Black Male Graduates’ Reflections on their College Experiences at a Private, Faith-Based, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education

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BLACK MALE GRADUATES’ REFLECTIONS ON THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AT A PRIVATE, FAITH-BASED, PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Kimberly Hayworth

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

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This study takes an in-depth look at the experiences of 12 Black males who graduated between 2001 and 2012 from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education, with a purpose to better understand the essence of their collegiate experiences. Most research on minority college enrollment has focused on reasons why students of color do not persist (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Douthat, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Western, Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2003). Rather than rehearsing reasons for attrition, my dissertation investigated the essence of their collegiate experiences and what could be learned from Black males who did persist to graduation, with a particular focus on the personal and institutional factors influencing their educational journey.

A qualitative research methodology was used to understand the participants’ experience, focusing on the following research questions: How do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe their college experiences? What do they describe as the key personal factors that contributed to their success? What were the personal obstacles they had to overcome? What do they describe as the key institutional factors that contributed to their success? What were the key institutional obstacles they had to overcome in order to
succeed? Analysis of the data revealed noncognitive factors positively influenced their educational journey, including (a) their own self-efficacy; (b) overall welcoming “feel” of campus; (c) personal alignment with the campus culture; and (d) availability of support through family; campus mentors; and peers. The participants also shared personal and institutional obstacles they had to overcome in order to persist, including (a) academic challenges; (b) minority sub-community drama; (c) coping with suspension and dismissal; (d) minority fatigue; (e) paying for college; and (f) campus policy disconnect.

For institutions of higher education, especially private, faith-based universities, the findings from this research study identify and suggest noncognitive factors of the student experience are a means to address key structural and cultural factors that can positively impact the success of Black males and perhaps other minority student groups.
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attended there.

Kimberly Hayworth
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background

What would you think if you were told a Black man in his early 30s is nearly twice as likely to have served time in prison as to have earned a bachelor’s degree? Maybe you have heard that statistic and thought it to be an exaggeration? According to a 2003 Justice Policy Institute report by Western, Schiraldi and Ziedenberg, that statistic is unfortunate, but true. Yet, there are Black males who do graduate from college every year. Most studies conducted on this topic have focused solely on the barriers for Black students. There is recognition that obstacles should be considered but there is growing support for further research on those who have risen above the obstacles and persisted to graduation (Freeman, 1997). Through studying the lived experiences of Black males who persisted to college graduation we will learn, through their own words, the elements of their journey that led them to earn a college degree. This study will focus on the opportunities before higher education and society in general to reframe the challenge before us to make the 2003 Justice Policy Institute report a travesty of the past.

To set the stage for what was learned through this qualitative study, it is important to understand the current condition of Black males in higher education. The Introduction and Literature Review highlights where Black males’ experiences with higher education have been and where they stand right now. The study then moves forward towards understanding those success factors gathered from the stories of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White Institution (PWI) of higher education. In the past, most research has focused on Black students’ experience at large
public institutions (Allen, 1992). What makes this study unique is the research considers
the experiences of successful graduates who attended a small private, faith-based, PWI.
What can the academy learn from the experiences of these successful graduates?
Perhaps these graduates’ stories can serve to inform higher education policy and practices
in order to better serve this population of students.

Over the last few decades the retention of students entering college and persisting
to graduation has risen to the forefront of higher education discussions. Research on
student persistence, such as Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model (1987) and Astin’s
Student Involvement Model (1985), proposed theories that significantly contributed to
further the understanding of the pre-college, assimilation and environmental factors
influencing student persistence. Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model includes the
cognitive and noncognitive variables that influence students’ educational experience both
in high school and college. These cognitive and noncognitive variables include students’
family backgrounds, high school experiences, campus social interactions, and personal
attitudes. Tinto (1987) believes that these variables are influential to a student’s ability to
successfully navigate the sometimes tumultuous waters of higher education. Tinto’s
theory on persistence may be accurate for the majority of college students but is it valid
for minority students, specifically Black males at a private, faith-based, PWI?

For the purpose of this study, the term “successful” is defined as someone who
graduates with a bachelor’s degree. Some may wonder why it is important to study
successful Black male graduates at all? No matter one’s opinion or personal ideologies,
the following enrollment, persistence, and graduation statistics of Black males in the
United States offer proof that something is awry in America’s system of higher
education. This introduction offers a brief background into the major issues that contribute to the reasons why it is vitally important to learn from successful Black males who do graduate from college. As described later in this study, these graduates often overcome odds that have caused similar peers to quit college. According to Nettles and Perna (1997) even with what is being researched and reported about the experience of minority students in higher education, minority recruitment, retention, and graduation remains the most pressing issue in higher education.

There has been a plethora of writing and research on higher education retention and persistence and the reasons why students do not persist to graduation. What about those who are successful? What do we know about the college experience of these individuals? According to Majors and Billson (1992) not only are there few studies that explore the lives of successful Black males but even fewer studies that allow these men to tell their own journey. Edwards and Polite (1992) suggest that there is much to be benefited by allowing Black students to identify in their own words the particular strengths and abilities needed to achieve success. According to researchers, few research studies look to uncover the factors that lead to minority student success (Freeman, 1997, Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson & Mugenda, 2000). There has been very little research specifically looking at the factors that influence the persistence of Black males at private, faith-based, PWI’s. The most common research found in higher education literature has been conducted at mainly large PWI’s and institutions located in urban settings. Since the PWI attended by the participants in this study is in a rural setting, it will be interesting to note if the participants mention the institution’s location as an influence on their experience.
As the researcher for this study, I have a longstanding curiosity about persistence patterns within higher education. Because I have spent my entire professional career at a faith-based, PWI, my reason for pursuing understanding of this phenomenon is personal and professional. On one hand, I sought to understand and influence change towards seeing higher education become a more hospitable environment for students of color in general. With U.S. population increases mainly being predicted for minorities, higher education must and can do better at addressing the unique needs of underrepresented students. In addition, I have a moral conviction that does not allow me to be satisfied with accepting the enrollment and graduation disparity between college students solely based on race. If higher education does not address this issue, the future of the U.S. as a country of innovation, influence, and achievement is in jeopardy. There is much to be learned from those Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, PWI to inform and impact change in the way we service students.

Cuyjet, in the 2006 book titled *African American Men in College*, stated that it is important for researchers as well as campus administrators to look at race and gender subunits in order to understand these subunits and program towards the individual needs of these groups. Grouping all student populations together according to race or even gender will leave a large gap in understanding the unique needs of any minority or majority student group. This is particularly important when focusing on Black male college students.

The gap between Black male and female enrollment and achievement has grown over the last few decades and has the distinction of having the largest degree completion gap along gender lines of all minority groups (Harvey 2003, Hughes 1987, Kane 1995,
Roach, 2001). Higher education is facing greater scrutiny than ever to increase graduation rates for all students. According to higher education enrollment and persistence research, Black males are the most challenged population of all minority groups. Enrollment trends reported by gender and ethnicities in the 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* show among all races, Black males had the smallest percentage of enrollment within their race at 35.8%. The next closest percentage was American Indian males at 39.6%. In a persistence study of students entering four-year institutions in the 1995-1996 academic year, just 46% of Black and 47% of Hispanics had completed their bachelor’s degree within six years (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). The purpose of this research is to discover what can be learned from studying the experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education.

Institutions of higher education need to better understand how to attract, retain and graduate students of color in the coming decades. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, ethnic minorities represented 28% of the U.S. population in 1998 and increased to 40% by 2005. By 2050 ethnic minorities’ population percentage is expected to grow to approximately 50% of the U.S. total population (Cheeseman-Day, 2011). A combination of increases in enrollment (Astone & Nunez-Womack, 1991; Evelyn, 2003), population outlook (Cheeseman-Day, 2011) and future employment needs (Bureau of Labor, 2002; Chandler, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Lewin, 2006; Swail, 2003) all speak to the apparent call to understand and address how to open opportunities for students of color to pursue higher education.
According to research, the personal factors most commonly related to persistence of minorities include parental income (Astin, 1982; Douthat, 2005; Evelyn, 2003; Fuller, Manski & Wise, 1982, 1983; Johnson, 1980; Lewin, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Simmons, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), positive attitude towards financial aid (Astin, 1975; Astin, 1982; Ekstrom, 1991; King, 1999; Nora, 2001), and GPA/ACT (Astin, 1982; Jaschik, 2005; Johnson, 1980; Tinto, 1987).

According to Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, even after controlling for statistically significant differences, including incoming academic credentials and previous college work, research shows that time-to-graduation is most strongly correlated with socio-economic factors, race/ethnicity, and gender (2009). What can colleges and universities do to better understand and promote the success of underrepresented populations? Despite some research and programming efforts that focus on deficits, higher education has not realized a substantial increase in Black males’ college graduation rates. It is the hope of this researcher to help higher education understand the experiences of successful Black male graduates in order to assist future students reach their educational goals.

*Education Pipeline*

The National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) research on degree attainment in the United States tracked the high school class of 1992. The study found 82% (excludes those earning an equivalency diploma or GED) of eighth graders in 1988 graduated high school. Of that 82%, 58% then enrolled in college at a bachelor’s granting institutions. Of the 58% that enrolled, 59% earned a bachelor’s degree by the age of 26.
Looking back to those students who were in eighth grade in 1988, 28% received a bachelor’s degree by the age of 26. That figure is similar to countries such as Australia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Poland and the United Kingdom (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009). Moving forward to the current decade and same age group for comparison, from 2000-2002 the percentage of 25-29 year olds who completed four or more years of college was 33.8% for Whites and 17.3% for Blacks (Harvey, 2003). Even by 2002, Whites had over a 16% higher college graduation rate than Blacks.

**Purpose Statement**

There are Black males who do graduate from private, faith-based, predominantly White institutions of higher education. What can we learn from the experiences of those Black males who do successfully navigate through the higher education system? Are there factors common among these men that propelled them to graduation? Are the success factors different because these students attended and graduated from a private, faith-based, PWI? This study examined the experiences of Black males who graduated from a four-year private, faith-based, PWI of higher education to learn more about the factors that influenced their journey and success.

**Research Question**

This research study was designed to examine and create fuller understanding of the overall college experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education. It sought to construct meaning from the “lived experience” of these graduates in order to help the academy understand and effectively serve future Black male students. The research question this study is designed to answer is the following: What are the critical factors within the experiences of Black
males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education that led them to be successful?

Theoretical Framework

There are multiple theoretical frameworks that are mentioned in the literature review. Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 1997) Institutional Departure Theory focuses in on campus engagement as the key overall factor affecting persistence to graduation. According to these studies, the impact of academic-related interactions with faculty, social interactions with classmates, and co-curricular participation are critical to the overall student experience and outcomes which is measured by persistence. Tinto believes that pre-college characteristics such as high school grade point average and test scores initially influence a student’s commitment to graduating from college, something Tinto coined as Goal Commitment. The higher the Goal Commitment, the greater the student’s desire to persist to graduation. Once enrolled, the type and quality of academic experiences, such as contact with faculty and classroom interaction, further impact positively or negatively a student’s Goal Commitment level. Social experiences typically formed by engagement in co-curricular activities, residence hall life, and peer relationships also play important parts in a student’s Goal Commitment level. The quality and level of pre-college characteristics along with academic and social integration play a part in a student’s persistence to graduation. In this study, the dynamics of college life from the viewpoint of Black males at a private, faith-based, PWI will emerge through the data collection and analysis process. It was interesting to discover Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model reflected in the words of the study participants as they described their college experiences.
Rationale for the Study

According to higher education enrollment and persistence research, Black males are the most challenged population of all minority groups. Enrollment trends reported by gender and ethnicities in the 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* show among all races, Black males had the smallest percentage of enrollment within their race at 35.8%. The next closest percentage was American Indian males at 39.6%. In a persistence study of students entering four-year institutions in the 1995-1996 academic year, just 46% of Black and 47% of Hispanics had completed their bachelor’s degree within six years as compared to 67% of Whites (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

As mentioned previously, there is plenty of research covering the challenges that Black males face in higher education. In addition to those felt challenges within higher education, there are societal realities such as minority population growth, the need for a better educated workforce, and educational equality within races that compound the concern over the small number of Black males who graduate from college. Yet, there are some Black males who do graduate from college. There is limited research or writing on the stories and experiences of those successful graduates. There is even less published research on the experiences of Black male graduates from private or faith-based institutions. The literature review will highlight some research that explains the role spirituality and religious affiliations have in the life of Black students, but there has been very little research conducted on the role spirituality plays in the life of graduates of private, faith-based, PWI’s.

With institutions of higher education looking for new revenue streams and greater public accountability, special attention should be paid to the persistence gap between
minority students, specifically Black and Hispanic. Minority student enrollment and success at historically White institutions would seem like “low hanging fruit” as institutions look across their organization for ways to encourage student and organizational success. Institutions that recognize the need, and who do not just consider it market share but are compelled by a truly worthy mission, can design recruitment and student success strategies that will benefit this burgeoning proportion of the U.S. population, thus current and future student populations. The impact can be profound for the institution, with financial, moral, academic, and social enrichment at stake. “The punishment for failing to sustain open and high-quality college and university systems will be a two-tier, third-rate America-one that divides rich from poor, White persons from persons of color, and that-by perpetuating inequality and failing to take advantage of its talent pool-will inexorably be the loser in the global economy” (Chandler, 1997, p. 6).

Individual students and select institutions are helping to close the gap between White and Black male graduation rates. Studying the lived experiences of Black graduates will assist higher education to understand better what modifications the educational enterprise can make in order to promote students towards successfully graduating.

Operational Definitions

Some of the terms used in this study are used in our common daily language. The definitions below will help the reader understand these terms within the context of this study.

African American-refers to people having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa (Ryu, 2010).
Minorities—refers to people of color: African American, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Alaska Natives (Ryu, 2010).

Retention—students who enroll at an institution and continue at that same institution until they complete degree requirements for graduation (Noel, 1978).

Success—students who complete requirements qualifying them for graduation.

White—people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa, including Irish, Germans, Italians, Lebanese, Near Easterners, Arabs, and Polish (Ryu, 2010).

Summary

The aim of this research was to consider the experiences of 12 Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution (PWI) of higher education. The research questions were designed to focus on their overall college experience as well as the reflections on the personal and institutional contributors and obstacles that were a part of their journey through college. By further understanding the experiences of these selected individuals who successfully navigated college at a private, faith-based, PWI, we can better understand how the personal and institutional factors contributed to their success as well as gain insights as to how to mitigate the obstacles they had to overcome.

The following chapters will include a review of literature (Chapter Two), research methodology (Chapter Three), results (Chapter Four), conclusions and recommendations (Chapter Five).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review paints the picture of the college enrollment, persistence and graduation trends of Black males in the United States. In addition, in order to provide background for the study described in chapter three, the literature review highlights salient issues related to the college experiences of Black males. Through the inquiry stage of this literature review, it became obvious there were cognitive, non-cognitive, and institutional factors that influence the experience of Black males in college. After summarizing the enrollment trends, the literature review is organized under cognitive, non-cognitive, and institutional factors found to be critical in the research on the Black male college experience.

It is a well known fact that the minority population in the U.S. is growing at a faster rate than the non-minority sector. Over the next half century the U.S. population is expected to increase by 50% from 275 to 394 million citizens (Chandler, 1997). As stated earlier, by the year 2050, ethnic minorities are predicted to comprise 50% of the U.S. population (Cheeseman-Day, 2011). Little growth is predicted for Whites, so future population increases, thus the future college bound population and workforce, will be comprised of minorities and immigrants.

In addition to the growth of minorities as a percentage of the U.S. population, the U.S. is losing its rank as one of the most educated countries in the world. In the United States, the most-educated sector of society is at or is reaching the age of retirement. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United States ranks second behind Canada for the percent of adults ages 35-64 years
with an associate’s degree or higher. The U.S. falls sharply compared to other nations ranking 10th in the younger age bracket for adults ages 25-34 years with an associate’s degree or higher (National Report Card on Higher Education, 2008). For the United States, the next generation’s educational attainment severely lags behind the previous generation as well as other nations. Given the future U.S. population growth trends for minorities, the higher education system must improve their record for graduating students of color, especially Black males. Institutions of higher education will need to strategically garner their human and financial resources if they hope to enroll and graduate these college-age students.

Enrollment Trends

The first obstacle facing minority access to a college education may be graduating from high school. In order to understand the broader issues related to minority access, specifically Blacks’ participation in higher education, a look at high school completion rates will aid in recognizing the impact on access. Harvey’s 2003 report for the American Council on Education (ACE) highlights that from 1998-2000 only 71.1% of Black males completed high school, and less than 40% of those 18-24 year olds enrolled in college. According to the ACE report, the picture for Black women was slightly better than for the males. For the same time frame and age group, 78.8% of Black women graduated from high school and 42% enrolled in college.

These figures are especially disconcerting in that the enrollment and graduation rates from 1998-2000 were lower than they were a decade earlier. In the same study, White student graduation rates for the same age group, 18-24 year olds, and same time
period, from 1998-2000, were 87.7%. The data demonstrates the need to address high school completion rates as a means to widening the pipeline to college for Black students.

The same 2003 report by Harvey outlines education attainment statistics for all high school graduates. From 1998-2000, 39.7% of all Black 18-24 year old high school graduates enrolled in college, compared to 45.6% of Whites in the same age bracket. Yet high school completion and college enrollment percentages tell only part of the story regarding access to higher education for Black students.

The 2008 National Report Card on Higher Education reports that the national average for high school graduation, including all ethnicities from 2001-2007, was 77.5% but only 69.1% for Blacks and 72.3% for Hispanics. As if mirroring high school graduation rates, college enrollment figures differ across ethnic lines substantially. Of those graduating from high school, 73% of Whites, 56% of Blacks, and 58% of Hispanics enrolled in college the fall following graduation.

Post-Secondary Enrollment

The question of not only access but also persistence must be posed to institutions of higher education. As summarized by Swail, et al. (2003), annual college and university enrollment rates generally increased among high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics since the late 1980s. The percentage of Black high school graduates between the ages of 18-24 enrolling in a degree-granting institution increased by only 1.3% between 1979 and 1989. The significant jump occurred between 1989 and 1999, with an increase of 8.5% or 39.2% of Black high school graduates enrolling in degree-granting institutions by 1999 (Swail, Redd and Perna, 2003). In other research on enrollment trends, from 1993-1995 and 2003-2005,
White student college participation rate increased from 43% to 48% while Black student participation rate increased from 35% to 41% during the same time period (Cook and Cordova 2007).

Unfortunately, the enrollment gap between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics is larger now than it was in the late 1970’s. By the 2003-2004 academic year, 36% of students enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities were minorities. In 2000, of students ages 18-24 years, minorities comprised 28% of the enrollment in 2-year institutions and 18% in 4-year institutions (Chang, Altbach, & Lomotey, 2005).

