Pathways to Success for African American Students at Predominately White Institutions: A Qualitative Study Exploring Academic Readiness

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African American students’ completion of post-secondary education is among the lowest of any other subgroup in higher education (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Broom, 2018; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cokley et al., 2016; Dulabaum, 2016; Karkouti, 2016; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017). This study focuses on addressing this problem by exploring the academic and social experiences of African American college students who persisted at a regional predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwest and secure information that can be used to improve their graduation rates.

To address this issue, this study is designed to explore initiatives and practices that encourage the successful matriculation and graduation of African American students from PWIs (Gross & Berry, 2016). This study utilized individual interviews in a qualitative inquiry to capture the lived experiences and deeper understandings of eight African American students who persisted through to their third year in college.

Additionally, Marcia's theory of academic identity (2002) and critical race theory (CRT) were used as lenses to better explore the experiences of the participants (Hiraldo, 2019). Marcia’s four identity statuses suggests how young adults will cope with adversity, make decisions about a vocational path, and how they negotiate the use of strategies as college
students: Identity Achievement, Identity Moratorium, Identity Foreclosure, and Identity Diffusion.

A critical race perspective highlights the assumption of how race and racism are embedded in the normal practices of higher educational institutions (Harper et al., 2018; Hiraldo, 2019; Patton et al., 2007). Patton (2016) utilizes CRT as a tool to disrupt the academic prose in higher education and offers three propositions to reveal educational inequity and racism/White supremacy. The first proposition argues how higher educational institutions in the United States were built and subsidized on the brutal oppression and enslavement of Africans and North American Indigenous populations. The second proposition states how higher education serves as an example of the complex relationship with race, property, and oppression. Lastly, the third proposition contends higher education is the primary locus where knowledge that shapes government and industry is produced.

I engaged in semi-structured interviews with 8 African American students at a midwestern PWI. Initial analysis of the data yielded three emergent themes: (a) The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support (b) Gaps in the College Support System and (c) The Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College. The family expectations and support theme are comprised of two sub-themes: role model “assignment” and parental influence. Finally, many of the students reflected on their belief they lacked the needed preparation for the rigors of college.

The findings from this research suggest how important it is for practitioners and researchers, whose primary focus are African American students, to continue to design initiatives and research highlighting their stories of success. This positive realignment, in practice and research, is essential to mitigating dismal experiences that hinder the success of African
American students who seek a better life for themselves, and their families, by attending a range of postsecondary institutions.
PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING ACADEMIC READINESS

by

Jeffery L. Jackson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology Western Michigan University August 2022

Doctoral Committee:

Andrea Beach, Ph.D., Chair
Donna Talbot, Ph.D.
Deveta Gardner, Ph.D.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Carl Edward, and Barbara Lee Jackson. They were the impetus for this work. I wish you both were here to celebrate with us. You both served as advocates for higher education, even though neither of you had experienced it. Nevertheless, you were both, especially you dad, wise enough to recognize the positive effects of obtaining a college degree. Your words still “ring” in my mind, “get an education, son.” Well, not only did I get an “education” with the bachelor’s degree, but I also received a master’s degree, and now a doctorate. Thank you both for being my inspiration from above. My pledge is to continue making you proud.

Next, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my heartbeats: my wife, Lois, and my daughters, Drew Amber, and Devyn Marie. Thank you all for always being my biggest supporters, and I am excited to share this accomplishment with you. Being around each of you has always served as motivation during this process and kept me mindful of my “why” as a partner and a father. Thank you!
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There are so many folks to thank that have contributed to me getting to the completion of this dissertation journey. I want to start by thanking God for sustaining me through the process. The Lord says, “I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you” (Psalms 32:8 NLT). What a “pathway” of experiences I have been on to complete this project! The loss of loved ones. The bouts with self-doubt. The challenges associated with new positions. The long tenure of this process from beginning to end. Too many to name. Therefore, I know without God’s guidance on my ordained pathway, I would have fallen victim to an excuse and not have completed this process.

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I also want to thank Dr. DA Louis for his guidance. He was instrumental in keeping me focused and moving along when I was at a low point in this process. Your brotherhood and mentorship were divinely timed. In addition, although she was not a part of my committee, I also want to thank Mary Ebejer for her assistance during this process. Special appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Andrea Beach, Dr. Donna Talbot, and Dr. Deveta Gardner. Your critical feedback has been instrumental in helping me to finish my doctoral journey.

A special thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Andrea Beach. I am forever grateful for your support and encouragement during this process. Your ability to dismantle the dissertation into
manageable parts, as well as to meet me “where” I was comfortable, allowed me to grow and appreciate the process. Thank you for your compassion.

Jeffery L. Jackson
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Student persistence is a perennial issue in higher education (Astin, 1993; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bean, 1981; Farruggia et al., 2018; Sharpiro et al., 2017; Tinto, 2017; Xu & Webber, 2018), with the current average six-year graduation rate for a college student at 63% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, a closer look at the graduation data reveals disparities between students of color and White students. The six-year graduation rate for African American students attending a four-year college is 45.9% (Banks & Dohy, 2019), 55% for Hispanic students (Sharpiro et al., 2017), and 67.2% and 71.7% for European American students and Asian students, respectively (Sharpiro et al., 2017). These statistics reveal the results of a dramatic shift in the American higher educational system that was once void of African Americans and then included them after some social and political forces led to greater access (Duster, 2009).

Historical Perspective of African Americans in Higher Education

African Americans were provided few educational opportunities before the Civil War (Pawlewicz, 2022). The majority of African Americans during this period were enslaved people and therefore were denied learning to read and write. In some areas in the South, it was a criminal offense to teach an African American person to read. With the aid of spirituals and bible lessons facilitated by clergy, about 10% of African Americans in 1865 possessed some ability of literacy (Bly, 2011; Duster, 2009).

Following the Civil War, the momentum for higher education opportunities for African Americans began to build with the establishment of the second Morrill Act of 1890. This act set aside federal funds for states that did not practice discrimination to create separate, but equal,
universities. As a result, the funds were used to established 16 universities dedicated to educating African Americans; these universities later became known as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). During this time, several private HBCUs were also created with the same mission of educating African Americans post slavery, such as Chaney State, Lincoln, and Wilberforce universities (Brown, 2013).

HBCUs had a near monopoly on educating African Americans who were college-educated prior to desegregation legislation (Duster, 2009). However, after the mandates of desegregation brought on by the 1954 case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the enrollment of African Americans in higher education, specifically on the campuses of historically and predominantly White institutions (PWIs), began to increase. By 1973, 75% of African American college students were attending PWIs (Lucas, 2001). While enrollments at PWIs were increasing during this time, HBCUs saw a major decline in their enrollments. Today, African American students continue to enroll at PWIs at increased rates of 89% (Beasley et al., 2016); however, they do not persist and graduate at the same rates as their European American peers, 41.9% vs. 71.7%, respectively (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Problem Statement

The challenges faced by African American students attending college is well documented (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Brooms, 2018; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cokley et al., 2016; Dulabaum, 2016; Karkouti, 2016; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017). The following areas contribute to the entrenched low student persistence rate of African American college students: lack of college preparation (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Lofton & James, 2015; Thompson et al., 2006), lack of sense of belonging (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Grier-Reed et al.,
Lack of college preparation (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Dulabaum, 2016; Lofton & James, 2015; Thompson et al., 2006) serves as a hurdle for African American students when they first arrive at college. They often enter college with memories of a high school experience absent of supportive teachers, void of meaningful early college exposure programs and classes, as well as few mentors who validated their college potential and ensured their successful matriculation by agreeing to remain in their life (Carey, 2019). Consequently, it is not surprising their inability to adjust to the rigors of college can prove to be a stumbling block and result in dropping out of college (Carey, 2019; Duncheon, 2021; Farruggia et al., 2018).

African American students also fail to graduate from college because, once there, they do not feel a sense of belonging on some college campuses because of racism, loneliness, stereotyping, lack of mentors, and feeling isolated (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Brooms, 2018). As a result, some colleges have instituted initiatives in the form of support programs to address areas of need for African American students (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

The achievement gap is another issue with roots in lack of preparation. Some studies have shown helping African American students develop a sense of belonging and positive academic self-efficacy are noncognitive skills that enhance academic performance and can reduce the achievement gap between African American students and their European American and Asian peers (Farruggia et al., 2018). Bridge programs have also demonstrated successful results with improving the persistence and academic success of African American students in college by providing opportunities to take a summer course, learn about college resources, and
become acclimated to campus before fall classes begin (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2013).

Lack of financial resources (Wenz & Yu, 2010) have also proven very detrimental to African American student persistence in college. African American families from low-income communities support the college aspirations of their children (Carey, 2019), but they often lack the knowledge of financial aid options and the ability to negotiate between their capacity to pay for college and their finances. As a result, some African American students miss out on better financial aid options. The stress caused by having to work to both pay for college as well as basic living necessities can prove challenging when balancing the responsibilities of work and demands of attending college and can lead to low achievement or dropping out completely.

**Deficiency Statement**

Despite research describing programs and best practices for helping African American students matriculate and graduate from college, they have not achieved parity with their European American counterparts. So, more work is needed to understand why the gap remains. Also, while Marcia’s theory of academic identity has been around for years, it was originally normed on the experiences of European American students, and no studies have explored its relevancy with African American college students. A study that explores the lived experiences of African American students through the lens of critical race theory (Harper et al., 2018) may provide important insights into African American college students’ persistence at predominately White institutions.

**Significance of the Study**

The rich information gleaned from African American students having the capacity to negotiate enormous odds before making it to college (Broh, 2002) and their wherewithal to not
opt out of college are important to the African American community, as well as to members of the academy (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Noble et al., 2008; Terenzini, 1987; Tinto, 1993). Understanding African American students’ lived experiences as seen through the lens of critical race theory (Hiraldo, 2019) and verifying the utility of Marcia’s academic identity theory (1993) could help improve student persistence and graduation rates for future African American college students. The present study could help to mitigate obstacles that prevent the persistence and graduation of African American students attending institutions of higher learning (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Moreover, the lived experiences and voices of the participants may reveal information that policymakers and higher educational leaders can use to shape institutional practices or “policy levers” that promote the creation of adequate financial aid support, supportive environments that curtail occurrences of racial discrimination, and related initiatives that encourage the successful matriculation and graduation of African American students from institutions of higher learning (Gross & Berry, 2016).

Lastly, exploring African American students’ lived experiences may offer new insights for assisting African American students admitted to universities. It is hoped that findings from the present study may benefit not just undergraduate African American students, but all students who need institutional resources to help them persist.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to explore the academic and social experiences of African American college students who persisted at a regional PWI in the Midwest and secure information that can be used to improve graduation rates of future African American students. Marcia’s (1993) academic identity theory and Critical Race Theory (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2018; Hiraldo, 2019; Patton, 2016; Patton et al., 2007) are used as lenses when
looking at themes generated from the lived experiences described by the participants in this study. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do African American students describe their academic and social experiences in college?
2. What influences – positive and negative – do African American students describe that impact their academic and social experiences in college?
3. How relevant is Marcia’s theory of academic identity (2002) to the students’ collegiate experiences? What in their experiences does not fit with Marcia’s identity statuses?

Theoretical Frameworks

The two theories guiding this study are Marcia's theory of academic identity and critical race theory (CRT). Marcia (2002) formulated four identity statuses within which young adults could reside during adolescence. Each identity status suggests how young adults will cope with adversity, make decisions about a vocational path, and how they negotiate the use of strategies as college students. The four identity statuses are: Identity Achievement, Identity Moratorium, Identity Foreclosure, and Identity Diffusion. Identity Achievement refers to young adults who have made a choice from a selection of options and have made a personal commitment to that choice. Identity Moratorium refers to young adults who have explored several options but have not made a commitment to them. Identity Foreclosure refers to young adults who has adopted the goals and beliefs given to them by others, usually parental figures, without exploring options on their own. Identity Diffusion refers to young adults who have made no effort to explore academic and personal options, as such, they lack direction (Was & Isaacson, 2008).

I will also use CRT as a lens for analyzing and interpreting the data. A critical race perspective highlights the assumption of how race and racism are embedded in the normal
practices of higher educational institutions (Hiraldo, 2019; Patton et al., 2007). Furthermore, a CRT lens reflects how historical practices in higher education benefit European American students and does not intentionally benefit the uniqueness of African American and other historically underrepresented minority students. For example, African American students struggle with a sense of belonging and a lack of mentors at PWIs (Graham & McClain, 2019). The CRT states racism is at the core of the canon in higher educational institutions because the curriculum focuses on the European American, Western perspective. Thus, the viewpoints, and images of African American and other students of color are absent from the curriculum and are marginalized on campus (Comeaux et al., 2020; Patton, 2016; Patton et al., 2007).

Despite research describing programs and best practices for helping African American students attend and graduate from college, they have not achieved parity with their European American counterparts (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bir & Myrick, 2015). So, more work is needed. It is my belief that the tenets of CRT in conjunction with Marcia’s academic identity statuses can help illuminate how race and racism in higher education affects the academic experiences and outcomes for African American students and other historically underrepresented minority students (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2018).

**Methods Overview**

This study utilized individual interviews in a qualitative inquiry to capture the lived experiences and deeper understandings of eight African American students who persisted through to their third year in college at a regional PWI in the Midwest. This method was well-suited for this study because it elicits the students’ unique personal perspectives, inviting them to describe in their own words what African American college students experience while attending a regional PWI in the Midwest.
Both critical race theory and Marcia’ (1993) academic identity theory were utilized as lenses to explore what experiences assisted in the students’ persistence and what role, if any, their academic identity played. The eight students were selected based on their scores received from the Academic Inventory Survey taken during their first year in college at a select public PWI in the Midwest. The survey was only offered in an introductory course for first-year students, U100 Career and Life Planning. The survey instrument was a 40-question paper tool that was used to determine the academic identity status of each student. All the students who agreed to participate in this study had persisted to their third year of college, maintaining a 2.0 GPA, or above, and did not have any gaps in their college enrollment at the time of this study.

**Chapter I Conclusion**

The present study examined the academic and social experiences of African American students through the lens of Marcia’s (1993) theory of academic identity and critical race theory (Hiraldo, 2019). Chapter 2 discusses theories of first-year student persistence, research concerning African Americans in higher education, the theoretical frameworks and research studies used to describe academic identity, and critical race theory. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used to secure the findings. Chapter 4 contains the results from the participants’ interviews and the themes that emerged from the data, Chapter 5 provides a discussion surrounding the three main research questions and the research findings and recommendations from this study.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

This study serves as a lens into the academic and social experiences of eight African American college students attending a Midwestern PWI to glean information that may aid in the persistence and graduation of African American college students in the future. This chapter focuses on the existing literature pertaining to the following areas: (a) theories of student persistence, (b) African Americans in higher education, (c) theoretical background of academic identity, and (d) critical race theory.

**Theories of Student Persistence**

During the past 50 years, several researchers have proposed causal models of why students fail to remain in higher education until degree completion (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1981; Boshier, 1972; Braxton et al., 2008; Kalsner, 1991; Kennedy et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pintrich, 2000; Rootman (1973); Spady, 1970; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Tierney, 1992). Although Astin’s Involvement Theory and Tinto’s Interactionist Theory are the two most discussed theories pertaining to student persistence, Spady (1970) is credited as the first to propose a causal model for student persistence.

Spady’s model on student drop-out was significantly influenced by Durkheim’s work on suicide (Godor, 2017). Spady utilized the following two hypotheses from Durkheim’s theory on suicide: a) When people have similar values with a group, they are less likely to commit suicide; and b) When people have the support of friends, they are less likely to commit suicide. Similarly, Spady (1970) believed that when students have shared group values and the support of friends on campus, they are less likely to drop out of college. Spady’s “Explanatory Sociological Model of
the Dropout Process” suggests that shared values, academic potential, and friendship support enhanced social integration, which leads to greater student persistence.

