes this research valuable is that it can potentially impact an entire paradigm by which postsecondary education deals with African American college males, who have been referred to as the "lost boys of American higher education" (Harvey, 2010, p. 242). Traditionally, it seems colleges and universities deal with Black college males from a deficit mindset by providing remedial resources designed to help college transition, retention, and persistence. Some of the major themes that emerged from this study call for empowering African American college males from the beginning of their college transition with the opportunity to achieve and succeed through alternative mindsets.

As a result of the focus groups interview, I arrived at the following implications and recommendations, applicable to African American male college students, university leadership,

departments of student affairs, university faculty, and campus student groups. These implications and recommendations are derived from patterns that emerged from eight African American males' college experiences at a Midwestern university.

### **Implications for African American Male College Students**

1. The data from the focus group interview suggest that African American males experience greater transition success when they are more obligation-minded than benefit-minded. The majority of the focus group was quite clear that holding perceptions of being burdens of hope for significant others actually strengthened their own college achievement and success. The literature suggests that because dependence is one of the five forms of mattering, perceptions of being needed actually produce greater transition success (Schlossberg, 1989).
2. The African American college males that I interviewed expressed both negative and positive experiences in their college transition. The participants suggested that a relationship should be formed with residential advisors early in the freshman year so that Black males can form needed connections with resources and campus organization along with mentors who are needed to experience successful college transition. The data suggest that perceptions of support from those who serve as mentors can actually produce a sense of importance, which in turn strengthens college transition (Schlossberg, 1989).
3. The focus group transcripts also indicate that much of African American male college success is associated with involvement in cultural and racial activities as well as other campus organizations. The literature suggests that the creation of environments that communicate to students *their own importance* help to facilitate increased student

- involvement, which in turn brings about greater achievement and success (Astin, 1984).
4. African American college males need to seek out opportunities to be involved in leadership roles on campus, such as volunteering for campus boards, tutoring, or other activities that allow a Black male's leadership quotient to grow. Part and parcel is that African American college males need to understand that needed resources to achieve and succeed in postsecondary education must be allowed to flow in both directions (toward the student and from the student), so that the experiences of perceived leadership can bring about a sense of personal importance, which the literature purports will generate college achievement and success. Even the most elementary form of mattering can elicit the feeling that one commands the interest and attention of another person (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Literature further suggests that college students who hold perceptions of mattering to an advisor or university experience greater engagement in their learning (Schlossberg, 1989).
  5. African American college males need to break any personal habits that were part of their previous identities and roles in high school that don't serve their pursuit of college achievement and success. The participants were very clear in their lived experiences that revealed how breaking some personal habits helped them experience a more effective college transition. The literature suggests the final successful phase of transition is characterized by embracing identities other than those that connected them to roles and relationships they had prior to their college enrollment. The literature also suggests that those who believe they have control over their lives tend to experience greater achievement and college success (Schlossberg, 1989).

6. Black college males need to passionately enter into a “failure is not an option” strategy to successfully cope with their college transition. It is also suggested that they find an accountability partner whom they can trust to hold them to the fire in their pursuit of college success. The idea of having an accountability partner was voiced by four out of the eight focus group participants. Preston said, “My girlfriend kind of snapped on me and said, look you need to get things together. You are letting me down and I was like, I wanted to cry.” Duane said that he could count on his residential assistant to keep him out of trouble and help him keep his head on and stay on top of his classes. For Tyree, he stated that it was an upperclassman that influenced his success and makes him work harder. Billy remarked that he could count on getting reality checks from two positive, African American women who worked at the campus Black cultural center.
7. Accessing resources is crucial to African American male college success; therefore, Black college males need to be proactive in asking questions and seeking out needed resources early in their college transition.

### **Implications for College Leadership**

1. The data from the African American focus, interviews firmly indicate that when Black college males are targeted for campus leadership opportunities, it communicates personal importance, which in turn strengthens college transition (Schlossberg, 1989). Therefore, it is highly recommended that new ideas are needed in defining what resources African American males need in order to succeed in postsecondary education. Traditionally, some Black college males have been targeted to receive leadership help and assistance from others, whether tutoring, guidance, or

- other forms of assistance. It is highly recommended that targeting more of them with opportunities to *give* assistance, to help others, also be included in the cadre of resources available to them. The perception that one's efforts are needed and appreciated by others all work together to create perceptions of importance and mattering that in turn create greater college achievement and success (Schlossberg, 1989).
2. This study can be a valuable aid to college leadership in understanding what the college transition experiences are for African American college males. It was clear from the interview that colleges need to do a better job of centralizing needed resources so that all students, including Black college males, can easily access them.
  3. It is clear that residential advisors are in many cases the first mentors that incoming African American college males form relationships with. Therefore, it is recommended that, while emphasizing diversity in all areas of the campus, special attention to diversity within the staff of residential advisors is important. Literature reports that when African American males enter college, they bring along with them a history of personal marginalization (Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T., 2000). Black males can feel comfortable in connecting with the campus by forming immediate relationships with ones who they believe and can identify with to reduce the feeling of marginalization.