Gender

Though it is not the focus of this study, it is evident through the research just on college persistence that the root of fewer Black males attaining a college degree starts far earlier in their educational experiences than their ability to succeed in college. Gender is an important factor in the enrollment behavior for students of all ethnicities with women graduating from high school then enrolling in college in greater numbers than men. In the 2006 high school completion rates by gender across all ethnicities in the 18-24 age group, the smallest to largest gap between male and female completion is a 2% difference for Asian Americans, 4% for Whites, 7% for Native Americans, and 9% for Blacks and Hispanics (Ryu, 2008).

The gender and ethnicity gaps that are evident in high school completion rates only become more exacerbated in college. The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (2005) reports of the 16,611,700 students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2002, 43.4% were males and 56.6% were females. According to a study by Roach (2001), Black women are predicted to continue to increase as a percentage of
undergraduates while Black men are expected to show flat to slight increases from one year to the next over the coming decade.

Further exploration into college enrollment by gender reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2005) reveals that of the six ethnicities/races recorded, Black males lagged far behind the Black females almost 2 to 1. Of Black students enrolled in college, 35.8% were male and 64.2% female. The other ethnic/racial breakdowns were as follows: White, 44% male/56.0% female; Foreign, 55.3% male/44.7% female; Hispanic, 42.1% male/57.9% female; Asian American, 46.9% male/53.1% female; American Indian, 39.6% male/60.4% female. Table One shows that among all ethnicities, Black males enroll at the lowest rate of any ethnicity as a percentage of total college enrollment by ethnicity and gender.

Table 1

*2004 College Enrollment by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High School achievement is stronger for Black women. This pattern affects enrollment in college and carries right on through to graduation rates with the gap widening through graduate and post-graduate completion percentages. According to the spring 2003 *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Black women outpaced Black men overall with earning 58% of the bachelor’s degrees, 63% of the master’s degrees, and 66% of the doctoral degrees awarded to Blacks in the United States.

*College Persistence*

Moving along the enrollment pipeline, with the exception of Asian Americans, the college persistence and graduation rates for students of color are significantly lower than that of White students. In the U.S. by 2000, only 11% of Hispanics and 17% of Blacks in the U.S. above the age of 25 had earned at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with 28% of Whites and 44% of Asians in the same age group (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). Additionally, of those students of color who enrolled in a four-year institution during the 1995-1996 academic year, 46% of Blacks and 47% of Hispanics successfully completed a bachelor’s degree within six years, as compared to 72% of Asians and 67% of Whites (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

According to Harvey in his 2003 report for the ACE, from 2000-2002 the percentage of 25-29 year olds who had completed four or more years of college was 33.8% for Whites and 17.3% for Blacks. These figures represent more than a 5% increase for Blacks during the past decade but over a 9% increase for Whites in the same time frame. Not only are White students graduating at a higher rate, but their percentage of increase over the past decade outpaces minority students. This may mean access in
general is opening across higher education without a particular focus on increasing minority persistence and graduation rates.

Unfortunately, Black men appear to struggle more than all other minority males. Research by Bowen, et al. (2009) found that of Whites, Hispanic, and Black students of either gender, Black men graduate at the lowest rate comparatively. Higher education is grappling with the realization that the face of higher education has been changing steadily over the last few decades with the increase of the minority population in the United States. With the globalization of society, the typical demographics of students in the future will be vastly different in many ways with one of the most obvious changes being the color of their skin.

Community College Enrollment

An interesting piece to the enrollment behaviors of students of color is not only the degree to which they seek post secondary education but where they choose to attend. According to Lamkin (2004), community colleges play an important role in the educational plans of students of color. As a percentage of total college enrollments, community colleges serve 46% of all Black students, 55% of all Hispanic, and 55% of all Native American students enrolling in college. Unfortunately, many students of color battle against deficits that put them at risk regardless of the institution they attend. Research shows that students starting college at two-year institutions are less likely to persist, and if they do persist, take longer to earn their degree than those students starting at a four-year institution (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008). In a 1995-96 study, only 33 % of Black students who first enrolled in a community college had transferred to a four-year college within six years (Berkner, He, Cataldi, & Knepper, 2002).
Where a student enrolls not only plays a part in the average amount of time to graduation but also affects their future earning capacity. In a study by Bowen and Bok (1998) research showed that Black alumni from academically prestigious institutions were almost equal in their earning power to their fellow White alumni, but the same result does not hold true for graduates of lesser academically rigorous higher education institutions.

Given the previous research, it is obvious community colleges play an important role for students of color’s access to post secondary education. Unfortunately, the average amount of time to complete a degree as well as future earnings are affected by their choice or perhaps necessity of enrolling at a community college. The community college realities contribute to the entire picture as we begin to understand the monumental struggle to level the educational and even the societal playing field for all ethnicities.

Minorities and Class System

*Household Income*

The research highlighted in this section paints a compelling picture of how college graduation is closely tied to family income. Higher education and society in general have long denied the idea of a class system in the United States. A close look at the socio-economic status (SES) of all minorities reveals class is very much connected to educational access and not much has changed over the last decade. In a 1996 study by Millett and MacKenzie of almost 4000 college bound students, household incomes of Black and Hispanic students averaged between $12,000-$15,000 less than White students and $20,000-$23,000 less than those of Asian students. In 2001, the chief bread winner
of a Black household was between the ages of 45-54 (the age range most likely to have
traditional college-age children) and earned $36,824. In the same age bracket Hispanic
bread winners earned $41,652 and White households had a combined income of $61,643
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Why is it important to study family income and its relationship to higher
education? In an article published in *The Atlantic* by Douthat (2005), a student 24
years of age has roughly a 1 in 2 chance of graduating with a bachelor’s degree if annual
household income is over $90,000. The ratio shifts to only a 1 in 4 chance of graduating
if the family income falls between $61,000 and $90,000, and even worse, a 1 in 10
chance if the family income falls between $35,000 and $61,000. For a high school
graduate whose family makes less than $35,000 a year, the chance of graduation from
college decreases to around 1 in 17. Family incomes are significantly lower for all
minority groups excluding Asian Americans with Black households the lowest at just
under $37,000.

Holding a bachelor’s degree makes a difference. Research shows that salaries are
almost level between Whites and Blacks holding a bachelor’s degree. Blacks with
bachelor degrees earn 95% of White individuals holding bachelor degrees (“Holding a
Four-Year College Degree,” 2005). In a seminal research study by Astin (1982),
undergraduate grade point average, persistence, and satisfaction were all found to be
positively linked with parental income. Given the previously mentioned research on the
family income’s relationship to graduation rates and satisfaction, it is imperative for
higher education to address the access to and successful completion of a higher education
degree for ethnic minorities. The future of the educational attainment level of the U.S.
depends on higher education making real progress towards serving all ethnicities.

Income level disparities among ethnic lines are so prevalent that the U. S. Supreme Court addressed the issue in the Gratz v. Bullinger case that sent ripples through all of higher education. In the 2003 University of Michigan undergraduate admissions affirmative action case Gratz v. Bullinger, Justices Ginsburg, Souter, and Breyer, supported affirmative action with data finding that “African American and Hispanic students have higher poverty rates than White students (22.1% and 21.2% compared to 7.5%), and that Black and Latino students are all too often educated in poverty-stricken and underperforming school systems” (Kahlenberg, 2004, p.2).

In a higher education persistence study by Braxton, Elkins and James, research identified four entry characteristics statistically significantly linked to student support: gender, race, parent income and high school academic achievement. These researchers found that White/Caucasian women were likely to receive more support in their college attendance than their male classmates and those from an ethnic minority group. The research also found that family support increases commensurate with parental income and higher academic achievement in high school (2000). Again, research confirms that the struggle for minority students is widespread as the factors mitigating against success of any college students are familiar realities to the average minority student in the U.S.

Tinto’s Student Departure Model (1993) includes family background as a key component in the success of a student’s educational experience. One would assume it is quite natural for college-aged adolescents to be able to look to parents for guidance when making decisions about college. In a 2008 report on student expectations, over 85% of
White students believed their parents would assist them in paying for college compared to only 76% of Black students. Even more troubling is that 72% of White parents surveyed felt like they had sufficient information related to the cost of college while only 58% of Black parents felt they had the necessary information (Lippman, Guzman, Dombrowski, Kinukawa, Shwalb, Trends, & Tice, 2000).

Contributing to the challenge of future enrollment decisions by coming generations is the small numbers of Black adults who have completed college degrees. D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) found that Black students had a much smaller network of relationships with people who were college graduates. Of the college-age Blacks in this particular study, 34%, or one-third, personally knew no one with a college degree as compared to just 10% of their White peers.

As the United States sees more Black men graduate from college, these graduates will be able to offer support and guidance to future students from the lessons they learned during their journey through college. This will help fill in a gap that all students feel when they are a first generation college student. In a study by Swail, Redd and Perna, more than 90% of parents with a bachelor’s degree planned to help their children pay for college compared with 81% of those with some college, and 75% with a high school diploma. Only 17% of Black adults over the age of 25 with a college degree as compared to 28% of Whites and 44% of Asians, the average Black student will find few in their personal network with the ability to assist them in preparing for college, navigating the admissions process and ongoing financial support once enrolled in college (2003).
The influence of socioeconomic status on enrollment cannot be underestimated. According to the following research study, it has even greater influence than academic achievement. Research conducted by the U.S. Government Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid, reported that students who were the lowest achieving yet had the highest socioeconomic status had a 77% college enrollment rate. What is interesting about this is that it is the same enrollment rate as the highest achieving, lowest SES students. Among the highly and very highly qualified high school graduates, those students with high SES enrolled in college at a rate of 67% while the same highly qualified and very highly qualified students from lower SES enrolled at a significantly lesser rate of 47% rate (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). This study did not report the same facts according to gender. Given the previously stated research on family income, it is an easy assertion to assume the highest percentages of those with the lower SES are minority college hopefuls.

Cuyjet (2006) purports that a contributing factor to the class system theory is the under-preparedness and cultural disincentives Black males also face. Cuyjet believes that Black youth are provided with less than adequate academic preparation as a result of poor school conditions and discriminatory practices, such as being “steered” into remedial classes because of behavioral problems. According to Rendon (1997), students begin to drop out of college in grade school because of the lack of mastery in the basics of reading, writing, and math early in their elementary and middle school years. The combination of the small number of Blacks with a college educated role model, lower than average household incomes, lack of quality K-12 preparation, and funneling of
minority students through remedial courses with lower academic expectations amounts to monumental obstacles for the average Black college bound hopeful.

Three Factors that Influence Student Outcomes

For organizational purposes the following discussion will be divided in three sections. Tinto’s Student Departure Model (1993) and retention research by Swail (2003) narrow the major influencers to student persistence down to three similar areas. Tinto focuses on pre-college attributes, academic integration and social engagement. According to Swail (2003), there are three predictors of persistence and academic success that are especially true for minority students: Cognitive Factors, Non-Cognitive or Social Factors, and Institutional Factors. These labels and their definitions provide themes for which this research study will follow closely but not perfectly. Because some of Swail’s predictors have a narrow scope, this literature review will include them under headings Personal Factors, College Experience, and Institutional Factors. As will be evident in the research to follow, these headings are more broad and better encompass Tinto’s factors and other research discussed in this literature review.

Definitions

Cognitive Factors: form the academic ability—the strengths and weaknesses of the student.

Noncognitive Factors: the ability to interact effectively with other persons, personal attitudes and cultural history.

Institutional Factors: refers to the practices, strategies, and culture of the college or university that, in either an intended or unintended way, impact persistence and achievement. Examples include, faculty teaching ability, academic support programming, financial aid, student services, recruitment and admissions, academic
services, and curriculum and instruction (p.57). Swail’s assertions on minority student success are undergirded by decades of Tinto’s research on college persistence. Tinto’s research on college student behavior found that the degree of integration by a student into the academic and social activities of an institution correlates positively to a deeper sense of institutional and goal commitment which then correlates to a higher rate of persistence (Tinto, 1997).

Cognitive Variables

*College Prepatory Programs*

In research by St. John (2006) a study was conducted of Blacks, Hispanics, and White students’ persistence at both private and public institutions of higher education in the state of Indiana. The study found that the access to college preparatory curriculum or participation in honors programs positively influenced persistence for all three groups pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Further supporting research from Tinto found that students of color are more apt to withdraw from college before earning their degree, even though only 15% of the attrition can be attributed to academic dismissal (1987). These two studies speak to fact that a minority student’s cognitive ability is not always the chief obstacle in their pursuit of a college degree.

*Standardized Tests*

Higher education predominantly measures college preparedness by GPA or standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT, yet research shows that minority students score well below the college-bound average. According to research by Sedlacek (1976) minority students do not perform as well as White students on most standardized academic achievement tests. In a study by D’Augelli and Hershberger, research revealed
no significant difference in the college academic performance of Black students and White students even when the Black students had significantly lower SAT scores coming into college (1993).

Many institutions require minimum scores on these standardized tests in order to qualify for admission. In a study by Bowen and Bok (1998) looking at graduation rates at 28 academically selective private and public institutions, the research revealed that when controlling for high school grades, test scores, and socioeconomic status, the higher the mean SAT score for the college the higher the graduation rate of the Black students. This was true even when the Black students’ SAT scores were lower than the overall student body average. These results held true for every set interval of SAT scores including modest scores. What this means is that when given the chance and surrounded by students seemingly more academically qualified and prepared, a higher percentage than the comparative norm of Black students were able to persist to graduation.

When looking at minority students’ cognitive abilities, considerable controversy exists about the utility of standardized test scores alone. In a study by St. John, Kirshstein, and Noell (1991), once cognitive variables were controlled, their influence on the persistence of ethnic minorities was found to be insignificant. According to Rendon, for minority students, standardized test scores should be combined with other academic measures, such as high school grade point average and class rank to create a formula able to more accurately predict a student’s academic abilities (1997). Schwartz and Washington recommended institutions take into consideration standardized tests in concert not only with high school gpa and rank in class but also should include
noncognitive variables. Their study found that noncognitive variables have a powerful influence when coupled together with cognitive variables.

According to Schwartz and Washington (2002) three noncognitive variables significantly contribute to the academic success and persistence of Black males. Those three noncognitive variables include academic self-concept, integration to a campus, and commitment to gaining an education. Factors further related to the three variables include availability of a strong support person, academic adjustment, attachment to college, personal emotional adjustment, and social adjustment. Obviously, standardized tests like the ACT and SAT do not measure these important noncognitive factors.

In yet another study supporting the theory that standardized tests are unfair measures of a minority student’s ability to succeed, according to Martinko (1995), factors related to persistence for students of color are a combination of the cognitive and noncognitive, including academic preparedness, campus climate, commitment to educational goals and the institution, social and academic integration, and financial aid. This finding leads one to believe that the impact of noncognitive variables may be greater than the cognitive for students of color, and higher education needs to abandon their singular focus on old standards of academic performance as the lone predictor of future academic success.

Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2004) conducted research studying the factors that contributed to college enrollment for students of color. Through conducting mixed methods approach to the research, focus groups described a “tracking” system in which high school students who were identified as “smart” received special guidance towards college enrollment through mentoring and college tours, while those not
designated in the “smart” group received little attention. Students of color were more often not placed in the college bound “track,” thus they did not benefit from the guidance offered to their peers labeled in the “smart” category.

Noncognitive Variables

Interpersonal Factors

Sedlacek (2004) defines noncognitive variables as factors that are unpredictable but are lived experiences of students. Noncognitive variables are predictive in identifying what motivates students and their perspectives on different experiences. Some researchers assert noncognitive variables have more influence over the enrollment and persistence of college students, especially students of color, than cognitive variables.

A simple definition of noncognitive variables germane to education would be behaviors and personal attributes that are not measured by accepted standardized tests higher education typically employs to determine enrollment eligibility and, in some cases, course placement. Numerous noncognitive variables are influential over the success of minority students, especially Black males in higher education. Noncognitive variables can include positive self-concept, socialization, cultural conflicts, faculty expectations and attitudes, curriculum, realistic self-appraisal, successfully handling issues of racism, preference for long-term goals, and availability of a strong support person, leadership experience, and community involvement. (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1986; Sedlacek, 2004; Steward & Vaux, 1986).

For the purpose of this research, noncognitive factors in this section will focus just on social factors: residence life, family income, campus culture, engagement and family support. Other noncognitive variables such as financial aid, faculty interaction
and classroom experience, which are more closely related to institutional structures and policies, will be covered in a later section of the literature review.

In a study by D’Augelli and Hershberger, research revealed no significant difference in the college academic performance of Black students and White students even when the Black students had significantly lower SAT scores coming into college (1993). It seems that the Black students in the study were able to “up their academic game” when surrounded by majority students with seemingly higher academic credentials.

The D’Augelli and Hershberger study concluded that the personal backgrounds of the Black students had greater influence over their collegiate experience than the grades they achieved while enrolled. This research revealed Black and White students studying at the same private predominantly White institution (PWI) had similar grades during their junior and senior years and comparable co-curricular involvements, yet Black students held a strong negative overall judgment of the university as well as a self-reported lower state of wellbeing. Surprisingly, the climate at the PWI studied by D’Augelli and Hershberger negatively influenced the Black students’ level of satisfaction with the social ecology of the institution but had no direct impact on their academic pursuits. It is the aim of this researcher to have Black male graduates reflect back on their classroom and campus community experiences in order to understand how these variables impacted the graduates’ overall college experiences.

*Family Support*

Minority cultures place a high value on family relationships (Hughes, 1987). Research on Black students in higher education has focused mainly on demographic
factors looking at family income and level of parental education and their correlation with student success. Although more research is needed there are other powerful factors that influence success in college.

In a study by Hinderlie and Kenny of 185 Black students enrolled at a PWI, strong maternal and paternal attachment were positively correlated with academic and personal-emotional adjustment as well as institutional attachment (2002). Student support can come in both traditional and non-traditional forms. For some students, family support may be related more to writing a check for tuition, help purchasing textbooks and course selection. For minority students, the definition of support is much broader extending to coping with racism, self-doubt and simply the encouragement to not quit. Several research studies by some of higher education’s foremost authorities on student retention have found that support from family is particularly important to minority students.

The impact of family support on college plans has a measurable impact on the freshman to sophomore persistence of Black students. Compared to White peers, Blacks and Hispanics attribute significantly more importance to family relationships (Hall, 1999, Tracey & Sadlacek, 1985). According to a study by Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn (1999), parental encouragement has four times the impact than all other measured variables on the level of goal commitment for Black students. Additionally, the same study found that parental encouragement was the single strongest factor influencing the persistence of Black students. Encouragement from relatives and a home community support system has been found to be instrumental not only in enrollment and persistence patterns of Black students, but it can help thwart the lasting effects of discriminatory
experiences, boost efforts towards academic and social integration and positively influence a student’s desire to earn a degree (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Research makes it apparent that the overall experience of minority students is bolstered in many ways when family support is present and felt.

Consistent over different decades, research shows that Black heads of households are less likely to hold a bachelor’s degree than White heads of households. Among all age groups, less than 8% of Black men have graduated from college as compared to 17% of White and 35% Asian males (Stoops, 2004). In studies by St. John, Paulsen and Carter (2005) and Astin (1982) research found that levels of parents’ education were positively related to persistence, grade point average and satisfaction. In the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of the class of 1992, across all ethnicities, only 21% of students attained a bachelor’s degree when neither parent graduated from college. Comparably, that figure increases to 45.5% when at least one parent had a bachelor’s degree. The U.S. and higher education must join forces to increase the number of U.S. citizens with college degrees. Given the population predictions and imbalance between genders, focus on increasing the number of Black males is a great place to start.