Tinto (1975) was another pioneer in the development of student persistence theory and was greatly influenced by Spady’s research on student persistence. Likewise, Tinto (1993) posited that people who think about committing suicide due to a lack of shared values and integration into society were like students’ who dropped out of college because of poor social and academic integration. Tinto’s (1993) model proposes two primary factors that may contribute to or hinder student persistence: personal characteristics of the student and the student’s interaction with the college environment (Guarino & Hocevar, 2005; Hseih et al., 2007; Tinto, 2017). A student’s personal characteristics include their precollege experiences, both academic and personal, family socioeconomic status, high school GPA, social skills, race, gender, age, study habits, and the educational background of their parents. The students’ interactions in college are a cornerstone of Tinto’s model. Thus, it is crucial for students to engage in the academic and social environments of college. Per Tinto (2017), students can academically integrate into college by committing to an educational goal and desiring to succeed in academia. Tinto (1993 & 2017) likened college performance and persistence to students’ commitment to occupational and educational goals. Tinto (1987 and 2017) believed that most students enter college with aspirations to secure a college degree; however, when freshman students initially experience the rigors of college, how they view themselves and the way they react will play a significant role in determining if they will accomplish their educational goals.

Swail’s (2004) subsequent research affirmed Tinto’s position by establishing a relationship between student persistence and students with commitments to their educational and institutional goals. Other researchers have found that students who have chosen an academic
major tend to be internally motivated and show a high rate of persistence (Berzenski, 2019). In addition to student motivation, a positive view of self is equally important to student persistence (Lane & Lane, 2001).

In 1987, Tinto revised his theory with the inclusion of Van Gennep’s (1960) theory pertaining to “rites of passages.” In Van Gennep’s theory, a rite of passage in life includes the phases of separation, segregation, and incorporation. A “new person” can only manifest itself when the “old person” ritually dies. However, during the rite, candidates who are separated from their familiar surroundings become devoid of their old identity and are reincorporated into society. Likewise, per Tinto’s model of integration, minority students must follow a “rite of passage” to successfully integrate into the collegiate environment. However, Tinto’s position on social integration lacks an application to non-majority students (French, 2017).

Although Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) integration theory continues to be used extensively when discussing student persistence, there are several researchers who question its effectiveness with students of color (Dugan et al., 2017; French, 2017; Museus, 2014; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992). Dugan et al. (2017) suggests, Tinto’s model does not consider the social experiences of all students entering college, instead it largely reflects experiences, cultural norms, and customs that are aligned with majority students. As such, although inadvertently, Tinto’s model may perpetuate a system of cultural bias that is experienced by students of color, especially African American students (Museus, 2014). Consequently, while students from privileged backgrounds may feel well-prepared for the rigors of higher education, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and with less social capital, may experience feelings of inadequacy and intimidation in the college environment (French, 2017). As a result, they may feel less-inclined to get involved in college activities.
Student involvement on campus has shown been to influence student persistence (Dorimé-Williams, 2020; Graham & McClain, 2019). Student involvement is defined by Astin (1993) as the amount of time and energy students put forth in their academic pursuits. Astin (1984) proposes that student involvement has a behavioral component because it is not what students believe or feel, it is what they do that is a true reflection of involvement. A student who has frequent interactions with faculty members, institutional personnel, other students, and who spends a lot of time participating in campus functions is viewed as highly involved. Furthermore, positive outcomes for highly involved students include both personal and intellectual growth and increased student persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Per Astin (1999), students need to be involved in their learning experiences. College programs that encourage students to commit to their learning are essential for students to succeed in college. Astin (1999) suggested program funding and support will be futile and lackluster if student involvement at significant levels is not present. Consequently, it is the amount of quality time and effort of the students’ involvement that will influence student persistence, learning and development.

**African American Students in Higher Education**

This research focuses on the experiences of African American students who persist at a Midwestern university. This is an important area of study because, although enrollment numbers for African American students attending college have never been higher, over the past 20 years they remain disproportionately represented among students who do not graduate. For example, the graduation rate of African American students is 25% lower than that of their White counterparts (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Kaba, 2005). Information gathered from this study can be used to assist with increase student retention and graduation of future African American students
attending higher education institutions. The following sections provide the history of African American students in academia as well as some factors that have compromised their persistence through to graduation.

**Historical Perspective**

African Americans were provided few educational opportunities prior to the Civil War (Pawlewicz, 2022). Following the Civil War, the momentum for educational opportunities for African Americans began to occur with the establishment of the second Morrill Act of 1890, which established 16 universities dedicated to educating African Americans.

These universities later became known as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Several private HBCUs were also founded during this period with the mission of educating African Americans post slavery, such as Chaney State, Lincoln, and Wilberforce universities; these universities were established by missionaries with funding from philanthropic donors (Brown, 2013).

After the mandates of desegregation brought on by the 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the enrollment of African Americans in higher education, specifically on the campuses of historically and predominantly White institutions (PWIs), began to increase. By 1973, 75% of African American students were attending PWIs (Lucas, 2001). As enrollments at PWIs were increasing, HBCUs saw a major decline in their enrollments. Nonetheless, even though enrollment numbers at PWIs were increasing, African American students did not persist and graduate at the same rates as White students (Saddlemire, 1996). Over time, this phenomenon has not changed significantly (Xu & Webber, 2018). The six-year graduation rate for African
American students attending a four-year college is 45.9% (Banks & Dohy, 2019) and 67.2% for European American students (Sharpiro et al., 2017).

Similarly, significant changes have not been made to mitigate hurdles that can prevent African American students from attending and graduating from college. For example, the following paragraphs will discuss how African American college students’ sense of belonging (Cerezo et al., 2015; Graham & McClain, 2019; Karkouti, 2016), college readiness, family support, and socioeconomic status can play in their retention and graduation from college. These items can prevent African American students from attending and graduating from college (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Brooms, 2018; Campbell et al., 2019; Carey, 2019; Cokley et al., 2016; Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

**Sense of Belonging**

Belongingness is defined as whether a student believes she or he belongs in their college environment (Cerezo et al., 2015). The sense of belonging is grounded in Tinto’s (1975) theory of social integration – the ability of students to integrate to the social and academic structures of higher educational institutions. Having the college experience of feeling connected both academically and socially can prove greatly beneficial to any student, especially African American students (Mishra, 2020).

A sense of belonging is especially important to African American college students. Their low numbers in college can lead to a college experience that is less fruitful and short lived due to a lack of shared identity with other students (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Mishra, 2020). According to Cerezo et al. (2015), their low numbers can specifically result in exposure to discriminatory acts and constantly gauging whether they belong on campus. Furthermore, as African American students leave home and transition to college, they leave
behind established relationships and close friends. In similar fashion, institutional leaders must create campus environments that foster opportunities for African American students to build new relationships in their new campus environment to promote student success and graduation (Ishitani, 2016). Unlike European American students who leave college due to academic factors, research by Chavous (2002) revealed that African American students have a greater propensity to drop out of college due to a reduced sense of belonging, in addition to academic factors.

A sense of belonging for African American students can also be affected by their perception of the campus climate at PWIs (Cerezo et al., 2015; Karkouti, 2016; McClain & Perry, 2017). According to Karkouti (2016), PWIs have a history of excluding and limiting access opportunities to African American students, and other socially stigmatized groups. Moreover, when they arrive on campus they are provided with limited opportunities for cross-racial interactions. Therefore, learning outcomes, retention rates, and belongingness for African American students can suffer because they are spending a lot of energy negotiating campus environments. Lastly, when African American students are unsure about their sense of belonging on campus, they can feel uncertain about their social and professional bond to campus. As a result, their motivation to achieve and perform in college is negatively affected, as well as their sense of belonging on campus.

**College Readiness**

College readiness is defined as the level of preparation students need to enroll and succeed in postsecondary schools without remediation (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education estimates that nearly half of current first-year students participate in one or more remedial courses (Chen, 2016). Mathematics, reading, science, and writing are the commonly used course areas to measure college readiness.
College readiness is important because it not only provides students, especially African American, with the necessary skills to succeed in college, but it also can save money because college students do not need to pay for remediation courses (Boatman & Long, 2018). Jimenez et. al (2016) estimate students annually spend about $1.3 billion for remedial courses and associated costs – these costs are a heavy burden for African American students. Unfortunately, until all students can enter college with the necessary skills to succeed, remediation will unevenly affect African American students and remain critical to meet the increasing demands for a skilled labor force (Boatman & Long, 2018).

In addition to remediation courses in college, there are pre-college initiatives designed to help African American and low-income students prepare for college (Turner, 2019). These initiatives are efforts designed to improve college readiness by providing academic preparation and information about college and financial aid, as well as the cultivation of organizational skills and the mental toughness needed for persistence and resiliency in college (Venezia & Jeager, 2013). Some of these initiatives include, but are not limited to, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and the TRIO Programs (i.e., Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Educational Opportunity Centers), which are federally funded programs specifically designed to engage underrepresented populations with the stated college preparation activities (Royster et al., 2015). There is also the Early College High School Initiative, which creates opportunities for underrepresented students to concurrently pursue a high school diploma and earn college credits (Berger et al., 2014).

College readiness should be a viable option for all students, not just for students living in affluent areas (Baum et al., 2013). Unfortunately, that is the case for too many students. However, college readiness initiatives and remediation can be lifelines for students, especially
African American and low-income, who desire to pursue a post-secondary degree. As a result, these students will be able to compete for future jobs that will require education beyond a high school degree.

**Importance of Family**

The support of family is important to the persistence of African American college students attending PWIs. For example, Guiffrida (2005) found that African American students in college were high achievers and valued family support. Conversely, African American students who did not persist listed the lack of family support, both emotional and financial, as primary reasons for their attrition. Not surprisingly, this observation was true for all socioeconomic levels. Whether it was family members paying for tuition and books or extending words of encouragement, African American students who performed better in school reported higher family support as opposed to students who did not have family support. The financial support received from family members allowed the students opportunities to spend more time on academic responsibilities and less time on having to work to support their financial needs.

For many traditional students, the road to college has been paved with the help of their family. Among families in which one or both parents were college educated, family members were assertive when it came to educational opportunities that would prepare their daughter or son for college (Strayhorn, 2008). For example, college educated parents may make sure that their children are enrolled in high school college preparatory classes and engaged in educational experiences that may prepare them for college. Concurrently, these parents tend to form alliances with school counselors and administrators to overcome or prevent the development of any obstacles that may prevent their child from attending and succeeding in college (Strayhorn, 2008).
However, African American students do not have the same advantages because their parents typically are not college educated, lack financing resources and often not able to afford homes in areas with high schools that provide college prep academic resources (Soria, 2018). Consequently, these parents may not be familiar with the plethora of barriers that their students can encounter when applying for college. Several of these barriers may include, but are not limited to: Standardize Test scores, financial aid forms, application processing costs, campus visit procedures, school transcripts, and providing letters of recommendation (Lofton & James, 2015).

**Socioeconomic Status**

An overwhelming number of African Americans are overrepresented among the poor groups in the U.S. and as a result, most travel a road that is less scripted for entry into mainstream society. For example, in 2010, there were 10,675,000 (27.4%) African American people living in poverty, as opposed to 9.9% of European American, 26.6% of Hispanic American, and 12.1% of Asian American (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011). Without a college education, improvement of the socioeconomic status of most members of the African American community will be compromised (Lucas, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). America’s future economy will reflect fewer jobs in mass production of durable goods and more job opportunities that will satisfy the global needs of information and biotechnology services (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). Therefore, a higher education degree can be used as a shield against poverty, as well as a vehicle for preparation in the future high-tech job market (Wells, 2008).

**Identity Development**

A student’s identity status and processing style identifies how a college may react to the rigors of college. Consequently, this knowledge may be a useful tool to increase the student
retention and graduation of college students, especially African American students (Berzonsky, 2011; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009; Berzonsky & Papini, 2014; Kuar & Singh, 2019; Marcia, 1966, 1993). The graduation rates of African American students remain among the lowest of students attending college (Banks & Dohy, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Sharpiro et al., 2017). Although there are interventions that promote student retention and graduation of African American students, the retention rates have remained consistent (Brooms, 2016; Harper et al., 2018; McDougal et al., 2018, Patton, 2016). Consequently, there is still a need to explore more strategies that can be used to increase the student retention and graduation rates of African American students – identity formation may be a useful tool. The following paragraphs will provide you with the development of identity development.

The current discourse pertaining to the importance of identity status is due in large part to Erikson (1963), Marcia (1966, 1993), and Berzonsky (1992, 2011). They each concluded that all students encounter issues when they arrive on campus. Some of these issues include, but are not limited to, establishing new relationships, living and/or studying around strangers, and adjusting to the psychological and academic demands of the academy.

Erikson’s (1968) life-span theory of psychosocial development contends that college students occupy Stage 5 (Identity vs. Confusion) of his eight-stage theory. College students encounter conflicts through information and experiences during each stage and how they manage their experiences will determine if they emerge with a feeling of mastery or inadequacy. During Stage 5, students are participating in personal explorations that lead to the development of personal values, interests, and a coherent set of beliefs (Erikson, 1963). Consequently, first-time students who remain unsure about their self-beliefs may not be ready for the demands of academia. Conversely, students who are exploring and developing a sense of self during Stage 5
will most likely form strong attributes of autonomy and control (Erikson, 1968), giving them the ability to make effective decisions about college, resolve dilemmas, and contend with life’s challenges (Adams et al., 2000; Pratt, 2000).

With Erikson’s theory as the foundation, Marcia (2002) formulated four identity statuses during adolescence. Each identity status suggests “how an individual will cope with not only adversity, but also interactions with others, decisions about a vocational path, and even [their] strategies” as college students (Was & Isaacson, 2008, p. 94). According to Marcia (2002), individuals are in an identity status based on two criteria: crisis and commitment. A crisis is defined as the period when an individual makes a choice regarding a life decision. Commitment refers to the amount of personal effort given to achieve the life decision. Subsequently, *Identity Achievement status* refers to young adults who have made a choice from a selection of options and have made a personal commitment to that choice. *Identity Moratorium* refers to the status of young adults who have explored several options but have not made a commitment to them. *Identity Foreclosure* refers to the status of an individual who has adopted the goals and beliefs given to them by others, usually parental figures, without exploring options on their own. The *Identity Diffusion* status refers to the individual who has made no effort to explore academic and personal options and thus, “has no clear direction” (Was & Isaacson, 2008, p. 94). According to Boyd et al. (2003), college students experiencing Identity Diffusion are less likely to succeed in college. So, it would be helpful to advisors, faculty, and student affairs personnel to know the “academic identity” of incoming freshmen students. With this understanding, resources could be made available to create an environment that would be conducive to the academic, personal, and professional success of all students (Boyd et al., 2003).
Berzonsky (2011) built upon Marcia’s paradigm and created a social-cognitive model of identity processing styles that reflect how students engage in or avoid tasks associated with developing or redeveloping a sense of identity. The following are the identity processing styles: informational oriented, normative oriented, and diffuse/avoidant (Boyd et al., 2003).

Informational oriented students have characteristics like Marcia’s achievement and moratorium statuses; they seek out information and feedback to gain new information about themselves (Soenens et al., 2005). Moreover, research confirms that informational oriented students are open to new experiences and are problem solvers, as well as, vigilant about bringing closure to self-decisions (Berzonsky, 2008).

Normative oriented students have characteristics like Marcia’s foreclosed status. They prefer to deal with identity conflicts by automatically conforming to values, goals, and the belief systems of others (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005). Moreover, normative oriented individuals prefer structure in their lives, despise ambiguity, and favor a foreclosed identity status; even if it is the identity of someone else (Krettenauer, 2005).