### **Student Affairs Leadership**

1. This study is a tool that a university can use to strengthen its successful connections with African American college males. Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering can be a valuable asset in helping college student affairs leaders assist African American

- college males in their transition experiences. Student affairs staff can be instrumental in facilitating the relationships new students have with successful upperclassmen.
2. The data from the focus group interview are consistent with the literature, stressing how postsecondary institutions need to do a better job of communicating importance to all students, especially those with a history of marginalization. Literature goes on to state how perceptions of importance are precursors to students deciding to be involved in campus organizations and activities, which in turn can strengthen college achievement and success (Schlossberg, 1989). Student affairs staff can help new students make the connections with supporting organizations.
  3. The data from the focus interviews suggest that personnel in student affairs need to provide counseling services targeted at assisting and guiding role changes, and developing new behavior patterns for African American college males. This will help the students feel a sense of control in their pursuit of college achievement and success and thereby experience greater college transition, retention and persistence (Schlossberg, 1989).

### **Faculty Members**

1. The data from the focus group interview indicate that faculty must seek awareness and training in regards as to how to better demonstrate and model support for the educational success for African American college males. None of the participants indicated that they wanted instructors to make excuses for them, but to respect them and their ability and desire to learn and achieve. The majority of the participants believed that both instructors and students should be held accountable for the students' success; however, they overwhelmingly expressed that instructor aloofness



and hostility actually created an institutional roadblock to Black male's successful college transition. This is in harmony with literature that reports how African American male achievement, as well as that of other minorities in college, can be either helped or hindered by faculty and staff (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

### **Campus Groups and Organizations**

1. The focus group interviews demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of the participants believed that there was a strong connection between their college success and their connections with cultural and racial campus groups, along with other campus organizations. Therefore, it is recommended that campus groups reach out to African American males early in their transition so that they can optimize the transition resources that these organizations offer. This is consistent with the literature which strongly states student involvement on campus is connected with college achievement and success (Astin, 1994).
2. Rituals and ceremonies emerged from the African American college males focus group interview as a structure to support African American male transition success. Campus groups can play a tremendous role in providing these events. It is therefore recommended that greater attention should be paid to celebrating transition successes in ceremonies scheduled routinely at strategic times, especially in the first and second years of college. The rituals and ceremonies for Duane were fraternity events that he said made him feel as if he were becoming a better person. Kendall, on the other hand, not only participated in a ceremony and ritual, but his sense of importance doubly grew from having the opportunity to actually organize it. He said, "An experience that made me feel important was when I had organized a peaceful protest

- around campus. We did sit-ins; instead of just sitting there, we actually studied to show that as upperclassmen, we made it to the next level [of college success] and that we wanted to show others that they needed to study before finals.” The literature suggests that rituals and ceremonies such as those described by Duane and Kendall can have a significant influence on student transition (Schlossberg, 1989).
3. It is important to note the emergence of spirituality and Black Greek organizations as important assets the participants cited in support of their decision to persist to the point of attainment of their degrees. Accordingly, it is recommended that the university, through campus groups or other venues, encourage and support opportunities for students to practice their personal faith on campus, which some students attributed as a major component of their willpower to achieve transition, retention, and persistence. It is also recommended that Black Greek organizations continue to be supported and encouraged by the university’s administration in order for African American males to continue to benefit from the rich legacy of one of the few historical bastions of Black male college achievement and success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the focus group interview, major themes were developed. These themes will inform future research in areas relative to African American male college transition, retention, and persistence, providing special emphasis on the influence of mattering and perceived leadership ability. This study examined the experiences of eight African American males at one Midwestern university. The use of this design is recommended for future research at a predominantly Black college or a PWI in a different region of the country. Schlossberg’s (1989) transition theory was used to create the research questions, which in turn helped to frame the

implications. Other theories exist that might inform an alternative route toward discovering new supports for African American males college experiences.