To build a brighter future for Blacks, higher education can play a major role by creating a system with a goal of graduating more students of color. From a study looking at family income and degree attainment, it is more advantageous for a student to have a parent with a college degree than a higher income. Of first generation college students in the lowest income quartile, nine percent graduate by the age of 26 as compared to 29% from a household in the lowest income quartile but at least one parent with a college degree. The 20% degree attainment spread continues in the following two higher income
quartiles and non-first-generation groupings. The graduation rate more than doubles in the highest income quartile and non-first-generation with 68% graduating as compared to 32% graduation rate for the first-generation college student in the same income quartile (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009). Bottom line, parents with a college degree have a more significant impact over their children achieving a college degree than their income level.

Regardless of the income level, the familiarity with the rigors of college both inside and outside the classroom provide an advantage to a student. Most minorities are first generation college students. Parents with a college education provide a rich resource for their children to draw from as their children seek answers to questions about the college enrollment process, securing financial aid, selecting a major, how to seek academic assistance, researching internships, and even handling emotional issues like homesickness.

Campus Life/Campus Climate

George Kuh, another well respected higher education researcher, offers research supporting engagement as a key to higher levels of persistence. Kuh’s research has found student engagement lessens the attrition rate of Black students so that they may persist at comparable and sometimes even higher levels than White students (2008). As summarized in this section, there is an abundance of historical research concerning the impact a campus culture can have on a Black student’s experience at a PWI (Allen, 1992, Fleming, 1984, Kraft, 1990, Lee & Ransom, 2011, Mow & Nettles, 1991). Supportive campus relationships and opportunities for involvement with cultural and ethnic
organizations have been positively correlated with Black student persistence (Hall, 1999, Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002).

Every student, regardless of their race, experiences heightened levels of stress while adjusting to his new college surroundings. According to research, Black males enrolled at PWI’s encountered higher incidences of depression, experienced lower levels of academic motivation, received negative treatment, and were generally dissatisfied with their college experience (Allen, 1992, Fleming, 1984, Lee & Ransom, 2011). Other researchers believe that psychological barriers, isolation, alienation, and hostility experienced especially by Black males who do matriculate, have the potential to be the largest factor in their decision to drop out of college once enrolled (Allen, 1992, Fleming, 1984, Lee & Ransom, 2011).

In a study on Black student attrition, Mow and Nettles (1990) found that 92% of Black students identified common feelings of alienation and loneliness as their chief factor for leaving college. Another research study by Kraft (1991) supporting the idea of alienation found that Black students stated the greatest problem they faced upon arrival to campus was the inhospitable atmosphere created by the White student population. In a qualitative study sponsored by College Board, a Black male freshman articulated that the reason students of color drop out was due to an unfamiliarity with the “codes of social interaction” at PWI’s, not because they did not have the academic abilities to succeed (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

Through the years, Astin has contributed several key theories on college student success. One theory that has literally formed student affairs programming through several decades is the positive relationship between student involvement and student
success. Astin’s (1984, 1996) research supported the theory that students who were
invested in the academic and social life of the campus experienced greater outcomes,
including overall increased satisfaction, reported greater growth, and persisted to
graduation at a greater measure than those students not involved socially or academically.

For minority students, favorable integration into campus life on a PWI can be a
key to their success. In addition to the previously mentioned common stressors
experienced by all students, minority students face assimilation to a PWI with additional
challenges. Depending on the diversification and cultural competency of a given campus,
these challenges may be singular, but in many cases they are cumulative. At most PWI’s
students of color encounter very few professors of the same race, fewer students of the
same race, racially biased institutional policies or systems, overt and covert
discrimination, being accused of “acting white,” and questions about their personal
ability to succeed (Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993, p.44). According to Hall (1999)
although successful graduates would prefer to see more professors of their same race,
they recognize caring and concerned White faculty and staff can positively affect their
experience as well.

Qualitative data collected by Hall (1999) found that Blacks who attended PWI’s
valued having a “critical mass” of other Black students on campus. In interviews students
expressed that increased number of students who looked like them helped to ease the
isolation and alienation felt by Black students.

Also germane to the topic of campus climate, Tracey and Sedlacek (1985) suggest
that in order for Black students to succeed on a PWI, they need both the ability to deal
with racism and the encouragement of at least one support person. Having the support to
face the challenges of racism is vitally important for the success of minority students.

Minority students who experience racism and discrimination have added psychological stressors that may reinforce obstacles to their transition to college and have been found to affect academic and social integration as well as academic performance (Nora & Cabrera, 1996, Smedley et al., 1993). Some researchers believe for minority students, it is the single individual’s perceptions of social and academic integration that are most directly associated with persistence/attrition (Noel, 1978, Robinson, 1969, Spradley, 2001, Starr, Betz, & Menne, 1972).

In a 1972 study on Black students’ perception of themselves, Goodman noted that an individual’s idea of who she or he is, the self-concept, contributes significantly to the relationship between the individual and society’s institutions. The degree to which a person’s self-concept is affirmed or disrespected by others is integral to the person’s maturation and to social and academic engagement. If a student’s interactions with an educational institution are positive and rewarding, the student’s self-concept and self-esteem are nurtured. As a result, when a student feels affirmed and encouraged, there is an enhanced likelihood that the student will experience academic and social integration (Hall, 1999).

Fryer and Lovas (1991, p. 14) define campus climate as:

The ambient, affective character of a place-the conditions that evoke feelings, either positive or negative, from the people in the organization. Climate is to the affective aspect of human beings in an organization what air is to the physical aspect. Climate is an organization’s emotional atmosphere. People breathe it.
Culture is all around us and everywhere we go and is not limited to geography but includes structures that we interact with on a daily basis, including higher education. Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined the culture found in higher education as the “social or normative glue” comprised of the ingredients of the common values and beliefs of any college or university. Because a campus culture is comprised of attitudes, history, policies, traditions, mission statements, reputations, processes, structures, etc. these ingrained elements of campus life are completely unique yet normative for an institution’s faculty, staff, and the majority of students. Shein (2010) described societal and organization culture as pervasive, yet difficult to understand. In fact, he went so far as to say that those who are not able to comprehend and navigate a particular culture can become a victim of a culture.

According to Kuh and Whitt, a campus culture serves four cultural fundamentals: campus identity, promotes commitment to the institution, reinforces the foundation of a campus social structure, and offers parameters of social norms that influence behavior. Kuh and Whitt add that because a campus culture can be so pervasive, and likely unfamiliar to students of color, these social norms can impede minority students’ ability to thrive.

These cultural barriers can be experienced both on and off a college campus for students regardless of their ethnicity. Prevalent in the cultural experience for students of color is the dance between the familiar and comfortable culture from which they came, to the unfamiliar and sometimes confusing and stressful campus culture. In a 2007 qualitative study focusing on the experiences of Black male students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and a PWI, the study found one participant
comparing his stress to that of a typical White student this way: “The fact that Black men have to go into so much processing to try to figure out the different dynamics and different perceptions kind of lets me know that I’m dealing with a lot more psychological pressure and stress than the average person would be” (Watkins, Guidry, Green, Stanley & Goodson, 2007).

Feelings of social isolation and disconnect are not just experienced by the minority student when they are on the college campus but also as they straddle the fence between campus and home. University of California Sociologist Dr. Troy Duster called this cultural dance “dual competency" (Rodarmor, 1991). Many Black students encounter cultural and language differences from the White majority culture that may create conflict for them as they move back and forth between a predominantly White university environment and their home environments where their ethnic culture is predominant. This may result in a minority student feeling the pressure of a lack of understanding from both environments (Ugbah & Williams, 1989, p. 32).

In addition to support, Tinto (1988) theorized that rejection of community or even familial values and attitudes were necessary for persistence. Black students learn to adapt to the predominantly White culture found on most campuses through becoming “bicultural” in their behavior. This bicultural behavior requires them to be culturally adept at switching back and forth as they shift between the Black and White communities and college setting changing their expressions and demeanor to fit the environment (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Tinto’s theory is further reinforced by researchers who found that lower parental income and high school academic achievement were linked to the perceived need to
reject the values and attitudes of their previous community (Cuyjet, 2006). Previously mentioned research confirms that the typical Black household has the lowest head of household income level when compared to all other major ethnic groups in the U.S. So in a sense, Black students, both because of their race as well as socio-economic level, may have reason for feeling the pressure of biculturalism or need for dual competency.

Black students may become frustrated as they seek to remain true to their cultural traditions within the majority’s cultural ethos (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson & Mugenda, 2001). Yet, converse to Tinto’s theory, Nora and Cabrera’s (1996) research refutes the notion that a student of color must reject familiar societal norms in order to be accepted into a dominant campus culture. Their research supports the claim that students of color can maintain their cultural identity and still academically and socially engage at a PWI. But one has to ask, where is the textbook for this type of learning? It will be interesting to compare where the findings from this study will fall on the sides of this debate.

Black students may feel the added pressure to not only learn the curriculum but also are sometimes insensitively asked to articulate its affect on their entire race. That is a great burden to place on the shoulders of an 18 year old college freshman. In research by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002), the authors discovered that Black students at PWI’s feel conspicuous as the lone representative voice for their race. Yet Hall (1999) found that many successful Black graduates viewed this as a challenge rather than an impediment. For Black students, this pressure to represent their entire race could force a division of their energy and focus that would normally be applied to their studies; this is pressure White students simply do not face. In this research study, graduates may recall different classroom experiences. If so, the data will capture if they are able to recall instances
where they were asked to represent the opinion of their culture. This researcher will be interested to learn whether they considered this to be a sincere question from a caring professor or unwanted pressure and a sign of cultural insensitivity.

Black undergraduates recounted greater feelings of racial-ethnic hostility; unequal treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants; and increased faculty racism than other ethnic groups. The research conducted by Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) further supported similar findings outlined in other research studies that Black students sense and experience significantly more racism than other White, Latino, or Asian American peers (Cabrera, & Nora, 1994; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993 Hurtado, 1992; LaSure, 1993; Sedlacek, 1987).

According to Fleming (1984), for minorities, one of the most important factors impeding academic success and effective development are instances of prejudice and discrimination. Racism as defined by Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams (1999) is, “beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (p. 805). Research supports that the most important variables that explain the significant difference between minority and non-minority academic performance and persistence can be attributed to experiences with racism (Loo & Rolinson, 1986; Suen, 1983 and Smedly, Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). In these studies the link between racism and minority student success is clear and convincing.

In a study by D’Augelli & Hershberger (1993) of Black students attending a large, PWI several hours from their homes, the research found that the African American students, almost to a person, had been recipients of racist remarks. Participants in the
qualitative research shared other forms of harassment or discrimination included personal threats, vandalism to their personal possessions, being chased or stalked, being spat upon, and physical violence as well. Over half of the Black students in the study stated they were fearful for their safety while on campus and accused White peers as the most frequent source of their fears. In the same study, one-third of the students complained of mistreatment by campus faculty, staff, or administrators.

According to Smith (1989, 1992), perceptions of prejudice and discrimination can cause feelings of isolation for minority students. As a result, minority students are often reticent to become engaged in activities that encourage cognitive or affective development which further limits their involvement with faculty, staff, and students. It can be a vicious circle because these relationships offer connections to both classroom and co-curricular engagement integral for further development. According to researchers, these academic connections and memberships may provide the key reasons why academically capable Black students choose to leave PWI’s (Allen, 1987; Loo & Rolinson, 1986; Tinto, 1988).

**Student Engagement**

One of the best predictors of student success is the degree to which a student is engaged in the life of a college community. Research specifically on minority students shows that when they are simultaneously connected, involved, and served, a student of color is more likely to persist in college (Tinto, 1987). Within higher education and by institution, the definition of student engagement varies greatly. From intellectually stimulating experiences with a professor to social activities meant to encourage the
building of peer to peer relationships, student engagement can have a profound impact on the overall level of student satisfaction.

Institutional practices can foster student academic and social engagement that is instrumental in students’ personal and intellectual development. According to Kinzie and Kuh (2004) when controlling for college preparation and previous academic performance and grouping all ethnicities, student engagement is the strongest indicator of college success. Since engagement appears to be a key to persistence, it makes sense for this literature review to further explore the influence of engagement on different minority groups, specifically on Black males.

In a study by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) and Livingston and Stewart (1987) looking at the experiences of Black students at PWI’s, study participants expressed frustration over the lack of sincere efforts by the PWI’s to offer student activities that were able to pique the unique interests of minority students. According to the research participants, PWI’s predominantly tried a “one-shot” approach to engage students of color socially rather than strategically promoting involvement in more developmental offerings such as student leadership, the campus newspaper, or other co-curricular activities. Some efforts were largely viewed as patronizing rather than genuine efforts to explore and then offer opportunities for involvement or activities that appealed culturally to students of color.

In a study of Black student experience on PWI’s, Hughes (1987) found that Black males are less likely to access campus student services than Black females. From health services to counseling, placement and residence life, Black males were far less likely to utilize the very services that were designed to support their college experience. This
should cause those in student services to pause and consider why Black males are so reticent to seek out these formalized modes of support. This is especially troubling given that Black male attrition is the highest in all of higher education and, according to Fleming (1984) and Hughes (1987), their development is blunted the most while in college, and even more so if they attend a PWI.

Living on campus has strong empirical support for its influence over student satisfaction, retention, and engagement. Several well-respected and often referenced studies purport the positive effect on-campus living has on the overall student experience (Astin, 1975; Chickering, 1974; Panteges & Creedon, 1978; Pascarella, 1984). Bowen et al. (2009) found that even when controlling for a multitude of factors, including SES, pre-college academic scores, and background characteristics, those students who chose to live on campus were seven to eight times more likely to graduate than comparable students who commuted to campus. Not only were graduation rates higher for those individuals in the study but overall graduation rates on primarily residential campuses are stronger than on predominantly commuter campuses.

According to a research study by Ancis et al. (2000) on measuring students’ perceptions of campus cultural climates by race, Black students were more sensitive to inter-cultural conflicts in the residence halls; experienced greater racial-ethnic hostility; felt a heightened pressure to conform to racial norms, perceived less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants; and reported more faculty discrimination than Asian-American, Hispanic, or White students. The previously listed experiences speak to both the social and academic sides of student engagement.
Perhaps for Black students, engagement is a double-edged sword. On one side it promotes a stronger institutional bond and commitment yet it also increases the probability of exposure to racially charged issues. Black students’ inability to feel a sense of academic connection and engagement is adversely affected by subtle racism experienced both inside and outside the classroom. According to research, both academic success and ability to persist correlates with a campus community where Black students feel safe and a “positive racial environment” pervades the institution (Allen, 1988; Nettles, Theony & Dandridge, 1985).

According to a phenomenological study by Hughes (1987) looking at Black students’ experiences on a PWI, Hughes concluded that Black students delay their social, personal, emotional, and cultural development during their college years due to the lack of a positive academic and social environment nurturing their growth and maturity. Instead, Black students studying at PWI’s report a preoccupation on the basics of intellectual survival and make the conscious decision to sacrifice normative development in order to focus energy towards just making it academically. Once again, research confirms that institutional efforts to provide meaningful intellectual and social engagement are essential keys to increasing African American student persistence.

**Spirituality**

There is some research focusing on the role religion has in the life of Black college students. According to a study of more than 100,000 college freshmen by the Higher Education Research Institute, 47% of Black students scored high on the “Religious commitment” scale outdistancing Whites by 22% and Latinos by 24% (Teicher, 2005). In other studies gauging the influence of religious commitment, Black
college students indicate spiritual beliefs and practices positively influence their ability to persist (Hughes, 1987, Stewart 2006, Watson, 2006). Love and Talbot (1999) further support that issues of faith are important to the college student developmental process. In addition, there is an increase of general student interest towards topics surrounding spirituality and religion. Because of apparent positive impact and expanding interest, there is a need to learn about college student spirituality.

According to Styles (1985), spiritual development contributes to overall psychological maturity. This tends to especially be true for both meeting and understanding the developmental needs of Black college students (Fleming, 1984, McEwen, Roper, Bryant, Langa, 1990, Sedlacek, 1987). In a study by Hughes, the importance of spiritual strength was mentioned equally by Black students on both PWI’s and HBCU’s (1987). Black students consider their spiritual life as assisting them in forming a sense of self, identifying their life purpose and direction as well as a source of strength to help cope with challenges related to campus culture and expectations (Stewart, 2006).

In a 2009 study by King, minority students at a private, faith-based institution shared factors they perceived as important to their persistence. Of the five themes that emerged, two specifically referenced spirituality. The two themes were labeled, “spiritual perspective” and “having a sense of a purpose or the big picture.” Both sub-themes mentioned how a reliance on faith in God and a sense of a higher calling were influential in their motivation to continue their pursuit of a college degree. Nance (2009) found that first-year Black students attending a large PWI, turned to mentors in their church for personal, academic, and even financial assistance. The students in the study
attributed their persistence in college to their spiritual beliefs and church involvement rather than formal support structures available on campus.

Stewart (2002, 2007) found that Black students relied on practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, church attendance, spiritual discipleship with an adult in order to continue their spiritual development, overcome challenges, combat effects of racial stereotyping, and to make-meaning of their experience as a college student. This research study should contribute to further understanding how Black males describe the role spirituality plays in their experience at a PWI that is faith-based.

Institutional Factors

Campus/Monocultural Ethos

Strategic and intentional institution-wide efforts towards affirming individual student value and creating connections are essential for the success of Black students. Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson and Mugenda (2000) developed a conceptual model based on the belief that minority students need to sense appreciation and hospitality both academically and socially in order to succeed. Therefore, their experience both inside and outside the classroom, from the initial exposure to the institution and continuing through each developmental stage of their college career needs to reinforce the sense that they are valued and welcome. Supporting research by Hall (1999) suggests that for Black students who do persist to graduation, institutional climate and other non-cognitive factors play the largest role in determining success.

In order to encourage success of minority students, researchers Curry (1992) and Fleming (1984) suggest PWI’s should offer a welcoming college community that recognizes and is conducive to the learning styles and social development (Swail, Redd &
Perna, 2003) of ethnically diverse student groups. The system of higher education has been operating for centuries and the increase of Black students has reached significant numbers only in the last two to three decades. Although there has been progress, the percentage of Blacks represented among first-time, full-time freshman at four-year institutions is lower than their percentage in the traditional college-age population (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

For higher education, regardless of race, there is no silver bullet when it comes to guaranteeing student success or eliminating student attrition for that matter. Institutions may be building unintentional cultural barriers linked to language preferences, qualities related to campus ethos, and even school pride that contribute to the isolation and alienation some ethnic minorities experience. Bonner and Evans (2006) call these characteristics and systems an institutional ecosystem which is individual to each college or university just like our unique human thumbprint.