Like the others above, diffuse/avoidant oriented individuals are like Marcia’s diffusion status. They employ procrastination and avoidance as coping strategies to self-identity conflicts and life decisions, in addition to exemplifying weak commitments to life choices (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005). For these students, decisions are driven by self-indulgent concerns and influenced by short-term demands (Berzonsky, 2008).

**Results from new and previous studies on identity status**

Newer research does not expand on Marcia’s work. Unlike Marcia's focus on the two essential processes (exploration and commitment) of achieving a mature identity, newer research is looking at different areas related to identity status. For example, Kaur and Singh (2019)
explored the identity formation of 200 Indian undergraduate college students at Punjab University, Chandigarh. The results revealed girls populated the identity achievement and moratorium status more than boys. In addition, the boys in the study scored higher in diffusion identity status as opposed to the girls. According to Kaur and Singh (2019), the results were welcomed because girls in India face more difficulties when attending and completing college. On the other hand, males will need more counseling to cultivate skills to help them become more goal oriented and motivated to complete college. Another study looked at the associations between Berzonsky's styles of identity exploration and the two self-esteem features, level of self-esteem and contingent self-esteem (Soenens et al., 2016). The research results revealed evidence that self-esteem variables have more effects on identity styles as opposed to the opposite. According to Soenens et. al (2016), most have suggested that modeled identity styles influence the outcomes of the two self-esteem features. This study revealed by late adolescence, features of self-esteem were more stable than identity styles and thus were influencing identity styles - and not the opposite.

Previous studies from Lange and Byrd (2002) confirmed that students with an Adult Identity were successful in predicating their class grades in an introductory psychology course. In their study, 288 first-year White students at the University of Canterbury were surveyed in an introductory psychology course regarding their belief of academic success in the stated class. Students who had an Adult Identity more accurately selected their final grade. Equally important, these students utilized more effective study strategies. The students completed 3 assessments. The first assessment tool was the *Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status* questionnaire developed by Adams et al. (1989) to measure the level of Marcia’s identity statuses (1993). The second assessment, *Sense of Coherence*, was created to measure the relationship between a
students’ ability to manage their lives in academia and their identity status (Lange & Byrd, 2002). The final assessment, *Study Strategies*, utilized questions to reveal how students prepare for tests. Similarly, Berzonsky and Kuk (2005) conducted a study to investigate what role identity styles play in how students adapt to college. The definition of identity style in their research study referred to how students make decisions, find solutions to personal problems, and respond to information related to their identity style. The participants in this study consisted of 460 first-term freshmen who attended a medium-sized university located in upstate New York. The ethnicity of the participating students consisted of 87% White, 7% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% Asian, Native American, or other. Students completed the measurements in the following areas: psychosocial development tasks, identity style, and identity commitment. The findings revealed that incoming students with an *informational* identity style persisted in college at a higher rate, as opposed to students with a *normative* identity style or a *diffuse/avoidant* identity style. For example, students with an *informational* identity style recorded high levels of academic autonomy, possessed a clear academic goal, and performed better academically. Although students with a *normative* identity style possessed a clear academic goal, they were less tolerant to diverse views and environments. As a result, these students may flounder in unstructured and diverse academic environments. Lastly, students with a *diffuse-avoidant* style presented poor coping strategies, lack of academic direction and academic autonomy. As a result, they were at the most risk for academic difficulties.

**Critical Race Theory**

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement has roots that can be traced back to the early 1900s when Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Dubois used race as a lens for assessing social inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in their books, *Miseducation of the Negro* and *The Souls
of Black Folk, respectively. Over the years, CRT has transformed into a tool that is used to examine how the legacy of White supremacy and the downgrading of people of color have been created and maintained in America (Khalifa et al., 2013).

CRT emerged from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement which was developed in response to how race and racism are reflected in U.S. jurisprudence (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hiraldo, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Derrick Bell and other scholars, such as, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Crenshaw wrote to highlight the intersection between the social framework and professed ideas of the rule of law and equal protection for all (Crenshaw, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2013).

The use of CRT in higher education provides a similar structure by which researchers can examine the role of race and racism in higher education as well as how higher education institutions support the dominance of Whiteness and produce a society that is fundamentally unequal (Hiraldo, 2019). In similar fashion, CRT is being used as a lens for this study. A critical race perspective highlights the assumption that race and racism are embedded in the normal practices of higher education institutions (Harper et al., 2018; Hiraldo, 2019; Patton et al., 2007). Furthermore, a CRT lens will provide a view of how historical practices in higher education were created benefitting European American students and intentionally do not benefit the uniqueness of African American and other underrepresented minority students. The following paragraphs provide a review of the tenets of CRT (Hiraldo, 2019), the role CRT can play in disrupting the postsecondary pose of meritocracy (Patton, 2016), a critical race analysis of Black students’ success at an urban commuter institution (Harper et al., 2018), and the critical analysis of the college access and choice processes of a select group of high-achieving African American students (Comeaux et al., 2020).
CRT Tenets

The tenets of CRT are the following: counterstories, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and the critique of liberalism (Hiraldo, 2019). Counterstories provide marginalized groups the space to share their truths and narratives in a dignified, wholesome, and culturally nuanced ways (Khalifa et al., 2013). Counter-storytelling is characterized as such because it often provides an opposing reality of the official version of events. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), the voices of marginalized populations can then be used to critique the dominate narrative and expose misinformation as well as invite readers who may be unfamiliar with their voices.

The permanence of racism is the belief that racism is embedded in systems within the U.S. society: political, educational, and economic (Hiraldo, 2019). As a result, systemic racism and White privilege are normalized experiences in the U.S. for most people of color (Delgado & Stefancic (2012). Therefore, because White privilege is normalized within our societal systems, it is difficult to identify.

Whiteness as property recognizes White people as the only beneficiaries from Whiteness and the only people who can have it (Hiraldo, 2019). According to Bierdz (2020), Whiteness as property has evolved over time according to how the meaning and purpose of Whiteness and property have changed. That said, the conceptual base of both, whiteness and property has remained constant – the right to exclude. For example, during the period of slavery, African Americans and indigenous populations were degraded, killed, tortured, and forced to work on plantations because of their exclusion from the European American race – non-European Americans were viewed as property and lived under a legal system that supported their exploitation. In similar fashion, Dixson and Anderson (2018) suggest over the past 20 years,
Whiteness as property is operationalized when the voices and cultural expressions of people of color are intentionally excluded from curriculums because a quality education is the property of European Americans. As such, school policies are constructed to limit the expressions of non-European Americans and promote the value of Whiteness.

Interest convergence can be divided into two parts (Dixon & Anderson, 2018; Hiraldo, 2019). First, people of color and other marginalized groups’ interest in achieving racial equality will only improve when those interests converge with the interests of those in power. Second, the racial remedy will be repealed when policy makers feel the remedial policy is a detriment to the superior status of European Americans.

Lastly, the critique of liberalism rejects the phrase “we are all created equal,” and asserts that legislation and policies are not neutral in American society (Hiraldo, 2019). Duncan (2020) furthers states that laws are not applied equally along the lines of race and that African Americans should embrace this notion of racial realism. As a result, African Americans could avoid a lot of despair and focus more on realizing viable racial strategies to help bring about viable changes.

**Disrupting the Postsecondary Pose with CRT**

Patton (2016) suggests higher education has been complicit in maintaining a bastion of racism/White supremacy. She utilizes CRT as a tool to disrupt the academic prose in higher education and offers three propositions to reveal educational inequity and racism/White supremacy. The propositions argue that higher educational institutions in the United States were built and subsidized on the brutal oppression and enslavement of Africans and North American Indigenous populations. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) contend ahistoricism should be countered with rewriting histories that continue to celebrate oppressors and not include the voices of the
oppressed. By doing so, higher education institutions will be better positioned to not continue to
promulgate race and racism and intentionally educate students on how they can live, work, and
interact in racial harmony in our society.

In addition, the propositions (Patton, 2016) state how higher education serves as an
evidence of the complex relationship among race, property, and oppression. Despite the changes
in the U.S. demographics, higher education has remained overwhelmingly European American in
terms of students, leadership, curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces. Lastly, higher
education is the primary locus where knowledge that shapes government and industry is
produced. The knowledge that is produced is used to colonize the mind and justify colonialism
and racism. Nevertheless, college and universities should educate students to live and thrive in a
multicultural society.

**CRT Analysis at an Urban Commuter Institution**

Harper et al. (2018) analyze structural problems that undermine persistence and degree
completion in their case study of Black undergraduate students attending a racially diverse
public, 4-year commuter university located in one of the most populous U.S. cities. In doing so,
they did not review raceless issues, such as, stereotype threat, lack of academic preparation, and
student unpreparedness that have been shown to affect African American student success.
Instead, they utilized the first four of the provided six CRT tenets from Matsuda et al., (1993) to
analyze the structural problems that undermine persistence and academic achievement for
Cityville’s Black undergraduates:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.

2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant claims of neutrality, objectivity, color
   blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of [structures].
4. CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p.6)

Interviews were conducted with 23 students and 20 members of the Black Students Success Task Force (students, administrators, and faculty). As a result, Harper et al. (2018) revealed Black student success is more complex than acknowledged. More attention should be placed on the structures, practices, and institutional cultures that disadvantage African American students and perpetuate racist and White supremacist views (Patton, 2016).

**CRT Analysis – College Access and Choice process of African American Students**

Comeaux et al. (2020) explored the college access and choice processes of 74 high-achieving African American students who were admitted to University of California (UC) campuses but elected to enroll elsewhere. Utilizing critical race theory as a basis for analysis, the study found that many of these students were not given their preferred UC campuses and were provided enrollment options to the least selective campuses. As a result, these students decided to attend selective colleges and universities across the U.S. that exhibited a commitment to admitting and financially supporting them. This study also uncovered these high achieving African American students investigated and experienced a range of racial climate issues (i.e., lack of diversity with regards to students and faculty) at UC campuses that weighed heavily in their decisions not to enroll. As a result of this study, the following recommendations were included for the consideration of UC campus leaders committed to creating impartial
postsecondary pathways for African American students: revise the admissions process; expand criteria for reserved slots; provide professional development on race and racism; provide funding for administration (i.e., recruitment initiatives of African American faculty, staff, related initiatives); repeal proposition 209 (prohibits a university from considering of race, gender, and ethnicity in admission decisions); and establish a critical mass of same-race peers.

Chapter II Conclusion

Chapter 2 reviewed the theories of first-year students and the history of African Americans in higher education. It also covered how Marcia’s academic identity theory can be used as a tool for African American student persistence in higher education. It concluded with the examination of Critical Race Theory as a lens to show how White supremacy and social inequity affect the success of African American students in their pursuit of a college degree. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used to secure the findings. Chapter 4 contains the results from the participants’ interviews and the themes that emerged from the data, Chapter 5 provides a discussion surrounding the three main research questions and the research findings and recommendations from this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences of eight African American college students who persisted at a predominately White Midwestern public university. Critical race theory (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2018; Hiraldo, 2019; Patton, 2016) and Marcia’s (1993) theory of academic identity are used as lenses when looking at the themes generated from the participants in this study.

The research questions guiding the proposed study are as follows:

1. How do African American students describe their academic and social experiences in college?
2. What influences – positive and negative – do African American students describe that impact their academic and social experiences in college?
3. How does Marcia’s theory of student readiness reflect in the students’ collegiate experiences? What in their experiences does not fit with Marcia’s identity statuses?

This chapter provides a description of the qualitative research design, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, validation of data, and limitations of the study.

Research Design

The present qualitative study provides an opportunity to sift through the experiences, perceptions, and meaning making of African American college students and highlight themes that helped them persist in college. Through a set of qualitative interview questions, the voices of the study participants were captured and provided rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, as opposed to a statistical analysis of a quantitative approach. Qualitative research is an inductive process whereby “the researcher attempts to make sense of the situation without
imposing pre-existing expectations on the research setting” (Kuhns & Martorana, 1982, p. 8),
which means the inquiry is naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) rather than experimental.
Through qualitative inquiry, common themes emerge, and these themes can be used to address
the research questions.

A qualitative design has many benefits. For example, participants are studied in their
natural setting (Chadwick et al., 1984); as such, the selected participants for this study were
third-year students and interviewed at their educational institution. Also, qualitative research is
descriptive and can provide an insightful and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon
(Azungah, 2018; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Gay et al., 2006). Qualitative inquiry captures the
understanding of the phenomenon through the voices of the participants (Glesne, 2016); in this
study, the voices of eight African American students were utilized to gain insight into the factors
that promoted their persistence in college. Lastly, qualitative research allows the researcher an
opportunity to experience the phenomenon through their interactions with the research
participants thus deepening their understanding of both the participants and the phenomenon
(Chadwick et al., 1984).

**Researcher Placement and Reflexivity**

As I reflect on my time spent with the participants during the interviews, I noticed a lot of
similarities to my experience as an African American student at a PWI. I was also a first-
generation college student. My parents were laborers and never attended college. However, they
valued what a higher education could offer. They were strong proponents of attending and
graduating from college because of their experiences as laborers. My dad, especially, always told
me he believed a college education would provide me with professional work opportunities with
a chance to earn higher wages – even in his death, I still recall the many conversations we had
about his desire for me to go to college. I acted on their advice when I went to college and started my career in higher education.

In similar fashion to my students, I lacked knowledge about effective study skills and college resources such as the writing center and student support groups. In fact, I know I initially failed some of my exams because I was unaware of effective study skills – in place of spending a lot of time preparing for an upcoming examination, I was spending too much time doing “other things.”

I also attended a Midwestern PWI. Similarly, I noticed there was a lack of diversity at the university, not only among the student population, but also in the staff and faculty. As a result, I felt uncomfortable, and at times, I often wondered if I belonged on campus. I dealt with these feelings of loneliness by joining a Black fraternity and visiting with my academic advisor and my favorite faculty member, an African American female and European American male, respectively.

I have worked over 20 years in various higher education settings: public institutions, private institutions, and community colleges. All my roles have been related to career services. As such, throughout my tenure in higher education, I have utilized my various positions in career services to intentionally engage with stakeholders to reach all students. It was important to engage college students in career prep programs, mentoring, and experiential learning, especially students of color and first-generation students. I have observed in my past experiences working with students, a lot of them lack the ability to negotiate career related matters and are unaware of how experiential learning and related activities promote positive academic outcomes, student persistence, and help validate career interests (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Graham & McClain, 2019).
I could have benefited from the information revealed in this study. As such, I hope by completing this project I can glean best practices from the voices of the participants that can help future African American students, and other students of color, have a greater student experience in college. Although I had similar experiences to my participants, I tried to put aside my perspectives to appreciate their unique experiences.

**Site, Population, and Sample**

This study was conducted at a mid-size, public, Masters’ granting university in the Midwest. The institution was selected because it offered first-year students an assignment to complete the Academic Inventory Survey, as part of the U100 Career and Life Planning course. At the time, I identified African American students who completed the course over the previous 3 years. This university is considered a regional institution because it primarily serves residents within a two-hour drive from its main campus. The traditional age student population (18-24) is 63% and the nontraditional age student population (25 and up) is 37%. The university has a total enrollment of 8590 students. The African American student population is around 850 or 10% of the total enrollment. The university employs 1543 employees and offers more than 100 degrees. Also, the university offers housing to 400 students.

Although not mandatory, incoming students are encouraged to take U100 Career and Life Planning three-credit class; with that said, this course is available to all students, regardless of their class standing. The class provides students with information pertaining to student learning styles, academic majors, campus resources, and techniques that can be used to help students be successful in college. The students who are enrolled in the class are offered the Academic Inventory Survey (AIS) during their first week of class. The survey was constructed by Randy
Isaacson and Chris Was (Was & Isaacson, 2008) and measures students’ academic identity per Marcia’s four stages: Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Diffusion.