Specifically, the emergence of the major theme of Targeted Leadership is something that colleges and universities cannot afford to ignore. In our benevolence, according to the focus group interviews we may have overlooked a valuable resource that holds serious promise for improving the dismal state of African American male college transition, retention, and persistence. Historical paradigms have assigned the role of receiver or consumer of resources to African American college males, but according to the data from my study, it would be advisable to take a closer look at also ascribing the role of producer and giver of resources to African American college males. Perhaps future studies could attempt to reveal whether this is true by investigating those institutions who espouse to provide these opportunities.

The Burden of Hope theme also caught my attention because it holds promise of creating new transitioning power for African American college males. If that obligation-minded ethos is cultivated by colleges, as the focus group interview suggested, it can be an additional effective tool for Black male college achievement and success.

In conclusion, what makes this research study valuable is that it holds potential of changing institutional practice in practical, meaningful ways. Schlossberg's model has been used in the past to address college transition for other groups; hopefully, this work has added to its promise in comprehensively addressing African American males' college transition.

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## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT



Department of  
Educational Leadership

Terre Haute, Indiana 47809  
812-237-2900

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### WALKING ON WATER: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE FRESHMEN MASTERING TRANSITION FOR THE PURPOSE OF RETENTION AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Oscar Underwood and Steve Gruenert from the Education, Leadership, and Administration Foundations Department at Indiana State University. This research study is being conducted as part of a dissertation project. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because your experiences as a student in higher education could be of benefit to the research study.

#### • PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to identify factors that could positively influence transition, retention, and persistence for African American males at institutions of higher learning.

#### • PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a , face –to- face, focus group interview of six participants with the principal researcher. The interview session should be about one hour in length. The interview will be audiotaped in order to truly capture the essence and meaning of your lived experiences. The interview will be held on campus at a location of the participants' choosing. You will be asked to comment on your college experiences during your freshman year. In order to protect your identity, you will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in all reporting of your comments.

#### • POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Although, no potential risks are anticipated for you if you agree to participate in the study, it is understood that your discussion of your lived experiences could possibly trigger some emotionality. If that occurs, you will have the freedom to excuse yourself from the interview, take time to compose yourself, or request to move on to the next question, without any consequences.

## • POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There are no personal benefits to you apart from knowing that the results of the study will be used to expand on the literature and knowledge of what could possibly improve African American transition and retention at institutions of higher education.

## • CONFIDENTIALITY

As part of this research study, your interview will be audiotaped. After your responses are transcribed, you will have an opportunity to read them and make any corrections that you deem necessary. None of your responses will be published without your written approval. Each interview will consist of the same group of 8 questions:

1. What are your experiences as an African American male freshman at this university?
2. Have any experiences made you feel important or not important? Explain.
3. What supports did you experience that strengthened your success and achievement?
4. In what ways could the university have helped you experience greater success on campus?
5. How would you describe "success" for a first-year student?
6. In what ways did the university make your success more difficult?
7. What experiences did you have prior to coming to college that influenced your success?
8. What suggestions would you give incoming African American freshmen at this university?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning you a pseudonym that will be used in all reporting of your comments. However, since the interviews will take place in a focus group, to facilitate confidentiality between members, all participants must agree to maintain confidentiality concerning the information shared in the interview. All records will be kept private. Data will be kept on audiotape, and fully transcribed. The original audiotapes will be kept for a period of 3 years in a locked file in the researcher's home in a place where only the researcher has access to. Transcriptions of the discussions will be kept on a personal computer to which only the researcher has access for a period of 3 years after completion of the research. Any published report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be personally identified. Your responses will truly be valuable to the understanding and improving of African American male retention and persistence at institutions of higher education. It is hoped that through your responses, critical themes or factors will be identified that can be of valuable use in helping to increase the graduation numbers for African American males and other minorities at colleges and universities.

Since your participation will be part of a focus group, the researcher cannot protect the confidentiality of the participants to each other. By virtue of your agreement to be part of the focus group, you agree to keep the participants and each of their comments confidential.

## • PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

## • IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact the principal investigator: Oscar Underwood at (260) 418-1747; address: 11323 Twin Creeks Drive, Fort Wayne, IN. 46845; email: [oscarfavor@aol.com](mailto:oscarfavor@aol.com). You may also contact the faculty sponsor: Steve Gruenert at (812)237-2902; address: Department of Educational Leadership, Bayh College of Education, Room 211G; office UH317A; Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN. 47809; email: [steve.gruenert@indstate.edu](mailto:steve.gruenert@indstate.edu).

## SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at [irb@indstate.edu](mailto:irb@indstate.edu). You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

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I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

---

*Leave this amount of space  
for IRB approval stamp (unless  
you plan to include the approval  
information in the text of the ICD)*

#### APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT E-MAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

A focus group is being recruited by Oscar Underwood and Steve Gruenert as part of a dissertation project. You are being asked to share your perceptions of your freshman or sophomore college experiences. The focus group will meet at the African American Cultural Center, which is located at 301 North 8<sup>th</sup> Street. date is February 6, 2012 at 6:00- 7:15 p.m. A complementary dinner will be served. If interested, please contact Oscar Underwood at 260-418-1747 or email: [oscarfavor@aol.com](mailto:oscarfavor@aol.com).

APPENDIX C: REMINDER E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Good Evening:

This is a reminder that the Black Male Focus Group will have its one and only meeting on Monday, February 6, 2012 at 6:00 p.m. at the African American Cultural Center. Dinner will be served. The meeting should end around 7:15 p.m. Please sign and bring the attached form with you to the meeting. I look forward to meeting each of you. Certainly, your participation will be of great value.

Sincerely,

Oscar Underwood

Principle Researcher

[oscarfavor@aol.com](mailto:oscarfavor@aol.com)

## APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC WORKSHEET

## Black Male Focus Group Demographics Questionnaire:

February 6, 2012

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the appropriate response for questions 1-2:

1. Gender:    F            M            Other(Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity:

a. White

b. African American/Black

c. Hispanic

d. Asian

e. Multiracial

f. Other (Please Specify): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Major(s) Minor(s) \_\_\_\_\_ GPA \_\_\_\_\_

5. Expected Graduation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you a first-generation college-student? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What campus, community, or national/local organizations were you involved in  
during your freshman year of college? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What jobs do you currently hold? \_\_\_\_\_

# APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

This agreement made on this date: \_\_\_\_\_, 2012, between Oscar J. Dowdell- Underwood, principal researcher, and \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptionist.

The transcriptionist agrees to operate in the strictest of confidentiality. It is also agreed that the transcriptionist will keep all communication both written and oral regarding the research study conducted by Oscar J. Dowdell-Underwood strictly confidential. This includes, but is not limited to any and all conversations, audio tapes, or e-mails pertaining to the transcription and transcription copies whether electronic or paper.

The transcriptionist further agrees to not duplicate any materials provided or given to the researcher without the consent of the principal researcher, Oscar J. Dowdell-Underwood. This includes, but is not limited to audio tapes and transcriptions. The completed transcriptions will be electronically sent to the principal researcher after completion and also saved on a flash drive. Any e-mail or electronic files pertaining to this study will be warehoused only in the possession of the principal researcher.

By signing this confidentiality agreement, the transcriptionist agrees to these terms outlined in this document, which limits the transcriptionist from sharing any information pertaining obtained from transcriptions of this study with anyone other than the principal researcher, Oscar J. Dowdell-Underwood.

Signature of Transcriptionist: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX F: IRB RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



### Institutional Review Board

Terre Haute, Indiana 47809  
812-237-3092  
Fax 812-237-3092

DATE: January 18, 2012

TO: Oscar Underwood, PH.D.  
FROM: Indiana State University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [281759-3] WALKING ON WATER: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE  
FRESHMAN ENTERING TRANSITION FOR THE PURPOSE OF  
RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE AT A MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY

IRB REFERENCE #: 12-041  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: January 18, 2012  
EXPIRATION DATE: December 2, 2012  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category #6

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this research study. The Indiana State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. The approval for this study expires on December 2, 2012.

Prior to the approval expiration date, if you plan to continue this study you will need to submit a continuation request (Form E) for review and approval by the IRB. Additionally, once you complete your study, you will need to submit the Completion of Activities report (Form G).

This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

**Informed Consent:** Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.

**Reporting of Problems:** All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported. Any problems involving risk to subjects or others, injury or other adverse effects experienced by subjects, and incidents of noncompliance must be reported to the IRB Chairperson or Vice Chairperson via phone or e-mail immediately. Additionally, you must submit Form F electronically to the IRB through IRBNet within 5 working days after first awareness of the problem.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

**Modifications:** Any modifications to this proposed study or to the informed consent form will need to be submitted using Form D for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years. If those research records involve health information, those records must be retained for a minimum of six years.

If you have any questions, please contact Thomas Steiger within IRBNet by clicking on the study title on the "My Projects" screen and the "Send Project Mail" button on the left side of the "New Project Message" screen. I wish you well in completing your study.