Careful examination of cognitive and noncognitive variables provides convincing evidence of their impact on student success. What role, if any, does an actual institution play? Liu and Liu (2000) place the largest responsibility of minority student attrition on higher education structural and societal cultural factors rather than those that focus on a particular ethnicity. They believe that organizational and societal structures within the academy at large, as well as individual institutions, are the major catalysts of the disproportionate minority student attrition. Many institutions remain entrenched in a monoculture structure yet purport to value the richness a multicultural student body and faculty can bring.
Liu and Liu suggest that the leaders within the higher education structure not only have the responsibility but the ability to bring about real change in the opportunity for success among all minority groups. Research implies that minorities studying at PWI’s report decreased levels of academic integration, are less satisfied with their institution, and are affected more by discrimination than their White peers (Nettles, Theony & Gosman, 1986, Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). Supportive research by Watkins et al. (2007) report that Black males attending PWI’s identified their major stressors as well as obstacles to persistence and overall satisfaction as being experiences with racism in addition to other institution-related variables. Interestingly, in the same study of Black males attending HBCU’s, major stressors included non-school-related events that the institution had no ability to control. In order to combat these feelings D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) recommend offering a student group targeting Black males with a focus on education about the trials they may experience in college and offering personal and academic support. So although institutions can do little to affect outside forces on their students, they certainly can create hospitable environments that will help allay the outcome of negative outside influences and experiences.

Widely respected researcher on Black males in higher education, Cuyjet explains, “Institutions must accept their own behavior that cultivates and harbors negative stereotypes of Black men on college campuses. Institutions need to provide two things for Black males to be successful: 1) safe place where their higher expectations of success can be nurtured and reinforced, 2) reeducation of the majority of the community about the inaccuracy of generally held perceptions about black men” (1997, p.7).
In a report on research assessing perceptions and experiences of campus cultural climate, Ancis et al. (2000) discovered that Black students perceived and experienced increased pressure to conform to ethnic stereotypes and had fewer positive interactions with faculty and staff. In another study focusing on students of color, Black students are more likely than White students, attending the same institution, to view PWI’s as hostile, alienating, socially isolating, and less responsive to their needs, interests and opinions (Smedly, Myers & Harrell, 1993, Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). These findings are supported by an earlier study by Neville, Weathers, Poston, and Atkinson (1990) that found Black college students reported feelings of being singled out for differential or inferior service or treatment by faculty or staff than that of their White peers.

The institutional environment that Black students experience at PWI’s heavily influences their success. According to the recommendations of several studies, real change will manifest when institutions address systemic issues of governance, curriculum, teaching pedagogy, student programming, and other institutional interactions that touch students’ daily lives (Liu & Liu, 2000, Rendon, Jalamo & Nora, 2000, Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). Whether because of market realities or desire for social justice, leaders in higher education are more poised than ever to engage in real systemic change in order to improve the success of minority students and the economically disadvantaged.

*Faculty Interaction*

Are the rules of student engagement’s connection to retention the same for minority students as they are for majority students? A natural tie for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, part time or full time student status, residential or commuter address, is their relationship to faculty. In this day of online registration, bill payment,
and grade reports, interacting with a member of the faculty through attending class, face to face, or online, is the one common experience for all students.

Research by Ugbah and Williams (1989) found that many minority students are naturally reticent in questioning faculty members in or outside of class. Therefore, according to Turner (1994), it is important for the academic success of Black students to find a “positive level of comfort” on a college campus. Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2004) in their study of factors contributing to postsecondary enrollment by students of color stated that, “Educational achievement is a social process, shaped by human exchanges within definitive sociocultural contexts” (p. 96).

According to Cuyjet (2006), many Black men do not view academic achievement as a worthwhile goal and their attitude quickly spreads to the youth in the community. Fostering a sense of promise and academic achievement among Black males is a challenge. From kindergarten through high school, the Black male student population experiences “political, cultural, and economic inequalities.”

According to Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996), Black students do not feel that White faculty, students, and staff see them as “full human beings with distinctive talents, virtues, interests, and problems” (p. 14). Zambrana (1988) reported that some students of color experience what she called “cultural assaults” that attacked their sense of personal identity and self-concept. In addition to the “normal” stress associated with college life, this added anxiety can cause discouragement and frustration. These “cultural assaults” may influence a student of color’s decision to leave a PWI for a more familiar and comfortable educational setting. This harkens back to Tinto’s (1988) research that only 15% of the attrition for students of color can be attributed to academic dismissal.
The 2010 Minorities in Higher Education Status Report by Ryu highlighted that 69.5% of college faculty are White. According to Ugbagh and Williams (1989), White faculty have not had significant interaction with minority groups that would create a better understanding of cultural differences and may not be sensitive to policies or language that can be interpreted as insulting or even threatening. Further complicating authentic interaction between minority students and the institution is that many minority students are culturally averse to challenging authority and do not object to rules or practices, even when they believe these institutional policies are discriminatory. They simply do not understand how higher education functions or its cultural norms.

Students of color perceive their academic abilities are in question and need to be proven not only to their faculty but to their peers as well (Allen, 1988; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Hummel & Steele, 1996). According to research by Howard and Hammond (1985), the common attitude among faculty is that Blacks are not as gifted intellectually as their White classmates. In turn, minority students discern the attitude that they are not expected to excel. This type of stereotype is complex and may become internalized and begin to degrade the academic confidence of even the most qualified student of color.

In research by Carter (2006) studying the persistence of Blacks as it related to college major found no positive association with a particular major and retention. Interestingly, the research did find that majors in health, business, education, and computer science had a negative influence on the persistence of Black students even more so than White peers who had yet to declare a major. Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) reported that Black students studying at PWI’s were so fixated on intellectual
survival that they lacked the energy and time to facilitate personal, social, and cultural engagement which is also important for individual development at this time in their lives.

From the research in this and previous sections, it is apparent that the support needed to enhance a student’s ability to succeed would be most useful if it was available inside the classroom through faculty, outside the classroom through clear connections to become involved and engaged; and at home through an encouraging family bolstering their ability to adjust academically and emotionally. Ongoing and positive contact with a faculty member is especially important to students of color on college campuses. Formal and informal mentoring through faculty and staff contact, especially if available from Black professors, are effective strategies to support student success (Hall, 1999, Ugbah & Williams, 1989). In a study on the effects of mentoring in college, Ugbah and Williams found that 91% of Black students who participated in the study reported feeling more confident as a result of being mentored. According to Hall (1999), that positive self-esteem, which could be fostered through mentoring, was a common coping strategy of successful Black college students.

There is strong empirical evidence that faculty play a vital role in the success of Black students. Hopefully more and more first-time and new faculty training will emphasize the difference reaching out to Black students can make in their persistence and overall positive college experience.

*Classroom Experiences*

The influence faculty have on the persistence of minority students should not be underestimated. Studies have shown that students of color are more apt to persist when faculty portray a strong belief, sometimes called validation, that all students are capable
of learning and can be taught to learn (Good, Halpin & Halpin, 2002; Rendon, 1997). In addition, positive interaction with faculty is one of the main influences on Black students’ development of quantitative skills, analytical thinking, and appreciation for the arts (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

As previously mentioned in research findings by Kraft (1991), social support from faculty is instrumental in the academic success of Black students. To these students, faculty advice and/or willingness to discuss a student’s work were the forms of social support students of color sought most. Unfortunately, in the same qualitative study, the most common complaint lodged against the faculty was the perception that faculty were less willing to spend time with Black students outside of the classroom answering course-related questions.

According to Love (1993), Black students felt like White faculty at PWI’s were “emotionally, socially, and academically unavailable” to them (p. 31). In a qualitative study by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) a Black student at a PWI shared how he felt powerless to refute the racial stereotypes in the classroom expressed by White peers. He described his feelings as “uneasy, misunderstood, and without allies” (p. 321). The student shared further that even the professor did not offer support or understanding to this student in a classroom where he was the single Black voice representing his culture. In addition, White students in a sea of other White students are not as easily noticed when they are absent and can enjoy a certain level of anonymity. A Black student at a PWI could very well be the only student of color in a classroom. According to a study by Hall (1999), successful Black students actually accepted being the lone representative of their race as a challenge and not as a threat.
Black students desire contact with faculty and attribute much of their success to professors who engage them in the classroom and affirm them as qualified to be there (Kraft, 1991, Love, 1993). In a qualitative research study involving 43 Black students attending a PWI, almost 60% of the males interviewed mentioned social support as one of the essential factors to enhance their academic success (Nettles and Perna, 1997).

*Financial Aid*

Virtually every study considering student access and persistence in college reveals finances as one of the major issues affecting everyone, including Black students. According to research by Hartle (1998), 83% of Blacks surveyed believed that college is not affordable for most families. As is often said, perception is reality, so just the perception that college is financially out of reach, may discourage the pursuit of a college degree even before enrollment. Higher education and society in general have long denied the idea of a class system in the United States. A close look at the socio-economic status (SES) of all minorities reveals class is very much connected to educational access and not much has changed in recent years.

Keeping a limit on tuition increases is important to minority students. Research shows that low-income students, more often minority students, are increasingly sensitive to net tuition costs than any other socioeconomic level of student. Financial aid plays a vital role in the access and success of minority students. The gap between low-income and high-income enrollment rates is positively related to growth rates in public universities. A study by Kane (1995) showed that enrollment differences at public institutions between low-income and high-income students were linked to tuition increases.
Because of what is known related to the household income of the average Black family, even slight increases in tuition rates can make reaching, and even continuing in college, unattainable for some. Retention research reveals a connection between tuition charges and ability for Black students to persist. According to St. John et al. (2005) in research focusing on price sensitivity, each thousand dollar of tuition differential increases the probability of a Black student dropping out of college by 12%. In addition to the cost of tuition, increases in room and board charges have a negative effect on Black student persistence. Every thousand dollar increase in room and board charges increases the probability of attrition by 4.5% for Black students.

For Black students, tuition prices and student aid are the variables that most affect their college choice. Once enrolled, the picture changes slightly. Tuition and the amount of grants awarded are significantly correlated to persistence (Heller, 1998, St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005). According to research, minority students are more sensitive to the cost of tuition, the amount in grants and scholarships, and are generally less willing to use student loans to finance their education (Kaltenbaugh, St. John & Starkey, 1999; St. John, 1991; St. John & Noel, 1989, St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005).

For Black students, this reluctance to borrow is an unfortunate factor in their high departure rates. In research on Black students who started in college in 2003-2004, by the 2006-2007 academic year, 51% of those students who chose to take out student loans to finance their education persisted to graduation, compared to 39% of the non-borrowers (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008). Aversion to debt is positive in most cases, but for African American college students, it may be the very resource that could be the path to
the greatest financial gain. Without the proper guidance, Black students may not understand that by investing in themselves through student loans in order to earn a college degree, this educational debt will significantly increase their future earning power.

There is a shift occurring in higher education away from offering assistance to those with proven financial need to those students who have proven academic achievement. In 1999-2000, 77% of students from families with less than $20,000 in family income received some financial aid, with the average award being $6,727. In contrast, 44% of those from families with an income of $100,000 or more, received aid with an average award of $7,838 (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003). In the U.S., 30% of all Black children live below the poverty line which is 2.5 times higher than the average for White children (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001a). Given these figures, institutions on average award larger amounts of financial aid, which includes merit scholarships, to students from families with what would seem to be a greater ability to pay. Higher education has been slowly moving to a philosophy of awarding aid scholarships earned as a result of academic merit leaving less of the financial aid resources allocated for high need students.

In *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*, researchers, Bowen et al. (2009) studied the class of 1999’s graduation rates from 21 flagship universities, as well as the public-university systems of Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia. According to their research, even after controlling for standardized tests and college preparatory course load in high school, there are significant disparities in graduation rates along gender, ethnicity, and family income lines.
Participants in their study showed that those from “privileged” homes were between 6-17% more likely to graduate within six years. With 30% of Black households reporting family incomes below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000a), it is unlikely many Black college students would fall into the “privileged” category increasing their chances of graduating within six years.

In research by St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005), Black students had higher grants and loans and chose colleges with lower tuition costs. This is interpreted to mean that even though their financial need was greater, Black students’ choice of colleges was influenced greatly by tuition costs rather than academic reputation, prestige, etc. On average, Whites attended colleges with higher tuition charges.

In 2002, because of financial barriers, over 400,000 college-qualified high school graduates from moderate and low-income families were prevented from enrolling in a four-year college, and 168,000 of them were unable to enroll in any college at all (Empty promises: the myth of college access in America, 2002). Because of previous research stated related to average family incomes, it is natural to assume a disproportionate number of those qualified high school graduates were from Black households. According to the same report, over the next decade of the 21st century, 4.4 million college-qualified high school graduates from moderate and low-income families will not attend a four-year college within two years, and too many students will not attend any college at all (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002).

Summary

The verdict is still out on who is chiefly responsible for minority enrollment and persistence in higher education and whether the cognitive or non-cognitive factors hold
the greatest sway over college success. Since there is research on both sides of the debate, the results of this study will help the academy better understand the experiences of Black male college students and the impact cognitive and non-cognitive factors have on their ability to persist to graduation at a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education.

Based on the research gathered in the literature review, a conceptual framework was developed to represent the factors consistently associated with the Black males’ experiences in higher education. The literature review covered the salient issues of the Black males’ overall student experience in higher education. The focus of this study is to now move to understanding if these same factors are present in the experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith based, PWI. How are their experiences the same or different? What can we take from previous research and what can be revealed through more focused research?
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine the college experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based institution, predominantly White (PWI) of higher education. It would seem after reading the previous review of literature that the research on minority retention and persistence points to more factors than any one institution could possibly have the ability to manage, and for some, to overcome. This is where the research designed in this study should help clarify the most prevalent factors influencing the experiences of Black men at private, faith-based, PWI’s who persisted to graduation. The conceptual framework represents the major factors that influence the college experience of Black males as found in the review of literature. Although informed by the literature review, the conceptual framework is a work in progress and may need to be revisited to reflect the results of this research study. Miles and Huberman call this the “researcher’s map of the territory” (1994). The research outlined in this study was conducted with a unique profile of participants and setting, therefore, findings reveal areas that are new or different from previous research studies.
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Factors that Influence the Experiences of Black Males at Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education
This research study examined Black male graduates’ reflections on their college experiences at a private, faith-based, PWI. The research questions in this study were intentionally designed to be broad as to allow for the participants to reflect on their personal journey through their undergraduate college experiences. The conceptual framework was based on the relevant research on the Black male experience in higher education and was only used to design the conceptual framework and the ranking exercise portion of the research. The following three research questions serve as the main focus of the study:

1. How do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe their college experiences?

2. What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key personal factors that contributed to their success? What were the personal obstacles they had to overcome in order to succeed?

3. What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key institutional factors that contributed to their success? What were the key institutional obstacles they had to overcome in order to succeed?

Research Method

For the purpose of this study a qualitative research study was conducted. The qualitative model of inquiry is appropriate for this research study because a deeper understanding of the “phenomenon” of the experiences of Black males who graduated
from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education is needed in the academy today. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), a qualitative research study is useful when an investigator is seeking to create a narrative of an incident or to gain an understanding of a specific environment or community. The qualitative method of inquiry allowed the research study to progress in a way where themes and meanings emerged as the phenomenon was described by participants in their own words and later analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. The qualitative approach to research lends itself especially well to studying students of color. Often minority student enrollment is small, thus making survey research difficult to draw perceptions and experiences due to the lack of critical mass participating in the study (Fetterman, 1991; Louis & Turner, 1991). The nature of qualitative research allowed for deeper understanding of the college journey of a small number of individuals experiencing the same phenomena; being a Black male attending a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education. Their collected stories formed a deep well of data from which to shape the themes that emerged through the analysis phase of the study.

According to Creswell (2003) qualitative research has five traditions of inquiry, including case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology. This research study utilized the phenomenological strategy which is an investigative process that seeks to understand a specific social situation, cohort, event, role, or interaction (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 1987). According to Moustakas, the phenomenological strategy of research is marked by an in-depth study of a small group of participants with the same “lived experience” in order to highlight relationships and themes that emerge as described by the participants (1994).
The goal of this research study was to capture the essence of the college experience of a group of Black males who graduated from a private, religiously affiliated, PWI by conducting individual in-depth interviews with the selected participants. The outcome of this phenomenological research was to make meaning of that experience from the various vantage points the participants presented. By utilizing the qualitative method of inquiry, the researcher takes the “data” collected through the one-on-one interviews and looks for ways to make sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, and developing themes through the analysis process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interview questions for this study were designed to be broad and open-ended, allowing the qualitative inquiry process to uncover, build, and form a holistic picture through analyzing the participants’ words (Creswell, 1998).

According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological research has nine core components:

1. how things appear visually;
2. focuses on revealing the elements of the lived experience as communicated by participants who “lived” the experience;
3. it formulates meaning and comprehension from processing specific situations or experiences;
4. provides detailed descriptions of experiences while resisting rationales;
5. research questions provide some direction toward formulation of overall themes and meanings;
6. the participants and the topic of the study are interrelated, yet participants offer personal reflections of their experiences contributing to understanding of the whole to form;

7. intersubjective reality is a constant throughout the research process: the participant’s experience is reality and each assign the meaning;

8. the data collected are the thoughts, perceptions, reflections, intuitions of the participants; and

9. the research question(s) must be carefully considered as it provides the direction of the study and the eventual thick description of the phenomenon.

The phenomenological method of research requires the researcher to put assumptions and opinions aside in order to allow the individual study participants to define the meaning of events, roles, and situations (Creswell, 2003). The phenomenological research approach was an ideal method in which to achieve the purpose of this study.

Sample Selection

The study participants were chosen because they experienced the phenomenon being considered: Black male graduates’ college experiences at a private, faith-based, PWI. The site selected for this study was a private, faith-based, PWI located in the Midwest. In the study the institution is referred to as Midwest University (MU).

According to Creswell, in qualitative research, in order to appreciate the phenomenon being studied, the researcher should purposefully select the study’s participants (2009). Because I have worked at Midwest University for 23 years, I am very familiar with the institution and believe it was an ideal institution for this study. MU has struggled with
supporting Black males but is interested in learning how they can partner with future students to achieve their educational goals.

Minority students comprise about 12% of the MU undergraduate residential student body. Of that 12%, almost seven percent are Black students. The six-year graduation rate for the Black freshman who started in the fall of 2004 is 35%. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the latest six-year graduation statistics available for Black males receiving a bachelor’s degree from a not-for-profit institution is 39% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Since MU’s most recent six-year graduation rate is comparable to national graduation rates, the Midwest University campus represents a microcosm of a widespread challenge for higher education. Understanding the experience of Black male graduates from MU may offer a glimpse for other similar institutions into the lives of their own students.