Population

Students were identified based on their race and successful completion of both, the U100 Career and Life Planning Class and the AIS. Identified students were contacted via e-mail and phone calls to ask if they would like to participate in this study (Appendix C). There were eight students who responded and were given an overview of the study. Next, upon their acceptance to participate in the study, the students were scheduled an interview at a mutually agreeable time in my office. Before the interview took place, a consent form explaining the nature of the study and authorizing access to college records was provided to the participants at the beginning of the interview. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that were used to probe for information about the students’ experiences in college (Appendix B). Nora and Cabrera (1996) commented that conducting the study on one campus as opposed to multiple campuses controls for several threats to internal validity. For example, students on one campus are more likely to be exposed to similar campus conditions such as course requirements, faculty, and academic staff with whom they must interact, and with other institutional elements and conditions (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Sample

In-depth interviews were carried out with eight undergraduate African American students who had taken the U100 course their freshman year and were now completing their third year at the university. Originally, the plan was to interview 12 African American students; however, only eight students self-selected to participate in this study after being asked to participate by e-mail (Appendix C) and phone calls. A main issue affecting this study was the lack of African
American students available for participation. It was problematic because of the sparse number of African American students attending the selected Midwestern University; the number of available students was made even smaller by the fact they needed to have been enrolled in the U100 Career and Life Planning course where the AIS was offered. As such, of the eight respondents, seven participants scored in the Achievement Identity Status and one participant scored in the Moratorium Identity Status. The goal was to have representatives from each of Marcia’s four statuses: Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Diffusion.

**Data Collection**

I followed the regulations of the WMU Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as a guide to protect the participants of this study. The role of the WMU HSIRB is to ensure research conducted on human research volunteers is administered with the highest quality and integrity (Marshall et. al, 2022). As my commitment to understanding and conducting research in the stated manner, I completed all the necessary documentation and gained approval from WMU HSIRB.

A consent form was provided to participants explaining the nature of the study, the possible risks, the benefits of participating in the study, and their responsibilities. Consent forms were gathered from the participants prior scheduling interviews. One-on-one interviews were scheduled over a one-month period. The in-person interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. During the interviews, open-ended questions were used to probe information about the students’ preparation for college, college experiences, and recommendations for enhancing the academic experiences of African American college students. The interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions that were used to probe for information about the students’ experiences in college (Appendix B).
The interviews took place at the participants’ campus to aid in their memory about their campus experiences. Participants were assigned pseudonyms as a way of maintaining their anonymity (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Only the researcher has access to participant names and identification information. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Afterwards, each participant was emailed a copy of their transcribed interview. The participants were asked to review their answers and add or correct any information that would highlight their academic and social experiences in college.

The following are the pseudonyms provided to the 8 participants:

- Interviewee #1: Sammy-Moratorium Status
- Interviewee #2: Jerry-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #3: Sheila-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #4: Jennifer-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #5: Ann-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #6: Ike-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #7: Andy-Achievement Status
- Interviewee #8: Marvin-Achievement Status

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, the researcher is the creator of the research questions, the person who selects the participant sample, and the person who highlights the data collection and analysis. Olson (2016) also states that researchers are products of the social world and will therefore possess values that will be more or less reflected in their research. Therefore, it is natural for researchers to study topics that are akin to their life experience and germane to their work area (Given, 2008). Thus, researchers must take precautions to avoid being biased in their study. As a
result, to reduce researcher bias and place more emphasis on the participants’ experiences, I wrote notes about my feelings, impressions, and observations during each of the eight interviews with my participants and reviewed them immediately after each interview. It was performed as a strategy to suspend and separate my personal judgment and to achieve a better understanding and the experiences of my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A qualitative research design creates an opportunity for me and the participants to develop a relationship of trust (Olson, 2016). Relationship building was not a major issue of concern with participants in the present research project because I taught the stated class and was also known as someone who helped all students on campus. Moreover, I utilized techniques learned from my graduate degree in counseling to help individuals become comfortable during the interviews. Finally, I worked on the study site campus for more than eight years and was familiar with a significant number of the attending students.

**Trustworthiness**

Per Locke et al. (2000), there are three threats to trustworthiness that must be addressed in qualitative research: (1) accurate descriptions; (2) threat of personal biases; and (3) reaction of interviewees to the researcher that may impede acquisition of data. I used the following strategies to validate the data obtained from the participants: member checking and the reflective practice of bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Shufutinsky, 2020). I provided the participating students or “members” with a copy of their transcripts to review and offer feedback and corrections. None offered edits or corrections. Member checking is an excellent way to ensure credibility of the data because participants can offer their input through a process of "correction/verification/challenge" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 108). In addition, the reflection on my notes wrote on index cards assisted with maintaining trustworthiness during data collection.
The reflective practice of bracketing was completed to document any potential researcher bias while conducting the research (Marshall et al., 2022). Due to my close connection to the experiences of the participants, the reflective practice was a successful strategy in maintaining emotional awareness during the data collection process.

### Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) states that analyzing qualitative data “involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 190). Consistent with this approach, the information gathered from participants in the present research was put through the following data analysis steps proposed by Rossman and Rallis (1998):

1. All data were manually transcribed from a Sony recording device and placed in an organized manner. A transcript of each participant’s interview was printed out for review.

2. All data from the transcripts were reviewed to gain a sense of the information gathered and the meanings conveyed. I composed field notes to capture my thoughts that occurred during and after the interviews.

3. Initially, the data was coded into “topic” areas on index cards and placed in related card piles.

4. Initial coding allowed me to place the information into descriptive categories or themes.

5. The different themes were then examined to convey descriptive information about the participants.

6. The final process of the data analysis involved making meaning of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). To establish “meaning” or significance of the data, I compared current research against the themes generated by the participants (Family
Expectations and Support; College Support System; and Preparation for College) to make inferences and attach significance to my data (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Carey, 2019; Duncheon, 2021; Farruggia et al., 2018).

**Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

Delimitations are boundaries of what the study is and is not (Marshall et. al, 2022). This study explored the lived experiences of African American college students who persisted at a Midwestern regional PWI to secure information that can be used to improve their graduation rates. The delimitations of this study include the choices I made that prevented generalizability of my results. In this study I only selected African American students who had taken the Academic Inventory Survey in a U100 Career and Life Planning class at a regional PWI in the Midwest. While it would have been of interest to the broader field of higher education, I chose not to include other student groups who were also enrolled in the introductory course. Although these choices delimited the generalizability of my results to other student groups who were also enrolled in the course, the focus on this specific population at the selected institution will strengthened the research and deepened the breadth of knowledge about African American students attending regional PWIs in the Midwest.

The first limitation of the study was that only one interview was conducted with each student. I had hoped to conduct more interviews with each student; however, students declined my offer due to time constraints and their belief the initial interview was sufficient. The second limitation is the information received from the students may not be reflective of most of the African American student population. Initially, I invited over 40 African American students who had taken the AIS to participate in this study – all of Marcia’s four statuses were represented in the invited group of students. From this sample group, I had hoped to secure 12 participants
representing Marcia’s four statuses but was only able to secure eight participants who resided in two of the four statuses: Achievement and Moratorium. The third limitation was that these eight students were all completing their third year at the university during the study. As a result, these students had to remember salient experiences from their first year when answering the research questions. Nevertheless, it is my hope the information obtained can be used to better lives, educational experiences, relationships, and the overall growth of African American students attending the selected institution.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Participant Narratives and Themes

Through one-on-one interview sessions, this study examined the academic and social experiences of eight African American students while attending a Midwestern PWI. This chapter provides the participants narratives as well as the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. The following are the three themes that emerged: (a) The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support (b) Opt-in Culture Creates Gaps in the College Support System and (c) The Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College. These themes will be presented as the anchor of this chapter.

Table 1 highlights the participants’ pseudonym, gender academic classification at the time of the study, and their academic identity status based on Marcia’s theory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Academic Classification</th>
<th>Marcia’s Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee #1: Sammy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Moratorium Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee #2: Jerry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee #3: Sheila</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee #4: Jennifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee #5: Ann</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee #6: Ike</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee #7: Andy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee #8: Marvin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Achievement Status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants

Participant Narrative #1

Sammy is a biracial African American male and scored in Marcia’s Moratorium stage. His father is European American, and his mother is African American; they were both college athletes at different four-year universities. His biological parents divorced when he was one year old. He grew up with his biological father and stepmother. After divorcing his father, his mother relocated and has always lived in a separate city. He has one “half-sister” who lives with his mother and two younger siblings (boy and girl) who resided with him and his father and stepmother.

Sammy currently is a third-year college student and majoring in Sociology. He also has a scholarship to play on the men’s basketball team. He lives in an apartment off campus and has a girlfriend.

**Sammy as a high school student.** According to Sammy, “My teachers always told me that I had a lot of potential.” However, Sammy reported he did not take high school seriously. He stated that he was selfish and that he “was an ass.” “I slept in class and thought that because I was an athlete, I could just slide through.” His father always told him to take school seriously; however, he did not act on his advice.

**Family’s perception of college.** Sammy’s biological father was the only parent to express an opinion about him going to college. His father was adamant about Sammy attending college; “he told me, basically, you are going to college!” As a result, his dad encouraged Sammy at an early age to play sports as a way “to get a free education.” Sammy participated in different sports: track, football, and basketball. Sammy selected basketball as he primary sport
interest. Sammy’s father suggested he play in the AAU summer basketball league. His success with the summer basketball league helped him earn his current basketball scholarship.

**The role of money to attend college.** Sammy stated money was not a factor in his decision to attend college because “my biological mother was really poor,” and he received an athletic scholarship. If he did not receive the athletic scholarship, he believes he would have received a substantial financial package because of his mother’s income. With that said, he mentioned, “I am not sure exactly how that all works having separate parents, to be honest.” However, his remarks infer money played a role in his decision to attend college. For example, he stated his biological mother is “dirt poor. I am not going [that] route. She lives in the slum. I go visit her, and it’s dirty. It’s dark. It’s nasty. I wish I had enough money to just get her out of there.” He went on to say, “[being] of this color, you got to have that degree. It is something I never realized in high school. As you go through things, and things happen, you realize this matter - the color of your skin.” Contrary to what Sammy said, money may also be a factor in his reason to attend college. “You are not a White man walking around the streets, so that’s what has been motivating me lately; my main objective...you have to get that degree!”

**Perception of being a college student in the beginning.** Sammy entered college with the idea of being a “party boy!” He initially viewed college as an extension of high school. It was not about getting an education or learning new things. It was about drinking and having fun. Because of his previous behavior, his father had warned him on several occasions that if he continued along his current behavioral pathway, it would hurt him; however, Sammy admitted that he was “defiant.” During their conversations, Sammy stated his father “said something, it was in one ear and out the other.”
Perception of being a college student after the first year of college. According to Sammy, he gradually learned that college is a place to learn, but it requires commitment. Unfortunately, Sammy stated that his grades were not good after his first year of college; actually, “I dug myself a nice little hole.” Now that his grades were almost failing, and his parents were upset with him, Sammy realized that “partying and all that” was a waste of time. After the initial year, Sammy learned that you “have to put the majority of your time aside to study and focus on them grades first, and then you can have your fun.” He also stated the “failures” of his first year helped him to become a better student. Going to school was more about him as opposed to pleasing his parents. “I don’t remember exactly when I did this; it was this year some time, but I was sitting there doing homework, and I said, I had to set a goal for myself.” His goal was to get a 3.0 or better; to achieve it, he had to be a better person and a student.

First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college. Sammy shared that first-year students should be informed about the purpose of a higher education. Unfortunately, Sammy believed college was a place where you could party more than study. As a result, Sammy stated, “I was placed on academic and suspended from the basketball team as a result of thinking I could party all the time.”

Instrumental individuals and their actions. The coaching staff of the men’s basketball team, a faculty member, his dad, and a staff member were all instrumental to Sammy’s success in college. For example, Sammy stated the coaching staff taught him discipline. When there were allegations of Sammy showing a condom in the library or cussing, he was instructed to run “30 suicides” in practice to maintain his status on the team. Sammy believed the “discipline” he received for his poor choices helped him learn discipline. Next, a faculty member from the
department of Sociology was a “big, big part” of Sammy’s first year in college. Sammy believed the faculty member helped him grow both personally and academically. Sammy stated, “I was always in his office. I loved talking to him. He has helped me to grow up a lot.” Sammy also praised his dad for his success in college. Sammy is biracial. His mother is African American, and his dad is European American. Sammy thanked his dad for always talking to him about life. Even though in the beginning he did not always listen to him, he learned that his dad wanted what was best for him. “So, I always follow up [before] I make any decisions. Any type of decision, I always call my dad to [find out] what he thinks about it.” Last, Sammy praised a staff member from the Multicultural Affairs Office for his support. Sammy stated this staff member was “my boy!” He helped Sammy with his basketball “game” as well as helped him grow as a person. Equally important, Sammy praised the staff member because “it’s good to have someone [you can go to] when you are really down.”

**How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college.** Sammy believes universities should do a better job of “reaching out” and educating students about the services available to them and giving them best practices on how to be a successful college student. However, students must “reach back” and respond to the help being offered to them. Sammy stated he believes he did not take advantage of the services offered to him during his first year. “I was just off on La La land being ignorant.”

**Participant Narrative #2**

Jerry is an African American male. He grew up in a two-parent home with no siblings. Both his mom and father valued a college education. His dad graduated from high school and went into the military. His mother graduated from a two-year college. His mother is a beautician. She did not want him to travel far for college. Thus, he decided to stay close to home to attend
college. His parents raised him to be a respectful person. Jerry is a junior and selected finance as his major. He had previously been interested in Biology/pre-med. In college, he was part of Black Student Union, Peer Mentor, Business Club, Community Service Program, and Student Government Association.

**Jerry as a high school student.** Jerry stated that he was a responsible student. He respected his teachers and was not a bad behaving student. However, he did like “playing around and didn’t really care” about school. Thus, Jerry claimed, “[my] freshmen and sophomore years were my hardest years in school.” Despite all his initial apathy about attending high school, he never wavered in his behavior as a respectable young man. Contrary to his first two years in high school, Jerry was more engaged with learning and excited about high school during his junior and senior year. As a result, he cannot recall how or why it happened, but he started thinking about “studying to be a doctor.” The more he thought about, the more he believed that was the career choice for him in the future.

**Family’s perception of college.** Both parents were excited about Jerry attending college. They often told Jerry that “you know you are going to college.” It was nonnegotiable. Jerry was expected to “find something [he] was interested in” and pursue it. Because of his parents’ adamant stance about him going to college, they were instrumental in Jerry “making the cross from high school to college.” However, Jerry believed that his parents were unfamiliar with the college application process because it “was years ago” when his mother attended college. Nevertheless, it was their support that mostly prompted him to attend college.

**The role money had in helping Jerry deciding to attend college.** Jerry stated the lure of making money was not the deciding factor for him deciding to attend college. He was planning to attend college anyway. Jerry stated that sitting at home after high school was never
an option. His desire to discover his "passion" and learn new skills were the catalysts for his interest in attending college. However, it was clear to Jerry that college was purposeful. The knowledge he would gain in college would be used to help him secure employment in the "work world." He also reintegrated that finding his "passion" in life was also very important to him and college was the venue he had planned to use to discover his "niche."

Jerry’s perception of being a college student during his freshman year. Jerry admits that "I have no idea. I don't know how I made it through my freshman year." After thinking about his initial days in college, Jerry claimed he quickly discovered he was underprepared for the rigors of college. Now that I am not in high school, during his first year he often thought, “I can skip class, and nobody would know, or I don’t have to go to class.” Furthermore, Jerry stated that he realized during his first year in college that he was now “a grown man and I was by myself.”