MU, like many PWI’s and public institutions of higher education, has good intentions toward seeing students, regardless of their race or gender, succeed. At MU these intentions manifest themselves through strategic plans, enrollment efforts, institutional statements on diversity, administrators hired to focus on diversity programming, and high level discussions on how to diversify the student, as well as faculty and staff populations. Yet the percentage of Blacks that MU and similar institutions graduate is significantly lower than all other genders and ethnicities (NCES, 2011). Hopefully, the results of this study will assist MU and possibly other PWI’s in moving from good intentions and episodic efforts to a more thorough understanding of their students and systemic changes needed to improve the success of Black males. This would be a win for the individual students, as well as the institutions.
Through assistance from the MU Department of Technology Services, participants in the study were drawn from the Black males who graduated within the last 10 years. The participants were individuals who enrolled at MU as first-time freshmen. On average, the institution enrolls approximately 12-18% minority and international students on a yearly basis, thus, it is considered a predominantly White campus (PWI). MU’s overall enrollment exceeds 4000 with approximately 1750 enrolled at the main campus in addition to several degree completion and graduate programs located at 13 centers across the state and in Ohio. Undergraduate tuition, room, board, and fees for the 2013-2014 academic year are $31,570. For the purpose of this study, only Black males, born in the United States, who graduated from the main campus completing a traditional four-year liberal arts program of study were invited to participate. Twelve individuals participated in the research study.

Data Collection

Once identified and the invitation to participate in the study was accepted, 12 graduates participated in the collection of the data. It took on average 90 minutes to complete each interview which was divided into four sections: short demographic survey, interviews, a ranking exercise and storytelling exercise. The invitation to participate explained the purpose of the study as well as garnered permission from each individual to record the interview. Recording each interview allowed the researcher to engage fully in the interview process and take notes as needed knowing she would later transcribe the recorded interviews.

The purpose of the interviews was to focus on the answers to the three previously mentioned research questions in order to understand the common experience of the
participants attending and graduating from a private, faith-based PWI. The semi-structured interviews took place face-to-face when possible as well as over the phone to accommodate a few participants who wanted to participate in the study but lived out of state.

The researcher followed an interview protocol. The interview protocol followed recommendations by Creswell (2003), which included a heading, instructions to the interviewer (opening statements), the key research questions, probes to follow key questions, transition messages for the interviewer, space for recording the interviewer’s comments, and space for the researcher to write reflective notes (p. 190).

The first section of the demographic survey was developed to accompany the interviews in order to provide a summary of the participants. Items on the demographic survey included age range while in college, college major, estimated parental income while in college, high school grade point average (gpa), college gpa, ACT/SAT, semesters as commuter/resident, marital status of parents, father’s level of schooling, and mother’s level of schooling. To make completing the demographic questionnaire easier for the participants, the researcher filled in as much information as was available through the college database including college gpa and major program of study.

The demographic information collected was used to describe the participants as a whole. The second and main section of the data collection session was the interview in which the participants answered questions related to their college experiences. This section included questions crafted to directly cover the three research questions. The semi-structured interview followed a list of open-ended questions designed to reveal the perceptions of the participants. The interview protocol is located in Appendix B.
The third and fourth sections of data collection were the ranking and storytelling exercises. Because Creswell (2009) encourages researchers to include data collection approaches outside the traditional qualitative interview or observation methods, these two exercises were included in the study. The ranking and storytelling approaches offered opportunities for the participants to articulate their experiences beyond responses to the interview questions which added richness to the data and understanding to their experiences.

For the ranking exercise, participants were asked to arrange in order of importance factors from the three sections represented in the conceptual framework: personal factors, college experiences, and institutional factors. Each of the factors or terms categorized under the three sections was presented on a worksheet where participants ranked the factors from most important to least important. The participants were then asked to share personal observations from the ranking exercise. In addition, the researcher observed the exercise when possible and took notes on the actual exercise, as well as the results and ensuing discussion with the participants. The 12 topics used in the ranking exercise included the following factors from the conceptual framework:

Personal Factors:
- Cognitive Variables (Pre-college ACT/GPA), Family Support, Parent’s Schooling, Spirituality

College Experiences:
- Campus Life/Climate, Student Engagement, Social Integration

Institutional Factors:
In the fourth and final section, the researcher asked the participants to answer the last question in story form. The question was, describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while you were in college that contributed to your success as a student. After the storytelling exercise, the researcher asked the participant to reflect on the story gleaning their insights into their own story. After the ranking and storytelling exercises, the researcher asked the participants if they had any reflections to add regarding the actual exercises in addition to the responses the exercises elicited.

Protection of Human Subjects

Approval for the study was granted by the Western Michigan University (WMU) Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). A copy of Western Michigan’s HSIRB approval was also shared with the institution from which the participants in the study graduated. To ensure the protection of the study participants, the researcher followed the informed consent protocol. Through the process of informed consent, potential study participants were contacted via email inviting their participation in the research study. The invitation included the goals of the study, explanation of the data collection and analysis methods, plan for protection of participant’s identity, and storage of data. Each participant signed a letter of consent which included their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Participants were also informed of the opportunity to review their interview transcript and invitation to clarify statements to add further understanding to their comments.
The identity of the participants was protected by assigning pseudonyms to the individuals. The interview data was secured in a locked cabinet when it was not being used by the researcher. At the conclusion of the study, the data will be held at Western Michigan University for three years. Invitation to participate and informed consent documents are located in Appendix B.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (1998), the qualitative data analysis process requires systematically examining, reviewing, and organizing interview transcripts to facilitate the understanding of the phenomena being studied. Some researchers have described the process as cyclical or spiral nature of discovery as the researcher works with the collected data, then organizing and narrowing the data to manageable codes, recognizing emerging patterns and themes that provide a multi-layered description of the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998). Moustakas calls this the essence description (1994).

During the analysis section of the study, the researcher followed the six steps of data analysis as described by Creswell (2003). The analysis was completed in the order the four sections of the data were collected, moving from the demographic information, to the interview questions, ranking exercise and ending with the storytelling exercise. Step One: the four different types of data collected were organized and prepared for analysis. The researcher collated the demographic information and ranking exercise data, as well as transcribed the taped interviews and storytelling sections. Transcription was aided by the use of Dragon Dictation software with each transcribed interview then being downloaded to qualitative analysis software, NVivo. Before analysis of the data the study participants read the full transcript of their interview in order to correct any errors
in the transcription process and to ensure the accuracy of the data. Minor corrections such as the spelling of names and high schools were made at this time. Field notes were taken by the researcher and later referred to in the data analysis phase.

Step Two: the researcher read through all the data and began to formulate a general framework of the information, as well as overarching direction. The researcher then looked for the emergence of primary and secondary themes. The researcher kept handwritten notes during this portion of the data analysis as overall impressions and emphasis began to coalesce as the researcher became more and more familiar with the data.

Step Three: with the assistance of NVivo, the researcher coded the data grouping similar ideas, paragraphs, segments, etc. into labeled multiple chunks. According to Creswell (2009), the most common approach is to allow the codes to emerge, what some would describe as organically, through the data analysis process rather than leaning on previously established a priori codes based on other research. With that said, Creswell encourages researchers to analyze the data looking for codes one would anticipate finding and those that add further support for established theories on the topic being researched. The researcher should also be prepared to discern the need for codes that are new and not on the radar of the researcher, as well as codes that are unique but appear to be consistent with the participants’ description of their experiences. Creswell (2009) encourages researchers to look for “in vivo” terms, which become labels or categories for the vernacular spoken by a participant during the data collection process. Through reading the data several times, dominant themes, as well as emerging themes were revealed and are described in chapter four.
Step Four: once the data was coded, the researcher used the codes and demographic information to create a general description of the participants and overall reflections. Between two and six themes emerged from each research question which formed the findings of the study.

Step Five: the researcher then created a narrative description for each finding. The narrative included the primary themes supported by personal experiences, stories, and quotes shared by the participants during the three verbal sections of the data collection and the demographic data when appropriate. Because two of the three research questions asked participants to reflect on both the personal and institutional contributors and obstacles to their success, multiple themes naturally formed around personal obstacles and contributors to their success and institutional obstacles and contributors to the participants’ success which yielded 14 total themes.

Step Six: in chapter five the researcher presented her findings from the study and compared the results to literature review and established theories.

Reliability and Validity

As with any research, it was important to collect and analyze the data through processes and procedures proven to yield reliable results. Unlike quantitative analyses that are subject to statistical procedures to determine the significance of the data, qualitative analysis utilizes reliability procedures to ensure credibility (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell (1998) encourages using at least two procedures to ensure the reliability of the researcher’s data analysis methods. To ensure reliability, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts paying close attention to identify and correct errors made during the transcription process. In order to avoid code “drift” the researcher crafted definitions
for the codes and frequently reviewed the data with the codes to ensure each code was
applied to the appropriate piece of data. Nvivo allowed the researcher to create
definitions as codes were identified. This feature in Nvivo assisted the researcher in
revisiting the definitions and the process of constantly comparing and contrasting
statements being analyzed.

A final strategy to ensure accuracy of this research study’s findings was to look
for intercoder agreement between two coders who analyzed the transcripts. This research
represents a modified version of Cohen’s kappa because the second coder coded only the
data that was chosen to represent the study findings. Cohen’s kappa required two coders
to code portions of the transcripts to check for inter-rater reliability in how the codes
were assigned to the data. Again, with the help of research software, NVivo, Cohen’s
kappa used a mathematical equation to measure the level of agreement between two
researchers who coded the same data as opposed to researchers assigning the same codes
to qualitative data by pure chance (Cohen, 1960). The results of Cohen’s kappa will be
reported in chapter five and a full table is available in Appendix A labeled Table A1.

The second coder used in the study to determine Cohen’s kappa works in
intercultural education at MU. Like the participants in the study, he is an African
American college graduate and has worked in the education profession for several years.
His specific area of higher education experience has focused on college access,
persistence, and cultural competency.

In qualitative research, Creswell (2009) warns of the potential of researcher
influence over study results when the same researcher is involved in carrying out the
data collection and analysis process. In order to ensure the accuracy of the findings and
eliminate potential researcher bias, the researcher incorporated member-checking and triangulation in the analysis process. Member-checking involved enlisting the assistance of two study participants to read the final chapter in full in order to offer feedback on the accuracy and or agreement with the study findings. These results will be discussed in chapter five.

Triangulation of the data occurred when the researcher analyzed patterns from the ranking exercise and storytelling data comparing them to the codes that emerged through the interview data. The triangulation process revealed strong convergence between the streams of data that yielded consistency and strengthening of the study themes even though the sources of the data came through different study participants and varied collection methods, including the interview, ranking, and storytelling exercises. Most themes discussed in chapter four will highlight when multiple streams of the data support the shaping of the research themes.

Reporting Data

The research questions for this study provided the basis, as well as structure in which the data is reported in chapters four and five. The intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of Black males who successfully graduated from a private, faith-based PWI by asking them to reflect on their college experiences.

Because of the different streams of data in this research project, it was a challenge to organize the data and report it in a fashion that made it easy to follow. In addition to traditional qualitative methods of reporting, the data by the use of quotes, examples, and illustrations from the verbal sections of the interviews, some of the data is presented in table form. Creswell (2003) calls this quantifying the qualitative data. Using the themes
identified through the data analysis process, the researcher created a chart to display which participants mention the different themes. The actual codes and eventual themes used in the table were identified through the analysis of the collected data. These tables are available in Appendix A labeled A2 and A3.

In chapter four, the first results discussed are the findings of the demographic survey. Again, following in the order of the three research questions, the analysis from the streams of data addresses each research question fully before moving to the next.

Role of the Researcher

Because qualitative research involves “the researcher as the instrument” (Merriam, 1998), it is important for me, as the principle research instrument, to identify my background and personal impetus for studying this topic. Merriam (1998) goes on to say, “both parties bring bias, predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that color the interaction and the data elicited. A skilled interviewer accounts for these factors in order to evaluate the data being obtained” (p.87). So why would a White, middle-class female be interested in studying the experiences of Black male college students?

My connection to this topic is influenced by the 23 years I have spent working in higher education at a private, faith-based, PWI. I started my professional career as an admissions counselor at my alma-mater, a private, faith-based, PWI in the Midwest. Early in my career, I began to notice too many of the students I recruited to come to my institution did not make it past their first or second year. I observed this to be especially true for Black males. Later, that observation turned into hard facts as I moved into the Director of Retention role at that same institution. I found the situation baffling and
through research, discovered the majority of higher education was profoundly struggling with retaining Black males to graduation.

Despite the best efforts of our retention programs, student services, and caring community, our ability as an institution to increase Black male graduation rates faltered. Yet, some in this population of students did graduate. Through my work at the institution, I knew Black males who did persist to graduation. What made their journey through college so different than those who did not graduate? I have personal thoughts and opinions based on my interaction with students over the years, but what would they say when asked about their personal journey? A great deal of research has been conducted surrounding the topic of minority attrition mostly focusing on why students do not persist. The unique twist this research was designed to consider is what can be learned from the experience of those Black males who do persist to graduation at a private, faith-based, PWI. Much of the published research I found was conducted at mainly large PWI and institutions located in urban settings.

Because of my employment status with MU, the institution from which the participants graduated, I had some familiarity with most of the research participants. As a campus administrator, some participants held a certain perception of me or my role. Once the participants understood the goals of the study and assurance of the protection of their identities, I encountered very little reluctance to participate in the study. Research protocols outlined by Western Michigan University’s Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) were followed to assure study participants and subsequent collected data was safeguarded and treated with respect. The participants were also informed that the data
collected through the study would be held for three years by the principal investigator at Western Michigan State University.

The phenomenological research approach seeks to consider how individual participants interact with the phenomenon being studied. The review of literature does present background for the problem or issue being considered, and the researcher has a prolonged exposure and interest in the topic being studied. Even so, the research was conducted without preconceived notions in order for this group of study participants’ personal experiences, perspectives and ideas to form the data that was analyzed and for the themes to emerge organically rather that prescriptively. In qualitative research, Creswell emphasizes literature is used in a manner consistent with the assumptions of learning from the participant, and not prescribing the questions that need to be answered from the researcher’s standpoint (2003).

It was my goal as a practitioner in the field of education to use my knowledge and experience in higher education to gain the trust of the research participants. It was my overall impression that the participants understood the value of the research study and considered their participation as a partnership with me towards deepening the understanding of their experiences with the hope of better serving future students.

Research Setting

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the site selected for this study was Midwest University (MU). According to Creswell, when conducting qualitative research, in order to appreciate the phenomenon being studied, the researcher should purposefully select the study’s participants (2009). MU has historically struggled with supporting Black males but is interested in learning how they can partner with future students to achieve their
educational goals. Because the researcher has worked at MU for 23 years, she was familiar with the institution and believed it was an ideal setting for the study. A description of the research setting and why it was selected was summarized earlier in this chapter.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the college experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, PWI. The qualitative model of inquiry was an appropriate research method as it provided the framework for researcher to pursue a deeper understanding of the “phenomenon” of the college experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), a qualitative research study is useful when an investigator is seeking to gain an understanding of a specific environment or community. In addition to the data that was collected through in-depth interviews, data collected through a demographic survey, ranking exercise, and storytelling exercise was analyzed and factored into the study results.

The phenomenological approach allowed for multiple in-depth interviews of participants with the shared experiences of enrolling in and graduating from a private, faith-based, PWI. In addition, this approach allowed the research study to progress in a way where themes and meanings emerged as the phenomenon was described by participants in their own words and later analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. Through the analysis process themes emerged, as Moustakas (1994) describes, depicting the “essence” of this shared experience.
During the analysis section of the study, the researcher followed the six steps of data analysis outlined by Creswell (2003). The analysis was completed in the order the four sections of data was collected, moving from the demographic information, to the interview questions, ranking exercise and ending with the storytelling exercise.

Finally, chapter three also outlined the role of the researcher, research setting and steps that were completed to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings. Chapters four and five will discuss the study results as well as recommendations and conclusions.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to take an in-depth look at the college experiences of 12 Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education. What can be learned from these men as they reflect on their college experiences and as demographic information is examined as well? The research was designed with the intent to answer the research question: What are the critical factors within the experience of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education? What factors contributed to their success and what obstacles did they overcome to be successful?

The results are reported by answering each of the three research questions integrating the different streams of data completely before moving to the following research question. Each research question is followed by at least two to six themes. Each theme is introduced by a table featuring a quote from the participants, who during the collection of data, illustrated the theme through their own words. Pertinent research from the literature review and how it correlates with the themes and sub-themes of this study are discussed in Chapter Five. Again, the research questions include:

1. How do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe their college experiences?

2. What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key
personal factors that contributed to their success? What personal obstacles had to be overcome in order to succeed?

3. What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key institutional factors that contributed to their success? What key institutional obstacles had to be overcome in order to succeed?

Because research questions two and three asked the participants to reflect on personal and institutional factors that contributed to their success, as well as obstacles they had to overcome, the themes for those questions are presented using those same terms. Research question two has three themes under the personal contributor theme and three themes under the personal obstacle theme. Research question three follows the same structure with three themes under the institutional contributor theme and three themes under the institutional obstacle theme. For each theme, the pertinent data collected through the ranking and storytelling exercises are included.

The four streams of data collected included a demographic survey, interview, ranking exercise, and storytelling exercise. In order to provide an overview of the 12 participants, a summary of the demographic survey is presented first in the section titled, Participants. Following the demographic summary, a brief overview of the three other streams of data and their contribution to fortifying the themes is provided. Each response to the research questions will integrate the relevant sources of data.

Participants

After approval from the institution’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and support from the Provost, the Department of Technology Services provided a list of
Black males who graduated from the university since 2001. Twenty individuals were originally invited to participate, and the researcher finally secured 12 participants after multiple attempts to contact the 20 graduates who met the study criteria. As mentioned previously, all but two participants fully completed the data collection pieces. The Office of Financial Aid and Technology Services provided access to some of the demographic information on the research participants.

The demographic data collected helps provide a full picture of the 12 participants as a whole. Because of the small number of participants and the relatively small institution, for the most part the information is being provided as aggregate, averages, or in ranges so as to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The participants graduated between 2001 and 2012. The average number of semesters to graduation was nine, with seven participants graduating in 10 semesters; two finishing in eight semesters (one with a double major); one in nine semesters; one in 11; and one in 12. All of the participants were enrolled full time every semester with two taking part time course loads as they neared completion of their graduation requirements.

The group’s estimated high school grade point average (GPA) was 2.90 and actual college GPA was 2.91. The participants’ final college GPA ranged from 2.02 to 3.42 on a 4.0 scale. The average ACT for the participants was 20.5 with a range between 15 and 27. Three of the participants were on the Dean’s List and recognized for their academic achievements; seven of the 12 participants were placed on academic probation with three participants qualifying for academic dismissal at some point during their college careers. Two participants who qualified for dismissal appealed their dismissals and were approved to continue enrollment on academic probation. The other
academically dismissed participant later returned to the institution transferring in a few credits from another college before eventually graduating from Midwest University.

Eleven of the participants are defined as traditional college age students. Bean and Metzner (1985) state the definition of a traditional college age student ranges between 18-24 years of age, with an average age of 17.6 as entering freshman (1985). Because the university requires all single students under the age of 22 to live in campus housing, 11 of the 12 participants lived on campus for at least six semesters with one moving off campus after he got married and one moving off campus when he turned 22 years old.