Jerry believed that he could not ask his parents for assistance about navigating college because they may not know. They could offer him moral and monetary support; however, they could not help him negotiate academia. Thus, Jerry believed that he did not "have nobody to teach [him] about what college students go through." As a result, he felt alone, even with his parents "right down the street."

Jerry’s perception of college after his first year. "It went so fast!" Jerry stated he could "barely remember [his] first year. As a result, he learned after his first year that college "is not a game." It was a place for him to prepare for the future.

During his sophomore year in college, he also remembers that he was happy and had money from financial aid. As a result, Jerry said, “I never got that experience how people say, I had it hard in school.” Well, he spoke too soon. College began to slow down for him after his sophomore year and he began to figure out how to succeed in college through his participation in
various group. However, his aid ran out. Therefore, during his junior year was the first time he asked his parents for food after leaving home for college. “I was like, Ma, I need some food.”

**First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college.** Jerry believes first-year students need to engage in activities and/or clubs on campus. Thus, first year students will have a greater chance of becoming more familiar with college resources and other people who may be able to help them succeed. Jerry stated, “I wish I was active in student life during my first year in college... coming from where I came from, having high aspirations, but not knowing the necessary steps to succeed in college was scary during my first year.” Jerry also believes students need constraints. “It’s like when you have a small tomato plant, you put a cage around it and when it grows up, it grows up and not lays on the ground.” So, Jerry recommends first year students be a part of a cohort group that will nurture students and help them make the adjustment from high school to college. Equally important, Jerry recommends the cohort group consist of members that look like him, African American, specifically African American males. The group should be a learning community of individuals in the same academic area.

**Individuals who were instrumental to your success and their actions.** Jerry stated he joined a student support group for minority students called Relay. The group was formed because of the belief that students of color should not run the “college race” by themselves. The group consisted of upperclassmen, sophomores, and freshmen. The group did activities together and supported each other. Equally important, they discussed and learned items that should positively affect African American student persistence in college, such as, understanding racism, how to utilize the available resources on campus, time management skills, and how to use the campus English and Math labs.
How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college. Jerry believes a support group for African American students would enhance their college persistence, especially for African American males. “I feel like Black men want to be in a brotherhood. That is why gangs flourish. It is just something about being Black and being together. That’s just part of our history.” He believes a lot of the African American students at his current college were not a group. “The ones who go here are scattered.” Jerry believes they all have similar needs, but they are from different cities and lack that something to “satisfy the natural needs” that would bring everyone together.

Participant Narrative #3

Ann is an African American female. She never knew her father. She grew up with her mom and stepfather. She has a younger sister who has a daughter. Her mother did not graduate from high school. Her stepfather finished high school and graduated from college with an associate degree. She is a member of the Latino Student Union and is a Relay Program Mentor. She is a pre-nursing major. However, Ann stated, “I don’t feel like nursing is what I want anymore.”

Ann wants to make good grades in college because it provides her with a sense of accomplishment that she has “learned something.” Ann also wants to do well in school because it will make her parents proud. Ann also stated that if her younger sister sees her doing well, “she will want the same thing.”

Ann as a high school student. She attended a high school that prepared students to work in the medical profession. She believes that is where she discovered she wanted to work in a helping profession. Ann stated she liked the ideal of helping people, and her grades were good. Ann stated, “school has always come easy for me.”
I really did not need help with a lot of work before coming to college. High school was easy for me, elementary was easy for me, and I never had to ask for help, and I never had to study much for anything. So, before I came to college, it was like easy.

**Family’s perception of college.** Ann’s mom and stepfather always encouraged her to attend college. Equally important, they were excited she was receptive to the idea of attending college. Because of her own limited work opportunities, Ann’s mom said “[go] ahead and go for it. There was nothing else for me to do out here but to go to school or get a minimum wage job.”

Equally important, Ann stated, “I am the first one in my family to go to school, so I feel like everyone is counting on me to finish college and get my degree.” Ann stated her grandmother is extremely proud of her. For example, when Ann visits her grandmother’s house and her friends are over visiting with her, she is always bragging about, “Oh, this is my grandbaby! She’s in college and is going to be a nurse; I am just so proud of her!” Ann stated these statements keep her motivated about college. In fact, she stated, “I feel like I have to do this. Not only to make myself happy but to also make my family happy. I don’t want to be a failure to them.”

**The role money had in helping Ann deciding to attend college.** “Money was a big factor for me deciding to go to school. I want to live good! I don’t want to work for minimum wage nor go to the Army.” Ann stated her family “struggled a lot.” She attributed the lack of income was due to limited work opportunities available to her mom who did not graduate from high school. Thus, she witnessed her mother “struggle and going through different things and having to work certain jobs that did not pay much.” Ann stated, “That’s why I really want to go to school. I want a better life, and my mother wants a better life for me.”

**Ann’s perception of being a college student during her freshman year.** Ann came into college with the belief she might not be able to succeed. She shared, “I thought college would be
like extremely, extremely hard. I thought that I might not be able to do what I imagined like having to write a 20-page paper in every single class.” Ann imaged having classes with “like 100 people” and “not being able to listen to the teacher,” although, she only had one class with more than 100 people. “It was nowhere close to what I thought it would be.” Ann also noticed during her first year in college the writing assignments were not as intense; however, “it was a lot of reading; more reading than [she] thought it would be.”

**Ann’s perception of college after her first year.** Ann believed her first year in college was centered on “self-discovery.” She admitted her initial year was “fun;” however, in addition to wanting to do well in college, she concluded her initial year in college was a time she “could become more independent; learn more about herself.”

**First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college.** Ann used an occasion when she accidently erased a paper, she was writing to highlight the importance of a support system when she felt discouraged during her first year in college. She stated, “I was in tears; just crying because I could not remember what I was writing about.” However, Ann believes African Americans should be able to look to their families for support and encouragement when life is a struggle. As a result, she called her mom and informed her about how she accidently erased her paper. Out of frustration, Ann said to her mom, “I don’t want to do this anymore! I just want to drop out!” In response, her mom reminded her how tough college can and will be. As a result, of her mom’s support, she found a way to rewrite the paper and stayed in school. Therefore, Ann recommends first year students develop a support system of people that will be able to encourage and help them if they become discouraged while attending college.
Individuals or groups that were instrumental to your success and their actions. Ann stated there were no specific individuals on campus that played a vital role in her persistence in college. However, “the Relay Program here helped me a lot.” The Relay Program provided Ann with opportunities to connect with other students and college staff. Ann believes it is very important for students to connect with the campus community. She stated, nobody “wants to go to school and not have anybody to be connected to.” The Relay Program provided intentional programming that brought together students and staff that centered on helping students of color, particularly African American students, succeed in college. She went on to say the Relay Program is an option for students to meet new friends on campus as well as be a part of a “support system” that can be used when needed.

How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college. Ann believes targeted programs “that cater to African American students are needed to keep them encouraged about going to school. This is a predominately White school and you do not see a lot of our Black students here.” In addition, student groups like the “Latino Student Union and the Relay Program” that are designed for diverse student populations should be available for all students, especially for students of color.

Participant Narrative #4

Jennifer is an African American female. She has two younger brothers, 6 years old and 16 years old, and a twin sister. Jennifer believes her siblings look to her as an example of what they should aspire to be when they grow up. As a result, she wants to be a positive role model for them. Both of her parents are “young.” They both went to college; however, they did not graduate. She stated her father dropped out of college because “my mom had me, my brother and my twin sister” as well as he wanted to be a “family guy.”
College was “the route to go” for Jennifer. Because she valued good grades and going to college, she said she was the “Black sheep” of the siblings; her sister is “doing online classes.” She always believed that school was “everything” to her and a vehicle for her to “do something with her life.” She came into college as a pre-med major.

**Jennifer as a high school student.** During the first years of high school, Jennifer described herself as a “nerd.” Jennifer said she embraced her status as a good student. She graduated from high school with a 3.5 GPA. Her high school was a medical-field preparatory school. As a result, students were provided opportunities to engage in activities that highlight careers in the medical field, such as, nursing, physical therapy, phlebotomist, medical science, occupational therapy, dentistry, and chiropractic medicine.

**Family’s perception of college.** “College was the thing to do.” Her parents supported her decision to go to college. She said her parents “would have supported whatever” she decided to do with her life. However, they knew that a college degree would provide Jennifer with more options. With that said, Jennifer stated that her parents “were not pushy” about her attending college.

She has a cousin who is a special education teacher. She is her role model. “She is on my dad’s side of the family. She lives in Chicago and even though we don’t really talk, I see what she is doing, and I am like, man, that’s what’s up!”

**The role money had in helping Jennifer decide to attend college.** “Money was not an issue” in Jennifer’s decision to attend college. She was never thinking, “Oh my gosh, how am I going to pay for college?” Going to college was always her plan. She stated she was aware of “so many opportunities” to fund college that she was never concerned about the cost associated with college. In high school, she received a merit scholarship to attend college. She also was aware of
Jennifer’s only regret is that she “did not put a lot of thought into the selection of her college.” She was always focused on attending college; however, she was less concerned with selecting a college. She stated, “When I was a senior coming out of high school, I cared less about selecting a college because I knew I was going somewhere.” She stated she would have been happy attending a local community college. However, “now I see it is a huge deal.” However, she stated, she is “content” with her current institution.

**Jennifer’s perception of being a college student during her freshman year.** “It seemed like a job.” Jennifer stated that she “went to school and back to [her] room”. She was not much of a social person her freshmen year. She believes her lack of involvement in campus activities was not good for her during her freshmen year. “The classes I took during my freshmen year; I should have done better than what I did.” Jennifer believes she was not prepared for the “free time” she had during her first year in college. Jennifer suggested the “new [college] environment” coupled with “a lot of free time, can cause students to lose sight of why they come to college.”

**Jennifer’s perception of college after her first year.** According to Jennifer, college is the “real deal.” After her first year in college Jennifer realized that her grades did not reflect the high standards she or her parents had come to expect. Although her parents were not “strict about her grades,” Jennifer did recall how they negatively received her low grades during her first year.
Jennifer had always done well in her classes. As a result, she never witnessed her parents upset with her about her grades until her first year in college. Jennifer recalled, “When I got a ‘C’ on my report card, my dad was really upset with me.” Jennifer said, “If he acted this way when I received a ‘C’ in one of my classes, I wonder how he would act if I received a ‘D’ letter grade?”

Jennifer also stated that she began to think about the value of her education and the money she was receiving to attend college. She believed the financial aid money (grants, scholarships, and loans) being used to fund her college education was going to waste if she did not perform better in the classroom. As a result, she made a personal commitment to do better in the classroom. Also, after her first year is “when [she] decided to think about her major.”

First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college. Jennifer believes the U100 freshmen class can be very instrumental in helping African American students succeed during their first year in college. “The class is not hard, but it helps students stay engaged with campus resources, classroom readings and group activities.” For example, Jennifer recalls her assignment to provide a classroom presentation, “I was nervous and did not like hearing myself speak, but I got through it.” She recalls the opportunities to speak in front of “a different crowd and mixture of people give her motivation” to excel in public speaking and the belief that she can do better in college. She received an “A” in the class.

Individuals or groups that were instrumental to your success and their actions. After her first year in class, Jennifer became more active on campus. She started singing “in the gospel choir.” Because she was attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI), Jennifer said she wanted to be a part of a group that made her feel comfortable. The group was instrumental in
helping her “make it through the day.” Members of the gospel choir became her family. The choir members became her “friends” on campus, and it was a calming feeling to know that you always had friends around you on campus. “I would always encourage someone to join a club or find a friend in college, because college is where you can create long time friendships” that can be instrumental to your success during and after college.

How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college. “We need more events on campus that are geared toward minority students, especially African American students.” Jennifer stated a lot of events are not attractive to African American students. These events are populated by mostly European American students. “These events are mostly attended by freshmen, there should also be diverse programs for upper classmen.”

Participant Narrative #5

Sheila is a non-traditional African American female student. She is married with two preschool age children. Her husband did not attend college. She is majoring in radiography and plans to work as a radiologic technologist when she completes her degree. She has a 4.0 GPA. She decided on her major while volunteering at a local hospital. After touring the radiology and oncology departments with a group of women at the hospital, she researched positions and salary information related to radiology. Sheila was raised in a home with her father, mother, and siblings, a brother and sister. Her siblings had not attended college at the time of this study. Her father did not attend college; however, her mother attended college and graduated.

Sheila as a high school student. Sheila shared that she “was a complete slacker. I barely made it out” of high school. She was more into her friends during high school than academics. Therefore, she split her time between her friends and her schoolwork. Sheila became pregnant with my first child during her senior year. As a result, her attention shifted from her friends to
her newborn son. During this time, she sought and secured full-time employment at Walmart to support herself and her newborn son.

**Family’s perception of college.** Sheila stated that her family was incredibly supportive of her attending college. As a result, she does “not want to let them down.” Between her father and mother, Sheila’s mother is the most vocal supporter of her attending college. In fact, Sheila stated that it was during college that her mother met most of her current friends. Sheila’s mom was hopeful that Sheila would have a similar experience by meeting “life-long friends” in college just as she did. Sheila’s mom said college was the best time of her life. Although it would have been nice to have had a similar college experience like her mother, Sheila stated her college experience is different because she has “a family, demanding major, and every exam that is not an A+ is not acceptable.”

**The role money had in helping Sheila decide to attend college.** Money is Sheila’s primary motivator for attending college.

I became pregnant with my first kid as a senior in high school. So, I put college off for a while to be more involved in his childhood. After working at Walmart for a while, I just knew I could not be in this financial situation forever. So, I started going to school. Because of working in a minimum wage paying position, Sheila wants to work in a “recession proof position” that can provide stable financial support for her family. Furthermore, Sheila believes her children are learning a life-lesson by witnessing her attending school. For instance, she shared, “they will see the value in education and know they can achieve anything, if they put their minds to it.”

**Sheila’s perception of being a college student during her first year in college.**

Initially, Sheila’s perception of college was influenced by her mother’s college experience. As a
result, she came to college expecting a festive environment like “the partying people you see in movies.” However, Sheila stated, “when I got here, it was completely different.” Nevertheless, she had a different reason for attending college, and “partying” was not it. Her goal was to secure a degree in radiography to earn a good salary to support her family. So, she is “willing to take all the necessary steps to make sure that my grades are where they need to be: tutoring, making my own study groups, asking for extra credit, and/or asking for more resources.”

**Sheila’s perception of college after her first year.** Sheila stated college was completely different from high school.

I was kind of shocked as to how different it is. It is kind of like the professors give you the information and it is up to you to teach yourself. I am not saying that they are not helpful, because they are, but you must go out of your way to seek their help.

Although she may have questioned her ability to perform in college during her first-year, Sheila stated “after the first semester I saw I could make A+s, so I wanted to keep up with that as long as possible.”

**First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college.** Sheila believes situations or experiences that involve failure may help African American students seek help and/or become more serious about succeeding in college. For example, Sheila stated, a turning point for her was when her U100 professor gave her class their first test. She thought the test would be easy, so she did not spend a lot of time studying for it. But when she received her grade, she said, “Oh my goodness, this is a ‘C’. This is not going to work!” So, she decided to use the study skills that were being taught in class to help her prepare for tests moving forward in the class.
Individuals or groups that were instrumental to your success and their actions.

Sheila listed her U100 instructor as the most instrumental person that helped her succeed during her initial year in college. She recalls that it was her instructor’s encouragement that helped her get through the difficult times. For example, after giving a business report presentation in class, Sheila’s instructor told her she did a great job, and that she possessed leadership qualities. Furthermore, she made Sheila believe she could pretty much do anything. Sheila stated, “Having somebody who really believes in you, makes a big difference.”