The family structure of the participants varied. Four of the participants’ parents were never married, four were married, three divorced, and one widowed. Of the 12, only three were first-generation college students with nine having at least one parent with an associate’s, bachelors, master’s, or doctoral degree. This fact is surprising because approximately 40% of students attending Midwest University are first-generation college students. This will be discussed further in chapter five.

The final family-related piece of information collected was family income. From information gathered through Technology Services and Financial Aid, the average household income for the participants was $44,212, which is slightly higher than the Black head of household incomes as reported previously in the literature review. The household income for the two married participants was not used because their financial aid status was considered independent. Thus, the $44,212 average and range from $8,794 to $99,288 is from the 10 participants who were dependent students according to the financial application for federal student aid.
The academic majors of the participants included three business administration (one double major); two art, two communication (one double major); two HIS/Social Science majors; one psychology; one worship arts, and one English major.

It was not overly difficult for the researcher to secure participation from the 12 participants for the study. As will become apparent later in chapter four, the participants enjoyed their college experience and were glad to share their stories. The participants were highly cooperative and grateful to share details from their experience with the hope that further understanding common characteristics as well as nuances from their college journey would benefit future students. The researcher felt a sense of partnership with the participants that eventually transformed into a felt responsibility to represent their lived experiences in way that honored these men individually and could perhaps impact the way higher education serves the coming generations of Black males.

As previously summarized, these men came from various backgrounds and were headed in diverse directions. Yet, common among these men was a hope that a college education would help them achieve the goals they set for themselves and the internal determination essential to transcend the challenges along that path. These men were resourceful and used the resources around them well. They were courageous, yet humble enough to ask for assistance from their support systems. The men were aware of their accomplishment but not prideful. Rather, they all shared a sense of accomplishment knowing many of their Black male peers never enrolled or left college before earning their degrees. They shared their stories with transparency and were careful to recognize how other individuals, as well as communities contributed positively to their college experience.
Integrating the Three Major Data Sources

*Interviews*

Through analyzing the qualitative data collected during the interviews, it became apparent that each participant’s experience was riddled with different types of challenges; yet, the support to face and overcome these challenges varied and was a common thread among their stories. The lifeline they each had in common was a healthy support system outside of themselves through one or all of the following entities: family, their faith, the college community, specific campus mentors, and peers. These sources of support emerged as the themes for the study as participants described in detail how important the support received through these different relationships contributed to their overall experience, success, and persistence to graduation.

The interview questions were structured in such a way as to extract the essence of the participants’ college experience. In addition to the interview section of the data collection, the ranking and storytelling exercises reinforced the themes found from analyzing the interview transcripts. The analysis yielded themes that provided insight into the answers to the three research questions with the ranking and storytelling exercises contributing additional layers of understanding beyond the answers to the open-ended interview questions.

*Ranking Exercise*

During the data collection process, participants were asked to rank order 12 items from the conceptual framework. Participants were asked to arrange in order of importance with the rank of one having the greatest impact on their ability to persist in college through 12 having the least impact on their college experience (see table 2).
Faculty interaction received the highest ranking followed by family, spirituality, financial aid, then tied for number five was classroom experience and social integration (involvement/integration into social life), and seven through 12 in order were engagement (involvement in academic or co-curricular programs); cognitive variables (academic capability); campus ethos (overall feel on campus as a whole); campus life (activities, student life); socio-economic status (family income) and parents’ schooling.

From observing some participants through the ranking exercise and answering just a few questions about the exercise, the participants appeared to enjoy the interview portion of the data collection process more than this exercise. For the participants, the exercise may have felt more like a survey collecting quantitative data because the terms were prescribed due to their appearance in the relevant research and not the participants’ own words and reflections. The participants’ collective rankings did affirm some of the study themes discussed later in this chapter.
Table 2

*Ranking Exercise Participants’ Averaged Results*

1 = most impact on ability to persist, 12 = least impact on ability to persist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Faculty Interaction</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
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<td>Classroom Experience</td>
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<td>Tie 5</td>
<td>Social Integration</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
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<td>Cognitive Variables</td>
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<td>Campus Ethos</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Campus Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Socio-economic Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Parents’ Schooling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Storytelling Exercise*

The storytelling exercise yielded information that was most helpful in answering research questions two and three. The participants were asked to describe an event (one-time or repeated) while in college that contributed to their success as a student. Ten out of the 12 participants chose to tell stories about overcoming challenges, such as academic
struggles, family difficulties or physical injuries as opposed to an “enjoyable” experience. For the most part, participants described events where they faced difficult circumstances, sometimes created by their own choices, and at other times, out of their control.

Themes

The next section is organized approaching each of the research questions with themes found through the data collection process. Each response to the research questions integrates the three sources of data. Because not all of the themes were of equal strength, a decision rule was created to identify which themes were dominant in the research and which themes were determined to be emerging. The dominant themes were those themes that were mentioned by at least seven of the 12 participants. Although the emerging themes were mentioned by less than one-half of the participants, a broader range of factors contributed to their inclusion into the compilation of the themes. Some emerging themes undergird a few of the dominant themes and their inclusion expands the overall description and understanding of the participants’ college experiences.

Research Question One

How do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe their college experiences?

Nine out of the 12 participants’ immediate or instinctual responses were to characterize their overall college experience using simple terms like “enjoyable” and “good.” As they continued the interview and expounded towards a more detailed description of their undergraduate experience, they often then moved to relaying examples and explanations of different types of support they were given. It became
apparent that support, offered by those connected to the institution and within their circle of relationships, would be a common thread for the participants.

*College Experience Theme 1: Enjoyable Experience*

For research question one regarding the overall college experience, as informants described their time at Midwest University, enjoyable experience became the first theme. The following table illustrates this theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Enjoyable experience is a dominant theme of the study because nine out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, is presented to support this particular theme.
The first question participants were asked in the interview portion of the data collection was to describe their overall college experience. This was a great warm-up question for participants with some offering short responses while others went into great detail about their college days. Collectively what they communicated clearly to the researcher was their overall positive feelings towards their undergraduate journey.

Ron shared that prior to college he had a good foundation but was ready to experience the next phase of life on his own in college:
College was everything I wanted it to be. Midwest University was far enough away from home that I had to develop on my own. I was trained up very well, but even with good training, you have to branch out. I enjoyed living with other people, learning how to conduct myself, how I measured up against myself, other people, other African Americans. Just how I would be out on my own. It was very good because I started out college very quiet, very to myself, but I had some things I wanted to do.

Participants were asked to describe their “overall” college experience. Their choice of adjectives ranged from positive words, such as “good or enjoyable” to superlatives, such as “phenomenal and life changing.”

Clark pointed out that even though college required hard work to achieve success, it could still be enjoyed:

My overall college experience was enjoyable. I mean, I did put in a lot of hard work, of course, because you can’t graduate without putting in some hard work and dedication to the studies. But I really don't have any, any bad experiences, not that I can remember, ya know, during those college years. It was pretty enjoyable. We’ll use that word.

Even though Jay would later go into detail about both positive and negative college experiences, he described his overall experience this way:

I absolutely tell everyone that I loved Midwest University. …so my overall experience…was just phenomenal. I really liked the academics from the professors to the college life, the little city. Just really wonderful. So I really enjoyed the overall college experience and it just made me feel back at home.
Joe’s reflection on his time in college was with an awareness that an institution like Midwest University may not be for everyone. He described his overall experience this way:

I liked it. I have to admit that umm, I think Midwest University was perfect for me. Just the way that I am, you know what I mean? My personality and just how I interact with people, and so I think I really enjoyed it. It was good.

Lamont voiced his appreciation that Midwest University was a Christian college, which made it a good fit for him. His response also reflects that, while being acutely aware he was a minority, that reality did not negatively impact his overall experience:

…A lot more easier for me being in a Christian environment. I never really initially got a feeling that I was like the odd one out, the people at Midwest, you know, were very receptive I had a great time in college.

Todd’s response communicated that his college experience was multi-faceted. Without prompting, Todd mentioned how his time in college was positive in several dimensions:

I loved it. I definitely wouldn't trade it for the world. The best five years of my life. A lot of ups and downs, but my ups far outnumbered my downs…very, very healthy for me spiritually and very healthy for me academically and as well as socially. Yeah, it was just a great experience overall.

*College Experience Theme 2: Struggle, Discouragement, and Stress*

For research question one regarding the overall college experience, the second theme is struggle, discouragement, and stress. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Struggle,
discouragement, and stress is a dominant theme because nine out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be included to support this particular theme.

Table 4

*College Experience Theme 2: Struggle, Discouragement, and Stress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;A lot of ups and downs but my ups far outnumbered my downs…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>“There was pressure for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>&quot;The discouragement really just came from, from the finances for the most part.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;My own dad wasn't in the picture and didn't know anything so I had that stress...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;...to take the mental toll...tough being away at school...knowing that my family was struggling and wanting to help...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;I was part-time here and you're going to school and it was just chaotic.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>&quot;And I think somewhat having a tragedy happen, you know, helps bring out things that, you know.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>&quot;Especially after that time because I was just as emotional, just as emotionally strung out as everyone else.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;My relationship with my father went through a lot of turmoil…&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although nine of the 12 participants, or 75%, initially expressed positive feelings about their college journey, as the interview process went on, that same number also recounted times of struggle, discouragement and stress. This section will present the Struggle, discouragement, and stress theme as a common experience for nine of the 12 participants. Listening to the description of their stressors, it is apparent that some of their stress was self-imposed but also closely linked with discouragement due to financial pressures and family issues. As will be mentioned later in research question two, three of the participants’ mindset was that college was the best option to guide them towards providing for the type of life they wanted for themselves. That mindset alone could be stressful as the men watched some of their peers drop out of college. Later, research questions two and three will present the institutional and personal obstacles or stressors the participants faced in more detailed themes and descriptions.

Ron came to Midwest University knowing what he wanted out of his college experience. His main sources of stress came from his sense of responsibility to represent his family well, wanting to graduate from college in four years, and difficulty getting along with other minority students. Ron described his overall college experience as positive, yet it was clear he put a lot of pressure on himself. Ron had an idea of what he wanted out of college, and he said he accomplished that at Midwest University. Ron felt a great sense of pride as he reflected on what he accomplished during his college career.

Ron set high expectations for himself. During his interview, Ron shared that he wanted to graduate in four years and “see how he measured up against himself, other people, other African Americans,” as well as “get into the gym and do things on my own.” Ron told two stories about the difficulty he had settling on a major. He first chose
music but needed extra tutoring in order to do well in basic music theory. He then chose math but encountered his only failing grade in Calculus One. Even with trying out different majors, he had no intention of taking more than four years to complete his college degree. In fact, he had to petition to take a class by tutorial in order to finish his degree in four years. Ron described his family as incredibly supportive, yet he called himself a “trailblazer,” as he was the first male in his family to go immediately from high school to college:

There was pressure for me. Then I had twin brothers and I was leaving home.

They were just seven-eight years old and they were just coming into their own. I was leaving home. I was missing out on that. It was a big transition. My family showed up big during that. They showed me how much they wanted me to excel.

It wasn’t easy for me. Knowing that I made them proud.

Clark’s discouragement was tied to the constant stress of figuring out how to pay for college which in turn caused him to struggle in the classroom. It was difficult for Clark to rate either his financial or academic challenges one over the other. Clark said that at times he was not motivated academically because he was discouraged about sufficient financial aid and personal resources to stay in college. Clark battled between discouragement and lack of motivation but said his family was one of the support systems that was always there for him:

Yeah, they were always, always making sure I was still focused and when I did get discouraged they always helped as well, ya know, getting me back, finding, finding the motivation because that was just the struggle that I was having, I guess. I don't think I was really ready, per se, to start college when I did, but, they
definitely helped making sure that I understood that I needed to, to push through and not be discouraged like I was.

When Ocean first enrolled at Midwest University he had recently been divorced and was a young father. Ocean shared that he really wasn’t engaged in college at that time due to the stress of the divorce and sharing custody of their child. He said that because his own father was not involved in his life, he experienced the stress of trying to figure out fatherhood and be a college student. This was all too much for him to handle and focus on his courses. Ocean ended up leaving Midwest University only to return a few years later. When Ocean re-enrolled he said he was more open to utilizing the academic and other support systems, and this time around, when “he felt low” because of personal issues he was more receptive to the help others offered.

Billy was an outgoing and capable student. For a while he did well in his classes and became a student leader. He loved Midwest University and although not a perfect place, Billy enjoyed college. As Billy continued in college and faced mounting tension from back home due to financial and personal family crisis, the weight of being a source of strength to his family and in his student leadership role started to weigh on him. Billy shared that although he knew better, he was not open with the extent of his struggles:

But I know a lot of that was just my lack of coping skills of the stress I was experiencing both as a student with the responsibilities on campus and at home. And, you know, in a moment of honesty, not be honest with the people that were supposed to be my support system and how much I was struggling until I got really bad.
Billy’s family situation was unique, and because he was the oldest son in a single-parent home, he felt a sense of responsibility and described the “personal internal struggle” to hold it together for them, so much so that it impacted his own emotional strength:

Like, life is life and it rains on the just and unjust alike. But at the same time, it definitely had an effect on me, and it had an effect on my motivation and where my spirits were in the way I was wrestling with depression. So I was like how do you take a situation like that? The consequences of what you're experiencing are inevitable, but you don't want it to be an excuse. But it is affecting you, and that was just a tough thing throughout the entire course of college.

Jay is another participant who set high expectations for himself, partially because his support system outside of Midwest University was not strong. Being from a single-parent home, Jay could not depend on financial assistance from his mother to help pay for college. Financially, Jay was on his own. During college Jay sometimes worked three part-time jobs while taking 21-24 credit hours when the maximum regular load was 15. He was motivated to finish his double-major in four years. Jay described his life as “chaotic” and at times “just barely getting by.” Even though he said that at different points in his college career that “life had hit me and I just didn’t know what to do,” he still managed to work full time most semesters, double major, get married, have a baby and graduate on time. Any combination of just two of those going on at the same time would cause stress, but Jay simultaneously juggled all those responsibilities.

Tony’s parents divorced when he was 13 because his father abused drugs and alcohol. Although since that time Tony and his father have reconciled and are best
friends, his relationship with his father was difficult on him. Tony said that his relationship with his father was “full of turmoil” especially during his sophomore and junior years. He described one particular Christmas holiday when he visited his father they argued and fought a lot:

I would like to, to think that I didn't really allow that to affect my performance at school but I think that it did. I thought about it a lot, umm, was kind of depressed about it for a while and so, but I don't know how much. I mean, I think if I look back those are probably, especially my sophomore year that was the year that I did the worst academically...

The reflections of the participants evenly represented that their experience at Midwest University was enjoyable overall. As mentioned earlier, “enjoyable” was the instinctual response for nine out of the 12 participants. The second theme, struggle, discouragement and stress, emerged through digging further into the responses to multiple interview questions and the storytelling exercise, not just through their responses to research question one. This theme came later on in the data analysis process as the researcher had already moved towards developing themes for research questions two and three.

Research Question Two and Three

Because research questions two and three asked the participants to reflect on personal and institutional factors that contributed to their success as well as obstacles they had to overcome, the themes for those questions will be presented using those same terms. For research question two, the six themes are organized under the personal contributor and personal obstacle themes. The personal contributor themes include self-
eficacy, family support, and faith to face challenges. The personal obstacle themes include academic challenges, coping with suspension or dismissal from college, and minority sub-community drama. For research question three, the six themes are organized under the institutional contributor and institutional obstacle themes. The institutional contributor themes include supportive community, campus mentors’ support, and peer support. The institutional obstacle themes include minority fatigue, paying for college, and campus policy disconnect.

The recognition of the tremendous support the participants received during college came through in the interviews. Whether the participants were talking about the institution, family or their relationship with God, their recognition and appreciation for various forms of support was a common thread among all the participants. The participants attributed their persistence largely to institutional support offered by the university and personal support found in their family and relationship with God. Personally, they succeeded because of their self-efficacy, which was often but not always, bolstered by the support of those who influenced who they were due to family relationships or their individual belief in God.

Every one of the 12 participants clearly delineated the different types of support that was available to them both formally and informally. The 12 participants’ description of the college experiences, including real-life examples and personal stories, emphasized the importance of their own self-efficacy and various forms of family support as providing the underpinnings of their successful experiences in college. Along their college journey these varied types of support were important to overcome the obstacles
they faced. The appendix will provide a full summary of the themes and which participants specifically mentioned the theme in their interview.

Research Question Two

What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key personal factors that contributed to their success? Were there personal obstacles they had to overcome in order to succeed?

Personal Contributor Themes

As was mentioned in the literature review, dating back to the early nineties, authors, including Edwards and Polite (1992), suggest researchers conduct studies allowing students of color to tell the stories of their educational journeys in their own words. Another higher education researcher, Cuyjet (1997), encourages researchers to explore Black males’ unique individuality instead of looking at all students of color or even all Black students in one category. This research was designed to do what was recommended by Edwards, Polite, and Cuyjet in that Black males were asked in their own words to reflect on their college experience. This research question puts the focus on the participants, asking for insights on the personal resources that were useful in their pursuit of a college degree, as well as identifying personal obstacles they had to overcome in order to persist.

The personal contributor themes that emerged through the data analysis include self-efficacy, family support, and faith to face challenges. The participants also identified three personal obstacle themes which included academic challenges, coping with dismissals or suspensions, and minority sub-community drama.
Personal Contributor Theme 1: Self-Efficacy

For research question two regarding personal contributors to the participants’ college success, the first theme is self-efficacy. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interviews to substantiate the theme. Self-efficacy is a dominant theme because eight out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme but, in the researcher’s opinion, all of the informants modeled the spirit of this theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 5

Personal Contributor Theme 1: Self-Efficacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;It was not a choice for me to not graduate from college.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>“I already had my own plan.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>&quot;...I need the degree to get doors open.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>&quot;It wasn't even a thought in college to not graduate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>&quot;I knew I was going to finish and that was my mentality.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>&quot;That wasn't an option. Wasn't an option. I had to graduate. That wasn't an option for me.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;It was never really an option for me not to graduate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>&quot;But persevering is what defines a man.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;So no matter what obstacles came up, I was going to graduate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One definition of self-efficacy from the Collins English Online Dictionary (2013) is, “the capacity or quality for producing or being successful in producing a desired result or effect.” All 12 study participants were asked if they had ever considered not graduating and, if so, what contributed to those thoughts; 10 responded almost verbatim that “quitting was not an option.” The participants were unwavering in their resolution that they would graduate, if not from Midwest University, from some other college. Ocean said it was not “if” he would graduate but “when,” and no obstacle was going to keep him from graduating. Even if it took him longer to graduate, he was going to achieve that goal. Joe’s comments were similar to Ocean’s when he said this about leaving college, “That wasn't an option. Wasn’t an option. I had to graduate. That wasn't an option for me.” Ocean and Joe’s comments represent the emphatic attitudes of the other 12 participants’ belief that they would finish college.

Although the vast majority of the participants said that “quitting was not an option,” their motivation for getting their college degree varied. Several participants recognized that they represented their families as well as themselves; Josh, David, and Jay said that for Black men, getting an education was the best option for making a living; Tony, Lamont, and Ocean literally never imagined that anything could stop them from finishing their degree. These men were focused on a goal and their journeys were paved with challenges, failures, and successes, yet their “quitting was not an option” attitude was pervasive and may have been the backbone that supported them to succeed.

Todd said that it was not that the idea of quitting never entered his mind he just did not allow himself to entertain the idea for too long. Like research supports, many Blacks believe that an education is the only solution to creating the life that they want for
themselves. Todd said that leaving college was not a viable option for him and graduating was a dream he had not only for himself but as a representative of his family as well:

I think I may have considered it [quitting school] but it never stayed in my mind very long. I couldn't. It was not a choice for me to not graduate from college… I’m the kind of person, I always want to prove myself and so being the first male to graduate college straight out of high school from either side of my family is well is more than I could ever imagine.

Jay recognized in himself that he had what he called a “high tolerance for self-help,” which meant that he was confident in his ability to achieve. For Jay, graduating from college was most certainly a goal he identified even before entering college, and he knew he “had to do the work myself” in order to be successful. He shared appreciation for many advisors who directed and encouraged him, but as he put it, “I already had my own plan.” Jay displayed a high level of determination and perseverance to graduate with a double major while working full time, getting married, and having a child all within four years of college.

Josh recognized that a high percentage of Black males did not enroll in and graduate from college. Somehow, he knew the value of a college education and recognized that a college degree would be the key to the future he had in mind for himself:

I think as far as being a Black male and graduating college, it's a thing where you have to come to realization that there's not many of us doing it... you know it's hard for us black men to get jobs in the first place. So, like, we have to have a
degree…it opens so many doors and I need the degree to get doors open. To get the type of life I want…and the type of life that I want my kids to have.

Like several others, Lamont said he never considered not graduating from college, “I knew what my goal was.” In fact, Lamont said that during his college experience he did not face many obstacles that would have kept him from finishing his degree:

I didn't really have a whole lot of obstacles that would prevent me from graduating. I knew what my goal was. I had some tough classes here and there but it wasn't anything that I didn’t feel like I could overcome. Yeah, I never really, I've never, I never considered not graduating college. I did everything in high school. I studied first before I did crazy stuff. In college I felt the same way. It wasn't even a thought in college to not graduate. So yeah, no, I never consider not graduating.

Rex continually kept his focus on graduation and believed that he could achieve his goal:

Graduating was always on my mind. It was always on my mind, but more just the fact that I knew I had to get it done. More to the fact of money, I knew I was going to finish and that was my mentality.

During the open-ended questions portion of the interview, one of the participants called himself a trailblazer because he was the first in his family to attend and then graduate from college right after high school. Even though another participant other than Joe used that term, the following stories told by Joe represent his and other participants’ college experiences very well. During the storytelling portion of the data collection, Joe
told two stories that he said, “…contributed to the success and the extent of the character that I have.”

It’s apparent that the reason Joe told these two particular stories was because they represent the fact that he was active and engaged in bringing minority students together and found Midwest University was a place that encouraged and appreciated his thoughts and ideas. The first story Joe told was about how he and fellow minority students spearheaded the formation of the first Midwest University Gospel Choir:

I guess it had to be like third or second year and a lot of the African-American students wanted some kind of outlet, and now we had music but they were never able to really do anything or never put anything together. So we got together the Gospel Choir and tried it from there. I was trying at that point to get, umm, you know get the use of the rooms and the things like that and really started to evolve and really went well. And I was pleased we were actually able to do something in chapel and we were able to contribute to chapel instead of just being a participant…The first time we ever did Gospel Fest it was a very small event but it went well. It was wonderful because we had to get down in the trenches and get people involved enough to do something, so it worked out. I learned from that that all you have to have is idea and the people around you will support the idea. Joe’s second story again speaks to his interest in being a part of the Midwest University student community and how he and his close friends took it upon themselves to organize a few social events for the campus:

I remember, too, that we did an interesting event. One of the fun events that we did there. Was ahh, we did a movie night where we had taken both lecture halls
and turned them into movie theaters. But we couldn’t continue that because I think somebody thought that we were selling tickets to it. We were able to do the popcorn out in the lobby. We weren't charging tickets for it. We were just getting people to come out. In my eyes, it was very successful and it was something that involved the rest of the campus community. Umm, so I enjoy doing that. I guess what I should've done at Midwest University was try a bit more to incorporate my business into being on being there on campus. But umm, that's all I can think of. It was just a good time. It was a good time, I don't have any regrets.

**Personal Contributor Theme 2: Family Support**

For research question two regarding personal contributors to the participants’ college success, family support is the second theme. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Family support is a dominant theme because a total of nine out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme and it is well supported by data collected from the ranking and storytelling exercises. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercises will also be presented to support this particular theme.
Table 6

*Personal Contributor Theme 2: Family Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>“…having parents who finished and that was a big deal for me.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;...there was never any discussion in my house about anything other than going to college after high school.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>&quot;I think a lot of people don't have a father or the confidence to follow through.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>&quot;...they were the ones that have always pushed me throughout my whole life really.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>&quot;I definitely had my family, my mom, my sister and even my church were really supportive of me while I went to college.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Todd      | "My family wouldn't have would have done whatever they could."
| Ron       | "I have a very supportive family." |
| David     | "I guess for my dad it would probably be moral support." |
| Billy     | "...leaving for five years to go away to go to school made things a lot more trying at home." |

The role of family in the college experience for the 12 participants had mostly a positive influence on their ability to succeed. Participants used words like sacrifice, encouragement, push, support, advice, role models, and wisdom when they described the active part their families played in their college experience. It was obvious through the
interviews that the participants felt both the burden and privilege of representing their greater family as they pursued their college degree. Participants spoke of the active role immediate family members played, including parents and siblings, as well as extended family members, like grandparents, aunts, and uncles. One participant even counted his home church in his “family” support system.

The participants credited the influence family had on their ability to succeed in college. The following two questions, “What helped you successfully graduate?” and “Who were the significant people who contributed to your college success?” from the open-ended interview portion of the data collection prompted participants to mention the role of family. Most participants answered the “what” question by talking about categories of relationships, like mentors or family. For some participants, the “who” question simply pushed them further to expound on those family relationships. For eight of the 12 participants, specific contributions by family members were highlighted in their answers.

Lamont, Tony, and Josh saw their family achievements as the foundation and normative behavior that showed them the path they too wanted to follow. Lamont said this about his parents, “…having parents who finished and that was a big deal for me. I didn't even want to be the one that didn't. I kind of just followed suit.” Tony's comments were similar in that going to college was just assumed:

I'm going to say my upbringing. It was never really an option for me not to graduate…there was never any discussion in my house about anything other than going to college after high school. So, um, yeah there was never really any option for me not to…I don't think I ever considered not graduating. It was always, if it
had taken me seven years, I was going to finish, um yeah, and in terms of what made me overcome even when things got difficult it was really a lot of internal stimulants, you know, my family and feeling kind of high expectations and, yeah, it was never really an option.

Being the wise parents they were, Josh’s folks provided the support, vision and challenge their son needed to be successful. Josh said that his parents gave him an ultimatum that if he did not graduate from college he could not come back home. He said in a way, his parents “decided” for him that he was going to graduate from college. Josh said that while in college his mother would have him “check-in frequently because I can be all over the place sometimes.” It was obvious Josh was grateful for the springboard towards success that his parents provided:

I think also my military background helps. Because I know the type of life that, that I could have, that my dad being a cornel, we live pretty well, you know, so I know, like, the potential. I think knowing the potential of what I could do helped me really get out of college, to get it done, you know what I'm saying, and really knowing that I have the confidence in myself that I can do it. I think a lot of people don't have a father or the confidence to follow through. And you got to be humble at the same time. But you gotta have confidence in yourself that you know you can do whatever you put your mind to…what I really had to determine within myself because I've been saying I can do it. But I was like, well, if my dad can do it now I know I can do it.

Of the nine participants who mentioned family as being contributors to their success, six specifically mentioned different ways and times their families found to
encourage them. He said that when his family sensed he was struggling or discouraged they would provide him the motivation he needed to “push through” and find his focus. His family would use all modes of communication, including calls, emails, and texts, to reach out when they sensed he was discouraged. Along with college being a foregone conclusion for Tony’s family, he said that his extended family not only encouraged him but even jokingly threatened him about finishing college. David’s parents guided him towards Midwest University because it was a Christian college. He said that his parents were there for him when he made late night calls to his dad for advice on how to handle a troubled friendship, and his mom would every now and then send him encouraging emails, as well as summer job and internship information.

Todd, Ron, and Joe shared that although times were not always easy for their families, they had the confidence that their families would, as Todd and Joe put it, “do whatever they could” to help them finish their college education. It was apparent that these men felt a tremendous amount of support, and that support propelled them through college in order to make their parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins proud.

Three participants did not mention family as being a part of their personal support system. Billy spoke mostly of enduring the stress of being away from his single parent home and the responsibility he still shouldered as the eldest child with three younger siblings living at home. He had a great desire to be a support for his mother and siblings even while attending college. He found motivation in the idea that through gaining a college degree he could better assist his family back home rather than leaving college
without graduating. Billy shared that his main struggle through college was related to the stress of being away from home:

Umm, because a lot of the struggle with me with college was not necessarily the work, purely academic question of it, but how to reconcile my being away from my family. Because I came from a single parent home of five, including myself. Where I was very much, maybe not financially so, but very much a primary support system for. And then leaving for five years to go away to go to school made things a lot more trying at home. And there was a point where I almost dropped out because things were getting so rough. It was almost like, for the sake of being sure that things stay well, that things stay together at home, I will put school on hold. Umm, but it was actually through the words of my mentors and just them encouraging me to recognize the investment that had been made in me to get me this far, and to not give up on that and knowing that I could be of better assistance with a degree then without. You know, just helping me keep perspective. Those are the kind of things that helped me to reconcile the things that were really tearing me apart, as far as whether or not I should or shouldn't be in school.

Of the 12 terms ranked by the participants during the ranking exercise, family support was second only to faculty interaction. The second ranking of family support is consistent with the interview portion of the data collection and literature review.

For the storytelling portion of the data collection process, participants were asked to describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while in college that contributed to their success as a student. Tony did not recall one single event, but rather
“conversations” or “lectures” that were given during various family gatherings:

I would have to go back to my family and all of the repeated conversations that we had about the importance of school, getting an education…all the doors that it will open…and various members of my family, my mom, my dad, my uncle, grandmother, grandfather, you know, everybody just there was just always, always, always at family gatherings and holidays, you know, sitting all of us down, my cousins and I and it's ridiculous long lectures about how important it was to be where we were and how important it was to finish and, and even continue, you know, none of us stopped at just a bachelor’s degree…I would say that those, those would be I think the single most important thing.

*Personal Contributor Theme 3: Faith to Face Challenges*

For research question two regarding personal contributors to the participants’ college success, faith to face challenges is the third theme. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Faith to face challenges is a dominant theme because a total of eight out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercises, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.
Table 7

*Personal Contributor Theme 3: Faith to Face Challenges*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>“A lot more easier for me being in a Christian environment.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>&quot;I went through that episode of wrestling with God and listening to my worship music.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>“I just felt like God said that he was going to provide and that he would take care of everything financially.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;...dear God in heaven please...whatever it is that I need to get over...my fears about myself and trying to validate myself.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Ron       | "What helped me overcome were those scriptures..."
| Jay       | "I really enjoyed the chapel speakers." |
| Joe       | "…it just kept me going no matter what." |
| Ocean     | "…and that actually helped me grow in my faith because I had taken that class.” |

Eight out of the 12 participants discussed how their relationship with God was a major influence on their college experience. Ten out of 12 participants voiced in one way or another that, although it was not their sole reason for attending Midwest University, they appreciated the fact that Midwest University was a faith-based institution. Lamont said this about attending Midwest University:
A lot more easier for me being in a Christian environment. I never really initially got a feeling that I was like the odd one out, that the people at Midwest you know, were very receptive I had a great time in college.

Rex shared his motivation for attending Midwest University was because it was a faith-based institution:

I wanted to attend the university that could broaden my horizons of what a Christian should be in the 21st-century. And to really understand that the things that I want to do and the things that I want to become.

Several participants described how Midwest University provided them the opportunity to develop their faith through attending chapel, class lectures, and relationships with students, faculty, and staff. Ron shared that now as a manager of employees, he has taken what he learned at Midwest University and uses it to influence his workplace:

I try to serve people so they can make it. That was the same thing in college. People gave me a chance, sometimes I did not even deserve a chance. But they saw what I was about, and they followed whatever God told them in their heart about me. I’m forever in debt to those individuals. I’m thankful; I shouldn’t say in debt, because it was a free gift.

Participants weaved the importance of their spiritual lives into almost all facets of their college experience. Todd shared that he looked to God to provide the necessary finances to continue in college, “I just felt like God said that he was going to provide and that he would take care of everything financially.” Rex shared that during a particularly stressful time he sought inspiration and wisdom from God through prayer, reading
scripture, and listening to worship music for direction on how to complete a senior-level graduation requirement. Rex said that during this desperate time of seeking God, he had a “revelation” that, “I can’t do anything without God, without his understanding.” He found this deeper understanding of God gave him strength to finish his senior year and to leave college with more confidence.

Todd equated the emergence of his identity to the development of his faith, which was greatly influenced by attending chapel and the relationships with three professors within his major area of study:

So, it was more identity and me. And yeah, that was towards the end of my college career. But my fifth year was huge, and I'm actually glad that I did take a fifth year because it did, it staked in me a different identity. I started to really see a different part of who I was and who God created me to be and that was that was huge. That was far beyond any of the other four years, so.

Later in research question three there is a longer explanation of how both in high school and college Billy struggled with self-confidence and how this influenced the way he interacted with the college community. Billy’s story portrays how participants viewed their relationship with God as critical to their survival. One night while serving as a student leader for a Midwest summer bridge program, Billy came to a place where he felt like he just could not go on without help from God. Billy said that he finally sought the Lord through prayer and asked him to heal past hurts and for strength to overcome insecurities:

And I was just like, dear God in heaven please, please whatever it is that I need to get over as far as my fears about myself and trying to validate myself. Please,
with everything that is within me I am crying to you to help me do that because I cannot.

Participants mentioned spiritual development activities they relied on during college included reading scripture, praying, listening to worship music, solitude, seeking wise counsel, and attending church and chapel. Ron said that there were particular books from the Bible that he read during his college days that helped develop his character:

Overall, writings of Solomon, and one thing that he said, I believe it was in Ecclesiastes, it’s not how you begin, it is how you finish. It is great if you start off well, but a majority of people in the world start off good because it is fresh. But persevering is what defines a man. What helped me overcome were those scriptures, relationships with my family, men in my family… everything is great in the moment but you have to deal with the reality after.

Out of 12 terms in the ranking exercise, participants ranked their spirituality third as having the greatest impact on their ability to persist in college. Spirituality ranked third behind only faculty interaction and family support. Through the participants’ stories and this ranking, it is apparent that their relationship with God played a major role in participants’ college experiences and was a personal pillar they leaned on to persist to graduation.

Throughout the interviews, including the storytelling portion, participants mentioned God’s role in their lives during college. Several sought God through individual prayer for direction and described how they felt God working through people they encountered at the institution. Ron described how he felt God through the way people served or assisted him in college:
At Midwest University I had several individuals that helped me out but never asked for anything in return. It was concentrated. I yearn for that. I wish I had more of that in my life now. I don’t think that was the ‘bubble factor’ spoiling me. I think it was God’s way of saying, ‘This is the way this is supposed to be.’ I try to serve people so they can make it. That was the same thing in college.

People gave me a chance; sometimes I didn’t even deserve a chance. But they saw what I was about and they followed whatever God told them in their heart about me.

Billy described how he turned to God in prayer for healing from personal hurts because he recognized the danger of trying to get his personal insecurities met through feeling needed by the underclassmen he was supposed to be mentoring. Billy told a story of one night being at the end of his rope; he cried out to God:

And I was walking back from the worship service…and it was like the Lord just kicked me in the chest, and it was like all of a sudden the weight of what was really at stake hit me. And I was just like, dear God in heaven please, please whatever it is that I need to get over as far as my fears about myself and trying to validate myself. Please, with everything that is within me I am crying to you to help me do that because I cannot. And that's when I came face-to-face with, you know, what I was so afraid of in high school, and what I was afraid of in college. It was like okay Billy, so for all this time you’ve been doing these things for the wrong reasons or maybe you know self-serving, and now time to face the facts. Look at yourself dead in the mirror. Tackle that head on and commit to doing it for the right reasons. And that's when I was just like, God please, any investment
that I’m making in any student, like help me to truly understand what it means to love people with no condition and not expect there to be a return. Because that's the way that you do it, and I know that I am going to do nothing but cause wreckage if I step into these people’s lives for the sake of getting my own needs met and my own valid validation.

Personal Obstacles

*Personal Obstacle Theme 1: Academic Challenges*

For research question two regarding personal obstacles to their college success, through analysis of the data collected during the interviews as well as participants’ demographic data, academic challenges emerged as the first theme. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Academic challenges is an emerging theme because five out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme, and it is well supported by data collected from the demographic survey, ranking, and storytelling exercises. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise will also be presented to support this particular theme.
Table 8

*Personal Obstacle Theme 1: Academic Challenges*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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</table>
| Tony      | "I was free to kind of...mess up a couple courses or retake them…"
| Clark     | "...I had to get off of academic probation and I had to, to prove that...I am capable...I am worthy of being... at an educational institution…"
| Billy     | “I know I did not perform nearly as well as I could have...lot of that was just my lack of coping skills of the stress I was experiencing both as a student with responsibilities on campus and at home." |
| Ocean     | "...for the longest time now I thought I was stupid." |
| Josh      | "...it [injury] really forced me to think and make me want to finish school." |

Academic success came easier for some participants than others. It was discovered through the demographic data collection that seven of the 12 participants were placed on academic probation some time during their undergraduate college experience, including three who were eligible for academic dismissal. Of the three who were eligible for dismissal, two appealed their dismissals right away and were allowed to be continuously enrolled until they graduated. One participant who was academically dismissed ended up leaving Midwest University for a period of time and took classes at another college then returned to Midwest University to finish his degree.
Five of the participants, while talking about their college experience, described periods where they struggled academically. Three shared extreme situations when they were academically dismissed, while others recognized they needed to avail themselves of the academic support services, such as tutoring offered through the campus learning center.

Three of the participants realized that they began to succeed academically once they became motivated to do so. Clark found his motivation at the end of his sophomore year when he received an academic dismissal notice. Josh’s wake-up call came when a physical injury halted his plans of a career in the military. Tony said that because one of his parents worked at Midwest University he qualified for a tuition benefit. He said that knowing he had the tuition benefit probably influenced him to take five years to graduate, so he lacked some motivation to succeed academically.