On the other hand, Sheila reported “there were a couple of classmates that, like, poked fun at me for participating so much. But I just thought, ‘Yea, when I have an A+ and you drop out, you will kind of see that making fun of me was not so funny.’”

How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college. Sheila pointed out that it is important to continue to have clubs, like the Black Student Union, that are “more visible” and can help African American students “feel more welcome” on campus. However, Sheila said “basically having somebody who acknowledges you and support your accomplishments can make you go a lot further.”

Participant Narrative #6

Ike is a first-generation international Black male student; however, he self-identifies as an African American. His parents came to America from Ghana to attend college, but he was born in the United States. After his parents graduated from college with their undergraduate degrees, they decided to stay and pursue citizenship in the United States. Both of Ike’s parents are currently pursuing graduate degrees. Ike has one sibling, a younger brother. Ike aspires to become a dentist. He considers himself as a person who is “focused on the future and believes education is the key to success.”
Ike believes he is a role model to his brother, and younger cousins and relatives. As a result, he wants to do well in life because they look up to him. He also wants to do well because he does not want to disappoint his parents and grandparents.

Ike also stated that he has always looked up to his mom. “She was always hardworking and always reading a book. So, when you sit down and look back at [how she contributed to] your life, you don’t want to do anything to disappoint her.”

**Ike as a high school student.** At Ike’s mixed-race high school, his classmates viewed him differently. Some referred to him as an “intelligent” person, and others believed he was a “comedian.” Either way, Ike stated he never allowed anything to compromise his goal of completing high school and attending college.

**Family’s perception of college.** Education is highly valued in Ike’s family. Ike recalls “when I was younger my parents always told me to finish high school and then further my education with the completion of a college degree.” Ike’s parents believe that a college degree can be used to help people accomplish their dreams by providing greater income and employment opportunities as opposed to individuals with only a high school diploma. Furthermore, because Ike’s parents work full-time and are concurrently pursuing their graduate degrees, he stated they serve as motivation for him “to get an education.” His routine during the academic year is: “when I wake up, I go to class and then go study.” He believes this routine will help ensure he reaches his goal of becoming a dentist.

Ike stated that his parents wanted him to do well in high school and college for his betterment. As a result, they expected good grades from him and his brother. Ike stated, if you keep your grades good, then obviously, you are going to keep your parents off your butt. If your
grades are bad, they are always going to be on your butt. One thing I learned from my youth; I do not want my parents in my business. Sometimes I want to feel free.

The role money had in helping Ike decide to attend college. Money was not a major factor in Ike’s decision to attend college because college was not optional. His parents always encouraged him to attend. As it relates to funding the costs associated with attending college, Ike was aware of his ability to receive financial assistance from his parents as well as financial aid from the federal government. He stated that, after completing high school, he was not going to “waste time” or money by postponing college.

Ike’s perception of being a college student during his first year in college. Ike anticipated that college was going to be hard” and his belief was confirmed after he attended his first college class. He walked out of class thinking, “It’s going to take a lot of patience and hard work to begin and graduate from college in four years.” Ike also noticed there is a difference in how class instruction is presented in high school and college. He expected college professors to “spoon feed” him assignments and information, like it was in high school. However, he quickly discovered that college instruction was completely different from high school. For example, in college, “Professors don’t treat you like a child; they treat you like an adult.” As a result, students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the material outlined in their class syllabi. As a result, Ike quickly figured out that it would be his “decisions and choices” that would determine his success or failure in college.

Ike’s perception of college after his first year. Ike stated that, after his first year in college, he felt overwhelmed and exhausted because of the increased time commitment needed for him to successfully pass his college classes. In fact, after his first year in college, Ike contemplated whether he “should take a semester off.” After speaking with his parents, he
decided to enroll the following year. His parents told him “not to waste a whole year and then extend his time in college. Life does not hold on for you. You have to keep going with it.” Ike concurred. Although the college struggle is real, he stated his grades were good, and “there was no need to take off.”

**First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college.** According to Ike, “The U100 Freshmen Threshold class helps our students. It shows students how to manage their time in college because everything is about time management.” Ike also stated the “Relay Mentoring Group” is a great program that promotes student success for Black students. The mentoring group allowed students to “get together and talk about problems that were affecting members within group.” As a result of the group, Ike stated students received answers and encouragement. Ike shared that he believed he was a part of a caring community and the group helped him feel “motivated to continue” in college.

**Individuals or groups that were instrumental to his success and their actions.** According to Ike, Professor Sullivan, and Jonathan: both “helped me get through” some difficult times. Ike stated that it was great to have individuals at the college “[he] could always go to and talk to” as well as “have someone ask how [he] was doing.” On the other hand, Ike does not recall anyone or group that was harmful to his success in college.

**How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college.** Ike suggested colleges could create spaces on campus for African American students where they can get “together to just talk freely about how college life is affecting” them. “Usually in the group, one person will open up about something they are experiencing” and, as a result, the group can then provide that individual with information to alleviate the issue. In
addition, the information discussed may provide other group members with information that can prevent or teach them how to deal with the issue if they were to encounter a similar situation.

**Participant Narrative #7**

Andy is an African American male. He has one sibling, a younger brother. He grew up living with both of his biological parents and his brother. Both of his parents went to college. Andy’s professional goal after college is to work as a biological researcher. He would prefer to work in a lab.

Andy admitted he did not always pay attention in class. For example, Andy reflected on his time in middle school when education was not a priority for him. He shared, “I had allergies really bad and my eyes were always watery, and I was sneezing. [As a result] it was hard for me to focus.” However, Andy admitted his allergies were not the only reason he did not focus in middle school. “I guess you can say, I was kind of a bad student. I had to be retained in the 7th grade because all I cared about was having fun in class.”

**Andy as a high school student.** Andy shared that when he moved on to high school, he admitted his behavior “got better” but, he still believed he “goofed off too much.” However, athletics in high school helped Andy focus more on his schoolwork because he was a member of the swim team, and to be a member of the team, he “had to keep [his] grades up.” Equally important, he realized that he had to keep his grades up, not just for himself, but also for his little brother because Andy was his role model. Andy stated that if he did well in high school, “my brother would have a little more motivation [to do better] because he pretty much does whatever I do.”

Also, Andy had a faulty belief that he “would be able to get into college because [he] was black, so [he] did not need to have good grades.” As a minority, he also believed colleges would
want him to enroll in their institutions to help them meet their diversity initiatives. After Andy spoke with his high school counselor, he discovered he “was completely wrong” about getting into college purely on his minority status. Grades do matter, and college admission representatives view them as an indicator of students’ capacity to do well at a post high school institution.

While attending a mixed-race high school, he was enrolled in their medical magnet program. The program provided Andy with opportunities to visit local hospitals and shadow their employees. As a result, Andy became interested in working in the medical profession as a biological researcher.

**Family’s perception of college.** At an early age, Andy’s parents set up the expectation that he would attend college one day. While his family was not poor, they “made it clear that I had to go to college to live like they live or to live better.” College was the vehicle for Andy to have a better life. His parents promoted college as an option to find better paying jobs, as opposed to lower paying jobs that were mostly assigned to individuals with an educational level of high school or less.

**The role money had in helping Andy decide to attend college.** Not Addressed.

**Andy’s perception of being a college student during his first year in college.** Andy realized he needed more time to complete homework in college than in high school.

I thought there would be more time in class to do work rather than doing the work at home on your own. And I thought it would be more of a party atmosphere. I spend so much time doing homework.
Andy’s perception of college after his first year. College was not what he imagined. “It was not glamorous the way you see it on television. It is more work. On television they do not show [students] doing work, they just show them doing the recreational part of college.”

First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college. Andy stated the freshmen threshold course, U100, was very instrumental in helping him during his initial year in college. Andy shared that he believes his brother and cousin (who attend different colleges) were not as prepared for the writing assignments during their freshmen year. For example, “When their first English paper came out, they had a hard time on it because they did not really understand how to write them.” Andy said, initially, he also had a difficult time making the transition from writing papers in high school to writing papers in college. However, the U100 class provide him with resources and assignments that helped strengthen his self-efficacy and his ability to write papers.

Individuals or groups that were instrumental to his success and their actions. Andy stated support programs like the Relay Program is an excellent way to promote academic success with African American students. The Relay Program helped him get connected to the institution by having informational sessions about the support services available on campus as well as group meetings that allowed students to talk about what they were experiencing on campus. As a result, students were able to secure timely information and support.

How universities can better support the persistence of African American students in college. Andy would like for universities to provide an individual or individuals who will be available for African American students to talk with when the need arises. Knowing someone is available when “something goes wrong” may help African American students feel they are not alone and supported when attending college away from home.
Participant Narrative #8

Marvin is an African American male. He is the middle sibling and has two brothers. He grew up living at home with his brothers, biological mother, and stepfather. He is a junior majoring in physics. He is a student worker in the college’s Career Center. He believes he is a “beacon of hope” for his brothers and cousins because he will be the first person to graduate from college in his immediate family. Due to the expectations, he has placed on himself, he stated college is also a stressful time for him. He copes with the stress by listening to music and playing video games.

Marvin as a high school student. Per Marvin, he was a very engaged student in high school. He participated in several extracurricular activities. For example, he served as class president during his senior year. In this role, he interacted with several students, teachers, and administrators. During this time, his high school involvement did not negatively affect his grades. He had a 3.6 G.P.A. in high school. Moreover, Marvin stated, outside of his student leadership role, he was popular with other students. They “liked being [his] friend.” He believes his “popularity” was brought on by his ability to “help students feel good about themselves.” Marvin became interested in science in high school. He stated it was his high school chemistry teacher that exposed him to his future college major: physics. However, in high school he was unsure about what specific area in science held his interest. Nevertheless, Marvin stated, “he liked to learn” and science was something that would afford him a lot of opportunities to learn new things.

Family’s perception of college. Marvin stated, “My mother always wanted me to go to college because she knew I was interested in higher education.” As a result, his mother and stepfather informed him, “When you get into your junior and senior year in high school, we will
start looking for a college for you to attend.” It was important for him to continue earning good grades because it made his parents feel proud of his accomplishments in the classroom. Moreover, he realized his parents wanted him to have a more financially secure life than the one they had provided him. It was their belief a college education could be Marvin’s method to helping him achieve a better life, but he needed to continue doing well in the classroom.

**The role money had in helping Marvin decide to attend college.** According to Marvin, “money was a deciding factor.” Marvin realized that his parents could not afford to pay for him to attend college. As a result, he “had to work hard in high school for good grades to be able to apply for grants and scholarships” to pay for college. He also stated his positive relationships with students and staff in high school were helpful because they helped him secure personal references for the college applications from his teachers.

**Marvin’s perception of being a college student during his first year in college.** College was a new experience for Marvin. His first revelation about college was the “freedom.” He could not believe how much free time and lack of “supervision” he experienced.

There was no one there to help wake you up, get you on the bus, help you get dressed.

You can make your own breakfast. There was nobody there. Virtually, you are on your own when you go to college. My question was, I have all this time, how do I manage it?

**Marvin’s perception of college after his first year.** College was more difficult than Marvin anticipated. He thought, “I probably need to put my head into these books and keep it there because studying did not come naturally to me.” This was a change for Marvin because, in high school, he did not have to study a lot to achieve good grades. However, in college, “there was much more information to retain.” Therefore, he would need to “study harder as well as
spend more time” reviewing class material in attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the assignments to be able to retain more information.

**First year experience that may help other African American students succeed during their first year in college.** Marvin recommends students connect with a campus staff or faculty, regardless their race, who can help them achieve success in college. Therefore, “get involved with professors on campus. I did not have any relationships with my professors during my first semester and the lack of information and guidance hurt me.” He believes a personal “connection” with a faculty member, staff member, and/or advisor could have given him needed information that would have prepared him for the rigors of his first year in college.

**Individuals or groups who were Instrumental to your success and their actions.**

Marvin stated that he was part of the National Society of Black Engineers during his first year. Although I struggled my first semester, they were still there to support me regardless. We did a lot of things together that I probably would not have done on my own. We attended a lot of club meetings and study sessions. Had I not gone to those, I would have done worse during my first year in college.

No individuals or groups were detrimental to Marvin’s success during his first year. He stated, “I think my biggest downfall was me.”

**How can universities better support the persistence of African American students in college.** According to Marvin, students should be “assigned a mentor.” “Maybe students can be assigned to a professor” who will mentor them as well as be a person they can “confide in” when they have questions and/or personal problems. “Some of these students don’t know what to do. They don’t get out there and ask questions for fear of being rejected” by professors, staff, and advisors.
Presentation of Themes

After reviewing transcripts of interviews taken from eight African American students, I revisited their stories and discovered three emergent themes from the participants: (a) The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support, (b) Opt-in Culture Creates Gaps in the College Support System, and (c) the Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College. These three themes are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2

Emergent Themes from the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support</td>
<td>Family support can be defined as monetary, emotional, and verbal support. Sub-theme: Role Model “Assignment: Students’ discussed their status as role models for both, old and young, family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-theme: Parental Influence: Highlights the roll family members played in the students’ desire to attend and succeed in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opt-in Culture Creates Gaps in the College Support</td>
<td>Information and interactions students believe are needed for their success in college are optional and not mandatory, such as, resource classes, professors as mentors, learning communities, related programs, and student organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>Sub-theme: College more difficult: Students explained how much more difficult college was in comparison to high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College</td>
<td>Sub-theme: Early Career Information: Students discuss how career information in high school helped them begin to consider career options.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support

The eight participants experienced all the themes. However, participants were clearly passionate about one theme, Family Expectations and Support, more so than the others. The family expectations and support theme are comprised of two sub-themes: role model “assignment” and parental influence. This theme highlights how the relationships between the students and their family members influenced the students’ participation in higher education. For example, Ann stated, “I feel like I have to do this. Not only to make myself happy but to also make my family happy.” Ann discussed she was the first person in her immediate family to attend college; as a result, everyone was counting on her to complete her degree and make everyone proud.

Sub-theme: The Importance of Being a Role Model

For the participants, serving as a role model for their siblings and their community while attending college was clearly both rewarding and taxing. For example, Ann shared, she felt vexed by the fact that her younger sister emulated her; doing poorly in college was not an option because it may negatively affect her little sister’s academic performance and behavior in school. In similar fashion, Andy realized that he too had to “keep his grades up, not just for himself, but also for his little brother.” Andy stated that because of his positive performance in college, “my little brother would have a little more motivation to do better in school because he pretty much does whatever I do.” Sheila, who is married and has young children, viewed her attending college as a life-lesson opportunity for her children. For instance, she shared, “they will see the value in education and know they can achieve anything, if they put their minds to it.” That said, she had to be successful at balancing multiple life-roles while pursuing her educational goal. Lastly, both, Jennifer and Marvin have siblings that look to them as role models. Jennifer
believes her siblings look to her as an example of what they should aspire to be when they grow up. Marvin believes he is a “beacon of hope” for his brothers and cousins because he will be the first person to graduate from college in his immediate family. Because of the expectations he has placed on himself, he stated college is also a stressful time for him.

Sub-theme: Influence of Parents, Intentional and Unintentional

Jerry remembered during his childhood how his parents often reminded him about their plans for him. “You know you are going to college,” they would say. Because of his youth, Jerry could not comprehend the totality of the expectations they had placed on his life. However, through conversations with his parents it became clearer that their desire for him to go to college was about him living a better life. Jerry’s parents’ desire for him to attend college was so he would not experience the loss of employment opportunities and financial rewards they had forfeited because they lacked a college degree. During his matriculation in college, his parents provided him with moral and monetary support.

In a similar fashion, Sammy’s father was adamant about him going to college. Sammy recalls, “[My father] told me, basically, ‘You are going to college!’” Moreover, he informed Sammy that he was going to use athletics to pay for his college education. Both of Sammy’s parents attended college on athletic scholarships, and Sammy likewise attended college on a basketball scholarship. As for being a college student, Sammy entered college as though it was an extension of high school. It was about having fun and drinking. Sammy shared his father warned him during his freshmen year that his careless behavior would hurt him. Sammy stated when his father “said something, it was in one ear and out the other.” However, Sammy recalls that it was because of the “failures” of his first year in college and his father’s persistent encouragement that he came to appreciate his educational opportunity. Equally important, it was
also his mother’s inability to help him financially in college that served as a motivation for him to persist in college. After his parents’ divorce, Sammy lived with his father; his mother moved to a different city. Sammy recalled during our interview,

My biological mother, she is dirt poor. I am not going [that] route. She lives in the slum in [another city]. I go visit her and it is dirty. It is dark. It is nasty. I wish I had enough money to just her out of there. I am not doing that; I just cannot do that. I am not going [to live] that way.

**Theme 2: Opt-in Culture Creates Gaps in the College Support System**

All the students expressed something or someone that was instrumental to their success during their first year in college. Ann stated there were no specific individuals on campus that played a vital role in her persistence in college. However, she said, “the Relay Program here helped me a lot.” The Relay Program provided intentional programming that brought together students and staff that centered on helping students of color, particularly African American students, succeed in college. Ann recalled how the Relay Program was instrumental in helping her create a “support system” and feel connected to the campus.

Likewise, Andy stated the Relay Program helped him during his first year in college. He also said, the Relay Program is an excellent way to promote academic success with African American students. It helped him get connected to the college by having informational sessions about the support services available on campus as well as group meetings that allowed students to talk about what they were experiencing on campus. As a result, students were able to secure timely information and support.

Jerry also praised the Relay Program for minority students. He stated the program was formed because of the belief that students of color should not run the “college race” by
themselves. The group did activities together and supported each other. Equally important, they discussed and learned items that should positively affect African American student persistence in college, such as, understanding racism, how to utilize the available resources on campus, time management skills, and how to use the campus English and math labs.

Jennifer believes the U100 freshmen class was instrumental in helping her and other African American students succeed during her first year in college. “The class is not hard, but it helps students stay engaged [by utilizing] campus resources, classroom readings and group activities.” Jennifer also credits her membership in the gospel choir as an instrument that has helped her feel comfortable on campus. She stated the choir members became her “friends” on campus; it was a calming feeling to know that you always had friends around you on campus. As a result, Jennifer stated, “I would always encourage someone to join a club or find a friend in college, because college is where you can create long-time friendships” that can be instrumental to your success during and after college.

Marvin credits his success during his first year in college to his membership in the National Society of Black Engineers. “Although I struggled my first semester, they were still there to support me regardless. We attended a lot of club meetings and study sessions.” Marvin claimed, “Had I not gone to those, I would have done worse during my first year in college.” On the other hand, Marvin reported there were no individuals or groups who were detrimental to his success during his first year. He stated, “I think my biggest downfall was me.”

Lastly, Ike recalls how one of his professors and a staff member “helped [him] get through” some difficult times during his first year in college. He recalls how it was great talking with her about his personal issues and how she never neglected to ask how he was doing in class. In a similar fashion, Ike highlighted how the staff member also always helped him out through
conversations about academic and personal problems. Ike stated that it was great to have individuals at the college “[he] could always go to and talk to” as well as “have someone ask how [he] was doing.”

**Theme 3: The Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College**

Another emergent theme discussed by some of students reflected their belief that they lacked the needed preparation for the rigors of college. For example, Jerry stated his during our interview, “I have no idea. I don’t know how I made it through my freshman year.” He went on to discuss how he quickly discovered he was underprepared for the rigors of college. Similarly, Ike stated that he walked out of his first class thinking, “It’s going to take a lot of patience and hard work to begin and graduate from college in four years.” He also noticed there is a difference in how class instruction is presented in high school and college. He expected college professors to “spoon feed” him assignments and information like high school teachers had delivered information. However, after attending a couple of classes, he quickly concluded, that students were expected to come to class prepared to discuss the material outlined in their class syllabi. As a result, he believed that it would be his “decisions and choices” that would determine his success or failure in college. As a result, Ike felt overwhelmed and exhausted after his first year in college because of the increased time commitment needed for him to pass his classes successfully. In fact, he even contemplated leaving school, but his parents convinced him to return the following year.

**Chapter IV Summary**

This chapter detailed the results from interviews with the eight African American students while attending a Midwestern PWI. The topics that guided the open-ended questions with each of the participants covered the following areas: high school experiences; the role
money played in helping them attend college; perception of college during their first year; perception of college after their first year; experiences during their first year in college that contributed to their success; individuals or groups, and their actions, that were instrumental to the participant’s success in college; and what can universities can do better to help African American students persist and graduate from college. The following three emergent themes were highlighted: (a) The Centrality of Family Expectations and Support, (b) Opt-in Culture Creates Gaps in the College Support System, and (c) The Role of Students’ Self-analysis of their Preparation for College. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion surrounding the three main research questions and will highlight the research findings and recommendations from this study.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The present interpretive qualitative study examined the academic and social experiences of eight African American students who persisted at a Midwestern public university to secure information that can be used to improve graduation rates of future African American students. Marcia’s (1993) theory of academic identity and Critical Race Theory (Comeaux et al., 2020; Harper et al., 2018; Patton, 2016; Patton et al., 2007) were used as lenses when examining the themes generated from the lived experiences described by the participants. Chapter 2 discussed the theoretical frameworks and research studies used to describe academic identity, research concerning African American students in higher education, and student persistence. Chapter 3 explained the methodology used to secure the findings. Chapter 4 contained the results from the participants’ interviews and the themes that emerged from the data, and Chapter 5 will provide a discussion surrounding the three main research questions and will highlight the research findings and recommendations from this study.

This interpretive qualitative study explored the academic and social experiences of African American college students attending a Midwestern, predominately White, mid-sized university and how their experiences will inform their persistence. Eight African American college students agreed to participate in this study after receiving phone and email requests to participate. Each of the participants were in their third year of college at the time of the interview. Of the eight participating African American students, seven self-reported in the achievement status and one reported in the moratorium status. The in-person interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. During the sessions, students discussed their preparation for college, college
experiences, and recommendations for enhancing the academic experiences of future African American students.

The three main research questions in this study were:

1) How do African American students describe their academic and social experiences in college?
2) What influences – positive and negative – do African American students describe that impact their academic and social experiences in college?
3) How does Marcia’s theory of academic identity reflect in the students’ collegiate experiences? What in their experiences does not fit with Marcia’s identity statuses?

In this section, answers to my research questions are explained and discussed using the lenses of CRT and Marcia’s academic identity theory woven into the participants’ responses. A critical race perspective highlights the assumption of how race and racism are embedded in the normal practices of higher educational institutions (Hiraldo, 2019; Patton et al., 2007).

Specifically, the CRT tenets regarding permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, and interest convergence are integrated in the discussion below as opposed to a checklist approach.

**Application of Critical Race Theory**

Regarding my first research question: How do African American students describe their academic and social experiences in college? Most of the participants felt a lack of connection to the campus because most of the activities and programs were for European American students as opposed to African American students. For example, Jennifer stated “We need more events on campus that are geared toward minority students, especially African American students.” As noted previously, CRT critiques claims permanence of racism (Hiraldo, 2019). In this case, African American participants not feeling comfortable on campus can stem from the
longstanding racist policies and practices of creating programs and events specifically for European American students and other programs for African American students as an afterthought (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Patton, 2016).

In the critique of the CRT tenet, liberalism, it could be argued the students’ compliant about the shortage of diverse faculty and staff on campus could be a result of lack of African Americans who are qualified to teach and/or work at the University. However, a closer look may reveal a lack of institutional strategy and commitment to recruiting highly qualified African American faculty and staff. As a result, African American student achievement suffers as the six-year graduation rate for African American students attending a four-year college is 45.9% (Banks & Dohy, 2019). The presence of faculty and staff members of color are instrumental in the academic success of students of color from a much larger perspective than just the positions that these individuals hold. These persons often also serve as surrogate parents, mentors, and counselors as they help students navigate the college experience. For example, Ike recalls how a staff member of color "helped him get through" some difficult times during his first year in college. He discussed the importance of having someone with whom to share his personal concerns and self-doubt regarding his coursework. These types of interactions help validate students in a way that they do not receive in the mainstream college experience.

The CRT tenet of counterstories, highlights the importance of the experiential knowledge of people of color to help us understand the participants’ experiences in college. This university is where their desire to attend college intersected with their ability to perform and thrive in college. Students expressed disappointment with their K-12 educational experiences. Some of the students indicated that, when they were high school students, they were not required to do a lot of reading and writing assignments in comparison to what was required in college. For
example, Ike stated that when he walked out of his first college class, he remembered thinking, "It's going to take a lot of patience and hard work to begin and graduate from college in four years." He was referring to needing to be patient with himself because he knew that he could not allow himself to become discouraged by what he should have known but did not. He had to learn to accept his current educational situation as part of the process of him realizing his dreams.

My second research question also helps illustrate the importance of using the CRT tenet counterstories to help explain the academic success of the participants in this study: What influences – positive and negative – do African American students describe that impact their academic and social experiences in college? All the students' parents were, in some way, adamant about their children attending college. For them, a college degree represented a better life than they could provide for themselves and their children. More so, the students often reflected on the pain and disappointment their parents revealed when they were growing up. For example, some of their parents were unable to apply for higher paying jobs due to their lack of a college degree. For the parents with college degrees, they knew the lifestyle they could provide their children was due in great part to the opportunities for higher paying jobs that their college degrees afforded them.

Students, like Ann and Andy, felt a greater commitment to attending and doing well in college. College was more than an education for them. It was a mission. They both felt the burden of being a first-generation college student; the overwhelming feeling to succeed in college for family and for themselves. For family members, they had woven their sense of pride in their family member's admittance to college and their expected educational outcome. Thus, they often would bring up their sibling's educational goals as if they were their own.
Fear of failure was an influence that impacted the academic experiences of all these students. The thought of losing the chance of continuing in college was frightening and motivational at the same time. All the participants understood the privilege of attending college even though they did not always understand how to navigate it. College was more than the "next step" after high school. It was about survival and not surrendering to college experiences that can cause students to dropout, such as, failing a test, feeling not a part of the university, lack of diversity in and out of the classroom, just to name a few.

College support systems helped play a vital role in the social experiences of African American students. For example, the Relay Program was a positive influence that was used to help the following five student participants adjust to college: Andy, Jerry, Sammy, Ann, and Ike. The Relay Program provided these students with opportunities to meet weekly discuss their college experiences, learn about college resources, and meet with college staff.

Jennifer, Ike, Sheila, and Andy also shared the importance of attending the U100 freshman class. The class helped keep students engaged in the college experience by informing them of and exposing them to campus resources (e.g., field trips to the Writing Lab, Math Center, Library, etc.). Without the U100 class during their first year in college, the students might not have been informed, nor used, the student support services.

Exposure to a variety of professions in high school was beneficial to Sheila, Jerry, Ann, Jennifer, Andy, and Marvin was helpful in choosing a major in college. Some of the students discussed the importance of visiting various companies during their time in high school. It was important because they did not have any high-profile positions such as "doctors or attorneys" in their families. The exposure to these professions provided them with the opportunity to consider professions beyond those they were typically exposed to in their neighborhoods: teachers, social
workers, firemen, production workers, retail positions and other professions germane to urban America. More so, when they entered college early career related information was helpful to the students in making informed decisions about their major and future careers.

African American student enrollment at PWIs continue to increase (Beasley et al., 2016). However, they do not persist and graduate at the same rate as European American students. The challenges African American students encounter in college is well documented (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bir & Myrick, 2015; Brooms, 2018; Carter-Francique et al., 2015; Cokley et al., 2016; Dulabaum, 2016; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Karkouti, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017). However, the lens of CRT provides us an opportunity to critically examine how racist institutional structures and practices undermine African American student success in college (Harper et al., 2018).

**Application of Marcia’s Theory**

My third and final research question was: How does Marcia’s theory of academic identity reflect in the students’ collegiate experiences? Of the eight student participants, all of whom were third year students, seven were in the Achievement status and one was in the Moratorium status. In Marcia's Achievement status, individuals have a high degree of exploration as well as commitment to a status, i.e., college student status. Marcia's academic identity is reflected by these students seeking out resources (i.e., services, people) and participating in support groups that helped them have the best and most successful college experience possible. The one student in Moratorium status, Sammy, was also highly committed to success as a college student. Thus, their success in college was equally important to their parents, if not more. The attainment of a college degree was bigger than the degree itself; it was about survival and a sense of pride.

However, the results of this study did not confirm previous research that suggests African Americans are usually in Marcia’s Foreclosure status (1966) or Berzonsky’s normative oriented
status (2008). Others contend that African Americans (Boyd et al., 2003) and other ethnic groups (Helms & Cook, 1999) were more often categorized as “normative” because they strive to maintain cultural norms. Students with a normative identity adopt the values and ideologies of significant others without exploring options. Of the eight participants in the present study, seven were in Marcia’s Achievement status and one was in the Foreclosure status. Students in the Achievement status were decisive in their academic goals and committed to achieving it, as exemplified by their persistence in college. In addition to their commitment to their goals, these students also discussed how their decision making (crisis) and commitment came with a deeper connection to their families and cultural background that does not overtly align with Marcia’s or Berzonsky’s theoretical models. For them, failure in college was not an option. Each of the students discussed how their success was also their families’ success. It is not uncommon for their parents and family members to brag about their family member’s attendance in college, especially first-generation students, as an honor, and as a positive representation of the whole family. This is more prevalent when first-generation African American students succeed in college because, according to Chiles (2017), their success is also helping their families and, in some cases, bringing their families out of poverty.

**Relationship with the Literature**

The experiences of the African American students aligned nicely with research regarding first-year persistence (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2016; McDermott et al., 2020; Proctor et al., 2018), the African American student experience in college (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Brooms, 2018; Karkouti, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017), and pre-college preparation (Chen, 2016; Jackson & Knight-Manual, 2019; Royster et al., 2015; Turner, 2019). For example, Sammy’s dad was supportive and adamant about him attending college. As a result, Sammy stated his dad
was always available if he needed assistance. Likewise, Jerry’s parents were incredibly supportive of him attending college. He stated they wanted a better life for him so that he would not experience the loss of employment opportunities and financial rewards they had forfeited because they lacked a college degree.

Participants also expressed their belief that mentoring from faculty and staff of color were important to their persistence in college, as well as their involvement in support programs or groups that were specifically designed for African American students. As described by Hunn (2014), African American students will encounter experiences not experienced by their European American peers. A lot of our African American students grow up in urban settings that are predominately African American. Consequently, they attended African American churches, schools, and have operated in mostly African American circles before coming to college. However, upon arriving a PWI, African American students feel out of place and experience feelings of isolation (Bir & Myrick, 2015). Therefore, because of their shared life experiences, African American students show an increase in student persistence when they receive mentoring from faculty and staff of color (Haizlip, 2012). This was true for several students in the present study. For example, Andy stated the Relay program was very instrumental in providing him with a “community” where he could talk about what he was experiencing on campus as well as received information about campus resources. Similarly, Ann stated that the Relay program “helped me a lot.” The program was instrumental in helping her create a support system and feel connected to the campus.

Table 3 lays out the Research Themes, Prior Literature, and Findings that were revealed through this study. The Research Themes section shares Marcia’s identity statuses that were occupied by the eight Black students who participated in the study: Achievement and
Moratorium. The Prior Literature column contains information regarding the connection between the current literature and the present research findings. Students participating in this study also reflected the prior literature findings regarding family support, social isolation, precollege preparation, and socioeconomic status. The Findings column reflected the results from the study. For example, of the eight students participating in the study, seven were in the Achievement status and one was in the Moratorium status. It is important to note that no students were listed in the Foreclosure status as predicted by prior literature (Boyd et al., 2003). Furthermore, Helms and Cook (1999) contend that this phenomenon is not too unusual because African Americans strive to maintain cultural customs.

It was my hope the findings would include at least one representative from each of Marcia’s statuses: Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Diffusion. As the researcher, I could have then examined how African American students experienced each of the four statuses. However, of the eight student participants, seven were in the Achievement status and one was in the Moratorium status. Moreover, the findings revealed all eight students were committed to their major selection, although, per Marcia (2002), the student in the Moratorium status should not have committed to a major. Another finding revealed by the research is that all the students received family support during their attendance in college. Each of the parents supported their students financially and/or with other resources. The students also expressed that their parents support was very instrumental during their matriculation.
Table 3

Crosswalk Table of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Themes</th>
<th>Prior Literature</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical Background on Academic Identity</strong></td>
<td>Crisis is a period when an individual makes a choice regarding a life decision</td>
<td>Of the eight student participants in the study, seven were in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each of Marcia’s identity status suggests how individual students will</td>
<td>Commitment refers to the personal effort given to achieve a life decision</td>
<td>Achievement status and one was in the Moratorium status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cope with adversity, interactions with others, decisions about a vocational</td>
<td>Achievement status refers to a college student who has made a choice from a</td>
<td>No students were listed in the Foreclosure status as predicted by Marcia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>path, and strategies while a college student</td>
<td>selection of options and has made a personal commitment to the choice</td>
<td>All the students were committed to their major selections as well as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity status is based on two criteria: crisis and commitment</td>
<td>Moratorium status refers to a student who has explored several options but</td>
<td>college completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>has not made a commitment to any of them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratorium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>African American Students in Higher Education</strong></td>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>All the students reported some form of family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
<td>All the students, except one student participated in a pre-college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-college Preparation</td>
<td>course or program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>The student that did not participate in a pre-college program is in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moratorium status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Most of the students stated college was important to being able to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>provide a better life in the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations for Practice

During a time when many colleges are placing a premium on student persistence initiatives to offset the reduction in states’ share of instructional costs, it behooves college administrators to seek out innovative ways to increase student success (Bir & Myrick, 2015). The results of this study suggest members of student affairs and academic support may increase the student persistence of African American students by implementing mandatory initiatives that promote student success of African American students in college, such as, summer bridge programs (Tomasko, et al., 2016) and promoting involvement in same race student groups (Dorimé-Williams, 2020; Graham & McClain, 2019) that provide peer-to-peer support for African American students.

Summer Bridge Program

Summer bridge programs provide African American students with experiences that can be used to help them feel comfortable with the transition to college, build self-efficacy, and serve as a student persistence tool that can lead to future success (Tomasko, et al., 2016). For example, bridge programs provide intensive short-term academic and social activities for African American students (Bir & Myrick, 2015). These programs provide the opportunity for students to adjust to living on campus before the fall semester begins. Students participating in these programs get the opportunity to take an entry level college course before experiencing the rigors of a full-time schedule in the fall. Consequently, students can learn time management, learn how college courses are structured, and identify college expectations, support, and feedback (Tinto, 2010). Summer bridge programs also provide these students with the opportunity to be part of a cohort and participate in sessions that highlight resources that they can use during the school year for student success, e.g., the tutoring center, the library, and meetings with their advisor and
faculty members. Being a part of a cohort helps the students develop a sense of community and connection to the institution that can prove beneficial to student persistence and graduation of African American students (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

Students in this study suggested that administrators who oversee programs for African American students consider mandating specific programs and student led groups for African American students. It can be mandatory for African American students to choose from a menu of programs and groups that have shown to promote student persistence and graduation. An example of a student group is the Relay program, which was formed at the institution where this study was conducted because of the belief that students of color should not run the “college race” by themselves. In the Relay program, students applauded their regular meeting times together because they discussed and learned items that positively affected their persistence in college, such as understanding racism, how to utilize available resources on campus, time management skills, and how to use the campus English and math labs.

Another example of a student group that was beneficial to a participant in this study was the gospel choir. This group provided the students with a sense of family away from home by bringing together people who look alike and often have common backgrounds and feel a connectedness in what otherwise could be a very isolating situation as people of color attending a PWI. Equally important, these groups provided opportunities for their members to become friends.

**Recommendations for Families to Assist Their Students in Preparation for College**

Results from this study revealed that participants expressed disappointment with educational experiences, especially high school. They believed they were not prepared for the academic rigor of college. However, families can help prepare their students for college. One-
way families can support students in preparing for college is to encourage them to take available college preparatory classes while in high school (Carey, 2019). The rigor of these courses can help students develop good study habits and make them aware of their academic abilities. If offered, families should also encourage their students to take college credit courses for the same beneficial reasons as stated for college preparatory classes, plus the extra benefit of having earned college credits in advance, potentially shortening the time that it will take for them to obtain their degree.

Another way that families can be supportive of their students is by meeting with financial aid advisors from their student’s school of choice, especially first generation college students and their parents. Thus, students and their parents can become more aware of the financial aid options available to the student. For example, students may not be aware of scholarships and work study options that can be used to pay for college without taking on unnecessary or excessive amounts of student loans. Moreover, many of the students in this study expressed that neither they nor their parents understood the process of financing college. Thus, students and parents may become more aware and less threatened of the payment options for their student attending college.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This research revealed that student persistence remains a perennial issue in higher education, especially as it relates to African American students (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Beasley et al., 2016; Brooms, 2016; Brooms, 2018; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017). Therefore, Marcia’s theory could be broadened by conducting more research with African American students as well as other students of color to help confirm the appropriateness of its use with non-European American student populations. For example, future research could
examine African American students attending PWIs in comparison with those attending HBCUs. Consequently, the research and evidenced-based programs and literature that will come because of conducting more research can be used to increase student success for African American students as well as other non-European American student populations. Therefore, this study contributes to the larger discussion of academic identity for college because it demonstrates the following important ideas . . . that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff can better serve African American and other students of color with this research. With information about the internal preparedness of incoming students, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff will be better prepared to help African American students succeed in college.

In addition, this research corroborated some of the areas, such as, lack of college preparation (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Lofton & James, 2015), lack of sense of belonging (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Lofton & James, 2015), and lack of financial resources (Proctor et al., 2018) that contribute to the entrenched low student persistence rate of African American students. As such, I believe more research should be conducted on mandatory service delivery models for African American students and other students that identify at-risk factors at PWIs. Participants in this research benefitted from support programs, such as the Relay Program, Mentoring, and Black Student Groups. However, these programs are opt-in only and students have to decide if they would like to utilize them. As such, I believe institutions should consider policy recommendations and more research to create support at scale. More research is needed for what evidence-based support initiatives would look like at scale. For too long we have partially paid for proven opt-in support initiatives that have only helped a small portion of African American students in higher education. More African American students can be better served by more research with Marcia theory to highlight the academic readiness of African American students.
for the rigors of higher education as well as more research to create mandatory support for African American students at scale.

**Chapter V Summary**

Understanding African American students’ lived experiences as seen through the lens of critical race theory (Harper et al., 2018; Hiraldo, 2019; Patton, 2016) and Marcia’s academic identity theory (1993) could help improve student persistence and graduation rates for future African American college students. The purpose of this interpretive qualitative study was to examine the experiences of eight African American students at a Midwestern public university to better understand how their experiences influenced their persistence while occupying two of the tenets of Marcia’s (1993) theory of academic identity. Given the importance of attending and graduating with a degree from a higher educational institution, a complete understanding of what promotes success for African American students, and other students of color, should include an examination of best practices, experiences, and initiatives. Results of this study revealed that precollege programs, first-year courses, mentoring, targeted programs for students of color, and opportunities for students of color to share their campus experiences with like students are all initiatives that promote the persistence and graduation of students of color, especially African American. However, these support programs are opt-in support initiatives that are used by a small portion of African American students – more African American students, and other students at-risk, could benefit if there was a mandatory service delivery model available.

Furthermore, this research confirmed that African American students do not overtly align with Marcia’s theoretical model (1966). Marcia’s theory suggest that African American students will populate the Foreclosure status because they are inclined to maintain cultural norms without exploring options. None of the students scored in the Foreclosure status. Lastly, this research
suggests that African American student success is more complex than often noted by higher education stakeholders. A broader application of the tenets of CRT (Harper et al., 2018; Patton, 2016) could help to deepen the analyses of the structures that shape the experiences and success of African American who seek a better life for themselves, and their families, by attending a range of postsecondary institutions.
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Appendix A

Questions Related to Marcia’s Four Statuses

Foreclosure
1. Please discuss how important it is to make good grades because you like to make your parents proud.
2. What are some reasons why people are counting on you to do well in college?
3. How did significant people in your life influence your decision to go to college?
4. Please discuss how much you trust and question what family or significant people say you should do with your life.
5. Please explain how important is it for you to do well in college for other people in your life?

Diffusion
1. What are some of the reasons you came to college?
2. Please discuss how important it is for you to make good grades?
3. Please describe what you think about in class?
4. What type of work/career are you planning for after you graduate from college?
5. What are some priorities you have for your life?
6. How difficult is it to find time to study in of place of social activities and why?
7. Do you believe your class material is boring? If so, why?

Moratorium
1. Please discuss how difficult it is to make a decision about a college major.
2. Please discuss how often you were upset about doing poorly on exams and why?
3. What is your academic goal and how and when did you come to your decision?
4. What type of job do you want after college and how and when did you come to your decision?
5. Please explain your difficulty, if any, with making decisions in your life?

Achievement
1. Please describe how you came to decide on a major.
2. Please describe how important a college education is to you.
3. What types of actions are you willing to do to secure your college education?
4. How do you survive in college when it becomes challenging?
5. How do you organize your time with so many competing priorities?
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Discuss how people would describe you and what type of student you were before coming to college.
2. Tell me a little about your family background.
   a. What role, if any, did they play in you attending college?
   b. What was their reaction to your interest in attending college?
3. What role did your financial background play in your decision to attend college?
   a. If money was not a decisive factor, what are the reason(s) for you attending college?
4. What were your perceptions of being a college student when you began college?
5. What were your perceptions of being a college student after your first year of college?
6. Tell me about an experience during your first year that you believe could be used to encourage other African American students to succeed during their first year in college.
7. Were there any individuals or groups that were instrumental in your success during your first year in college?
   a. If so, who (their title) and what did they do specifically?
8. Were there any individuals or groups that you believe were detrimental to your success during your first year in college?
   a. If so, who (their title) and what did they do specifically?
9. What can university officials do better to support the persistence of African American students who attend this school?
Appendix C

Invitation Email

Greetings:

My name is Jeffery L. Jackson, and I am currently a Ph.D. student in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. During the next few months, I will be conducting research on the experiences of African American students here at Indiana University South Bend. The title of my study is “The Analysis of Lived Experiences of Undergraduate African American Students at a selected Public University in the Midwest.” I would like to invite you to participate in this study. More details and a consent form will be provided if you decide to participate.

I am specifically seeking students who have taken the U100 Career and Life Planning course. Participants will be interviewed for one hour and may be contacted later to clarify any answers obtained during the interview. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed for review.

The name of the participants will not be disclosed; they will be coded for confidentiality. Your participation in this research will increase the knowledge of African American students in higher education. Again, I would like to invite you to participate in this study. If you decide to participate or have any questions pertaining to this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at the following e-mail address: jefljack@yahoo.com.

Sincerely,

Jeffery L. Jackson
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership
Appendix D

Consent and Information Form

Consent & Information Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Principal Investigator: Dave Louis, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Jeffery L. Jackson
Title of Study: The Critical Analysis of the Usage of Marcia’s Academic Identity Theory on the experiences of First-Time African American students at a selected Public University in the Midwest

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "The Critical Analysis of the Usage of Marcia's Academic Identity Theory on the experiences of First-Time African American students at a selected Public University in the Midwest." This project will serve as Jeffery L. Jackson’s dissertation for the requirements of the doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
I am doing a research study on first-time African American students attending Indiana University South Bend experience Marcia’s academic identity stages. This study will use one-on-one interviews to examine the lived experiences of first-time African American students who have experienced the Academic Identity stages of Marcia: Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Diffusion. The rich information gleaned from African American students having the capacity to negotiate enormous odds before making it to college and their wherewithal to not opt out during the volatile first year are important to the African American community as well as to members of the academy.

Who can participate in this study?
The participants of this study are African-American undergraduate college students at Indiana University South Bend. The criteria to be a participant are (1) to be currently enrolled at Indiana University South Bend, (2) to be classified as a first-time African American, (3) Successfully completed their freshmen year at Indiana University South Bend, and (3) completed the Academic Inventory Survey at Indiana University South Bend.

Approved for use for one year from this date:

2117 Sangren Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5283
phone (269) 387-3696 fax (269) 387-3696
Where will this study take place?
This study will take place on the campus of Indiana University South Bend in order to aid the students in their remembering items about their campus experiences.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
The maximum time commitment for participants in this study is no longer than 120 minutes for a one-on-one interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. They will be scheduled over a one month period for the purpose of meeting with the participants. The data from the interviews will be stored on a secure server at Western Michigan University for a period of at least 3 years. Afterwards the data will be destroyed. The identity of the participants will be kept undisclosed by assigning each individual with a pseudonym.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you choose to participate in this study, all that is required from you is to (1) completely read and sign the Consent and Information Form and (2) answer the questions asked accurately and honestly as possible.

What information is being measured during the study?
By participating in this study you would help increase the research pertaining to the “college readiness” of African American students who persist in college. Furthermore, your comments can be used to create programs to combat the dismal dropout rates of African American college students.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are no known physical or psychological risks associated with participating in this study. Participants will be informed that participation in this study is completely voluntary and they may stop at any time with no repercussions.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
By participating in this study participants will help increase the research pertaining to the “college readiness” of African American students who persist in college. Furthermore, your comments can be used to create programs to combat the dismal dropout rates of African American college students.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
Participants will not incur any costs as a result of participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
Participants will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
H. S. I. R. B.
Approved for use for one year from this date:

FEB 12 2013
HSIRB Chair
Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The primary researcher will be the only individual who has access to the data. Participants’
identifying information will be protected at all cost. Most, if not all of identifying information
will be eliminated from the data. For example, participants’ identity will be kept undisclosed
with the use of pseudonyms in place of the participants’ real names.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer
any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO
consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary
investigator, Dave Louis, Ph.D., at 269-387-3829 or dave.louis@wmich.edu, You may also
contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice
President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects
Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board
chair in the lower left corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than
one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I
agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant’s signature Date

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
H. S. I. R. B.
Approved for use for one year from this date:

FEB 12 2013

HSIRB Chair
Appendix E

Member Checking Email

Hello (Name),

Thank you again for taking time to participate in my research study. Per our conversation, please find attached your interview transcripts. Please review them for accuracy. If there are items you would like to add and/or clarify, please send them to me in an email.

If you believe your transcripts are accurate, no response is needed. After two weeks, I will believe the information you provided about your experiences in college is correct.

Sincerely,
Jeff

Jeffery L. Jackson
Director, Career Services
Indiana University South Bend
jefljack@yahoo.com
Appendix F

HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: February 12, 2013

To: Dave Louis, Principal Investigator  
Jeffrey Jackson, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 13-01-41

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “A Critical Analysis of the Usage of Marcia’s Academic Identity Theory on the Experiences of First-Time African American Students at a Selected Public University in the Midwest” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 12, 2014