Clark fought discouragement and was bolstered by his mother’s encouragement to appeal his academic dismissal and commit to being motivated in the classroom. Clark said that being academically dismissed was actually a real turning point in his college experience:

Sophomore year, um, after the second semester, I was actually dismissed from school because of my grades. So, that part added to discouragement, but then again, that’s where my mom really stepped in that summer there and just really helped. I had to, to write a letter to be able to be reinstated and, uh, I was put on academic probation, um, and my mom just really helped. She let me know that this is something that I should really be pushing for, and she let me know just a few other things, and that's where some of the motivation started because I really
had to prove something, ya know, I had to get off of academic probation and I had to, to prove that, ya know, I am capable of being, or I am worthy of being at a institution, an educational institution and receiving, ya know, my degree there. So, that was a big thing that I really had to prove myself. So that added some motivation that year.

Like Clark, Billy was academically dismissed but appealed the dismissal and was allowed to return to Midwest University the following semester. Billy’s academic struggles stemmed from coping with stressors from home including family financial crisis and being devastated by the death of his biological father for whom he had just begun to search to discover his identity. These emotionally draining family situations became overwhelming for Billy, so much so that he did not finish his classes one semester:

I did not do what I needed to do in regards to taking care of myself during that time. I did not seek any kind of counseling or anything like that and ended up coming back, didn't even attend all of my finals. Ended up failing that semester for the most part. I passed under 10 credits, and the following semester the same thing, passed under 10 credits. I was technically academically dismissed.

Ocean had a similar experience with family stressors that impacted his academic success:

I didn't really think I wanted to be here. So, first couple semesters just didn't work and really wasn't invested in it. But there were people trying to walk with me, but I really didn't want anybody in my business. I was put on academic probation and I didn't get my grades up after the semester, so I was academically
dismissed and free. I did a couple semesters at another university before transferring back in, but I had put myself in a big hole. My GPA was like 1.23, no, actually it was a 0.089, yeah it was 0.089, and I ended up graduating here with the 2.0 GPA. Which I have to say was amazing how I actually pulled that GPA up just to graduate. So I knew I could do the work and just having everything. But one thing I didn't know that I still had the same people pulling for me when I was feeling down low.

When Ocean returned to Midwest University after attending another institution, he became connected with the campus learning center. It was the director of the learning center, Mrs. Madison, who helped Ocean figure out the root of some of his academic struggles. Ocean discovered he had dyslexia which impacted his ability to read and write. Once diagnosed, assistance from the learning center, as well as professors who worked with Ocean to improve his writing skills, he slowly improved his academic confidence and performance:

Mrs. Madison and the learning center, I kind of stayed in there and lived in there. Taking test and actually she help diagnose me with dyslexia. I'm dyslexic. She's the one that first noticed that, and for the longest time now I thought I was stupid. …Ms. Baker [a professor] actually taught me how to write because when I first got here I didn't really write up anything. Now I can put words in sentences and, you know, write papers and stuff, so she was a big impact on, like, my being where I'm at now and actually graduating. She was phenomenal teacher…but she taught me how to write. Dr. Jones was more human now I had her. She actually took a few sentences I was able to write and she stretched me to to my potential
and then Ms. Baker took my work and she stretched me. And I really didn't do
great in Dr. Jones’ class, but for her to put the pressure and say, ‘Hey, you are
more than that.’ She saw the value upon my life and so she, you know, worked
hard and Ms. Baker gave me the tools to write…

Tony said that the major impendiment to his academic success was his social life,
“I was then and continue to be a procrastinator.” Tony said that he “wised up” some time
in his junior year to the fact that he could not socialize until four in the morning and be
up and alert for his eight a.m. classes. Tony also said that he had to learn to control his
attention deficit disorder:

Um, the attention deficit thing, you know, once I found a major that, that I really
liked and really clicked with me, um, that didn't become so much of a problem
because the majority of my classes became really interesting to me and so it
wasn't an issue to pay attention. Sometimes it was a little bit of an issue to kind of
make myself focus in studying and doing homework, but it became less and less
of an issue.

According to the ranking exercise, of the 12 terms, the participants ranked
Classroom Experience number five and Cognitive Ability number eight. The participants
may have ranked the academically related terms as having moderate impact on their
ability to succeed, but with seven of the 12 either having been on academic probation or
academically dismissed, academic success would appear to have been a bigger obstacle
than participants estimated. The participants’ high level of self-efficacy may have
overridden or helped compensate during the periods when they struggled the most
academically. Even with the academic struggles, these 12 men did overcome and persist to graduation.

During the interview participants were asked to tell a story about a significant time or event in their college career that impacted their ability to persist to graduation. Clark shared that being academically dismissed was the turning point for him:

…with my sophomore year when I was dismissed from school. I had to, really had to work, you know that's when it set in, so that was the biggest part that contributed to my success because I actually had to, to work to get back because I had to write a letter to be reinstated and to be put on academic probation so I really had to work to get off of academic probation obviously, and to graduate, so, that was the biggest part.

When given the same opportunity to recount a significant event or time in his college career that contributed to his success, Josh shared that after a knee surgery, which earlier he called a “crisis,” he had a new perspective on finishing college:

I think I was on the probation at one point and I think that was right when I got my knee surgery. I came back and my mind was totally different. And I was saying it’s cool, I got to get this [college] done. And I remember…everyone was asking to hang out with them…sophomore-freshman year, I would've done it in a second. I would just say, ‘I'll do that later.’ And I was like, ‘No I can't do that,’ and that's when I really realized…And I started having these visions in my head of like money being dumped down the sewer. And so, so I started realizing that and I was really just like, you know, I’ve got to focus.
Personal Obstacle Theme 2: Coping with Suspension or Dismissal from College

For research question two regarding personal obstacles to the participants’ success, the second theme is coping with suspension or dismissal from college. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Coping with suspension or dismissal from college is a dominant theme because a total of seven out of the 12 participants either mentioned this theme or were included because information from the demographic survey showed a relationship to the theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 9

Personal Obstacle Theme 2: Coping with Suspension or Dismissal from College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;I was actually dismissed from school because of my grades.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;I was put on academic probation and I didn't get my grades up after the semester so I was academically dismissed and free.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>&quot;I was actually dismissed from school because of my grades.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;…this was the time where they [Student Development] actually understood...they contacted our parents and we were suspended…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>&quot;I was suspended from Midwest University.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;I was kicked out of school for a brief period of time for missing chapel too many times.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As with any degree-granting institution, there are academic benchmarks of achievement students must meet in order to stay in good academic standing with the university. Students who fall below the minimum grade point average step scale at Midwest University are first given a semester warning then placed on academic probation. If a student on academic probation does not increase his grade point average above the established step scale he is eligible for academic dismissal.

As was mentioned previously in this section, three of the participants in this study were academically dismissed from Midwest University. Two of the participants successfully appealed their dismissals and the other left Midwest and then transferred back after attending another college. Two other participants were suspended from attending classes for a few days due to violating a campus policy and one was dismissed for exceeding the allowable chapel absences.

As a condition of their enrollment, Midwest University students must agree to abide by policies and regulations that relate to the spiritual and social character of Midwest University. One participant was dismissed from Midwest University for exceeding the maximum allowable chapel absences. This participant appealed his dismissal and was allowed to return to Midwest University but was required to sit out a brief three-week January term. The other participant served a two-day suspension for being in a women’s residence hall room after visitation hours were over.

Even with low grade point averages to the point of academic dismissal, family and personal issues weighing on their minds, issues with chapel attendance, and other campus lifestyle violations, all of these individuals overcame dismissals and suspensions to eventually graduate from Midwest University. Surely other students who enrolled at
Midwest University but did not persist to graduation faced these same issues and obstacles. One likely difference for these six individuals is that these challenges did not impede their progress towards their goal of graduating from college. Hearing how they talk about this time in their college career may help others learn from their approach.

Billy talked a lot about his sense of responsibilities as the oldest male in his single-parent home. Billy attributed his academic dismissal to his inability to cope with personal family issues and his campus duties as a student leader. These obligations and issues took an emotional toll on Billy, so much so, that he left school one semester without taking his final exams. Billy said the root cause was not academics, but rather his inability to manage stress brought on by these issues:

…academically, I know I did not perform nearly as well as I could have. But I know a lot of that was just my lack of coping skills of the stress I was experiencing both as a student with the responsibilities on campus and at home. And you know in a moment of honesty, not be honest with the people that were supposed to be my support system and how much I was struggling until I got really bad.

Billy later said that when he was academically dismissed he spoke with a faculty mentor and his student leadership advisor. With the help of that campus support system and his desire to finish college, Billy successfully appealed the academic dismissal and continued as a Midwest University student until he graduated. It was those members of the faculty and administration who took a personal interest in Billy who helped him overcome his personal and family obstacles:
But you know, the personal interest that they took in me allowed me to think outside of that and to think that, actually no, I do have a place here and I'm not just a cog in the wheel, and there are people that see me as an individual and are willing to make an investment in my potential. To help me get somewhere. And that inspired a lot of confidence in myself.

Like Billy, Ocean’s personal life impeded his ability to focus on his college studies. When Ocean first enrolled in Midwest University he was still hurting from a recent divorce and in his own words, “was kind of shaky.” Ocean admitted he was not fully engaged in his studies and ignored those who reached out to help and was eventually academically dismissed:

I didn't really think I wanted to be here. So first couple semesters just didn't work and really wasn't invested in it. But there were people trying to walk with me but I really didn't want anybody in my business. Because, I think it was, I was really hurt from the situation from getting a divorce and was trying to figure out how to be a dad. My own dad wasn't in the picture and didn't know anything, so I had that stress and am figuring out how to use the life and stuff and just not focusing on the school when I was supposed to.

A few years later Ocean re-enrolled after taking classes at another university and transferred those to Midwest University. Ocean said that he was surprised to learn that the same people who tried to reach out to him before he was dismissed would still be “the same people pulling for me when I was down low” after he re-enrolled at Midwest and eventually completed his degree.
Clark also had to overcome academic dismissal. As was highlighted in the previous family support theme, Clark had a cheering section made up of family members who encouraged him to pursue his college dream despite the dismissal and financial difficulties. They encouraged him to appeal the academic dismissal so he could continue at Midwest University. Even with family support, it was Clark who found the personal motivation to work harder and to stay focused:

I was actually dismissed from school because of my grades. So, that part added to discouragement, but then again, that’s where my mom really stepped in that summer there and just really helped. That's where some of the motivation started because I really had to prove something, ya know; I had to get off of academic probation and I had to, to prove that, ya know, I am capable of being, or I am worthy of being at an institution, an educational institution and receiving, ya know, my degree there. So, that was a big thing that I really had to prove myself.

Jay, Tony and Rex were all either suspended or dismissed for violating a Community Standard or Chapel Policy. Through their forced separation from campus each one of them came to either a new understanding about themselves or Midwest University.

Surprisingly for Jay, through the suspension process he actually felt supported and cared for by some of the very Midwest University staff that had to inform him of his suspension. “This was the time where they actually understood and you know they contacted our parents and we were suspended and everything.” Jay said that at a time when he feared the worst from Midwest University they “were very helpful and resourceful and making sure that things got taken care of. They wowed me.”
Rex said that his suspension was a “wake-up call” that quickly educated him on the fact that some students did not appreciate the Christian college environment like he did and so he would eventually decide to part ways with some friends who were “mischievous and deceiving.” Rex described his suspension this way:

I was suspended from Midwest University and it was more to the fact of me understanding different characters and understanding that everyone wasn't like me in a given way, and yet at the same time everyone has their own mission. I had to be able to have discernment so I wouldn't be put into any type of position that would cause me to fall into the snare or fall into the way of losing my college experience.

Tony said he “learned his lesson” when he was dismissed for excessive chapel absences. Tony recalls, “I was kicked out of school for a brief period of time for missing chapel too many times.” He fought the dismissal and was allowed to return to Midwest after only missing one three week January term. Tony said after that brush with being dismissed “it wasn’t a problem after that” to abide by the Midwest University chapel policies. Again, it is moments like these that the participants faced and overcame that may have made the difference between their persisting to graduating from Midwest University.

*Personal Obstacle Theme 3: Minority Sub-Community Drama*

For research question two regarding personal obstacles to the participants’ college success, the third theme is minority sub-community drama. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Although only two participants specifically referred to this theme during the
interviews, during the member-checking process an additional participant shared he observed the presence of this theme and intentionally distanced himself from potential situations and people to avoid experiencing the “drama” for himself. In addition, the two participants shared such in-depth and powerful experiences related to the theme, the researcher felt strongly it qualified as an emerging theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 10

*Personal Obstacle Theme 3: Minority Sub-Community Drama*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;...you got a lot of criticism...for not congregating with the rest of the African-American students...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>&quot;I didn’t get along with a lot of the Black students…they thought I was arrogant.&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The influence of peers was sometimes negative and stressful for some participants, while positive and encouraging for others. Navigating the peer culture and, as one participant called it, the “minority student sub-community,” was a source of stress and frustration for some participants. The title of this theme is the fusion of comments mentioned by two participants as they described the difficulties they encountered within the minority student population at Midwest University. Although only two out of the 12 participants specifically mentioned “minority student sub-community drama,” another
participant in the member-checking process did share he saw this happening while he was in college. I believe if more of the participants were queried they would support this theme as well. The stories Billy and Ron told were compelling. Even so, because only three of the participants affirmed this theme it is an emerging theme in this study.

Billy shared that two of his most difficult experiences came because of conflicts he faced when students within the university’s minority population were at odds with each other. Billy attended a predominantly White high school, so he thought he had found a good way to face racism and stereotyping. What he discovered in college was that this learned coping behavior actually caused conflict between Billy and a group of Black peers at Midwest University.

Billy told a story from his freshman year when out of frustration a floor mate voiced a racial slur that Billy heard but ignored. It was actually a White peer who asked Billy if he was okay or bothered by the comment, to which Billy replied, “No.” Other students ended up hearing about the incident and, unbeknownst to Billy, escalated it to a level where administration got involved in order to address the racial tensions between students. Billy credited the Director of the Multicultural Office as being a “buffer” as he faced race-related issues like this and another later in his college career.

Another incident later in Billy’s college career resulted in another Black student being dismissed for voicing a threat and stealing personal property from Billy and his roommate out of the residence hall room. A group of minority students who were friends with the thief were angry at Billy over the incident in which Billy felt like students lost sight of who the real victim was in the situation. Billy attributed the anger expressed by
this group of minority students was because he did not hang out much with the other
Black students:

Because you got a lot of criticism for hanging around people that I didn’t, for not
congregating with the rest of the African American students, for not being
involved like they felt I should be involved in the little sub-community.

Ron sought friendships with people who shared his same interests regardless of
their race. Ron said he avoided relationships and situations that caused “drama.” Even
though he was a Black male attending a predominantly White university, he felt his
struggle was unique because it was other minority students that treated him poorly:

Environment wise, I didn’t get along with a lot of the Black students…they
thought I was arrogant. Some of them thought that I just didn’t want to be
bothered. And that’s one thing, a lot of my surroundings were not from my
culture. I was very to myself. Low drama and all that. Other than that, it was
just something I had to manage…Yea, that was just my background. My personal
background I had family at church, I had cousins, I went to Christian school, I
went to church. They thought I was arrogant. I wasn’t arrogant. We went to the
same church, I went to Christian School, we drove the same cars. They weren’t
able to communicate their feelings without placing the blame. It taught me at an
early age that people who aren’t able to communicate will go to other forms that
are a lot more maligning, that are a lot more harsh, and most of the time they
don’t mean it but because they are ignorant and immature and don’t know how to
manage their emotions.
Research Question Three

What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key institutional factors that contributed to their success? What were the key institutional obstacles they had to overcome in order to succeed?

Institutional Contributors Theme

Merriam and Webster’s Dictionary defines support as a verb meaning “to bear or hold weight of; to tolerate; to give assistance or approval” (Kauffman, 1991). This definition truly summarizes the essence of how participants equated their experience with different facets of their journey of attending and graduating from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education. Through analysis of the interview data, three types of support connected to the institution were instrumental to the success of the participants. The institutional ethos the participants described outlined support received from the overall campus community, specific campus mentors, and peers. The overall campus community, campus mentors, and peers were the major purveyors of support that significantly impacted the participants.

Institutional Contributor Theme 1: Supportive Community

For research question three regarding institutional contributors to the participants’ college success, the first theme is supportive community. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Supportive community is a dominant theme because a total of seven out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme. After the table and the substantiation using the
interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 11

_Institutional Contributor Theme 1: Supportive Community_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;He watched my kids for me so we could go to marriage counseling.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;...everybody I ran into encouraged me. ...I should name every single person at Midwest University.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>&quot;There were people who were going to give me a chance to succeed.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;...but I really appreciated how you know caring and how nice that the whole department was…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>&quot;I always got an encouraging word from Mrs. Madison.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>&quot;...and I really thank God for having people in my life that were willing to let me be creative and try new things.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>“I've never been in a place like this where people welcomed me this warmly. They are interested in you.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two questions from the research interview prompted participants to describe the college community in a way that communicated their experience with and appreciation for the overall supportive campus ethos. Participants used the words “community” and “encouragement” repeatedly when asked about their overall college experience and specifically what helped them successfully graduate.
It was apparent that the participants felt this encouragement in deep and meaningful ways. A few of the participants mentioned 10-20 individuals, as well as “people” in general which helped emphasize the supportive community aspect in addition to just one or two individuals; even still, many individuals will be mentioned in the campus mentor theme. This finding should be confirming to the institution since the word “community” is used in the university’s mission statement and is an organizational characteristic that is emphasized and valued.

Ocean mentioned even though he made mistakes it was the expressions of encouragement and invested interest that made him feel like he was part of the larger community. Although Ocean mentioned specific names of individuals and examples of their impact on his experience, he also spoke in general terms about the institution’s community:

The encouragement of the staff, professors, and administration, and people just walking by. People approaching me…even when I made stupid mistakes before. You know, they are always there and pull me back in or give me encouragement or just give me advice that they didn't have to do. So they invested in me, and in turn, I believe that having that support and having them invest interest in me, it made me feel a part of something bigger that I could accomplish…I still had the same people pulling for me when I was feeling down low. And kitchen staff over at the DC. Those mamas in there, all the hugs…they were so proud of me for graduating too.
Like Ocean, Todd spoke about the institution as a whole and offered several names and examples of how he had been encouraged, inspired, motivated, and bolstered through supportive people in the college community:

The biggest one probably was community and the other one that was just the faculty and how they taught…they all just encouraged me. I think the best part of my entire season at Midwest University was that everybody I ran into encouraged me. …I should name every single person at Midwest University. You know everybody encouraged me. That between Mary [administrator] and John [administrator’s spouse] being encouraged there, and all of my teachers. John Doe [administrator] always an encourager. Yeah, I think the biggest thing about it was that everybody encouraged me. I never felt discouraged at Midwest University. I never felt like I couldn't do it. I never felt like, I never felt like it was too much. Yeah, I could name hundreds of people because everybody was an encouragement.

Again, like Ocean and Todd, Ron named several individuals, mostly faculty, who played a mentoring role in his life, but he also spoke in more global terms about “people” being the main influence on his persistence to graduation:

That was the main thing that kept me going in college. There were people who were going to give me a chance to succeed. People gave me a chance; sometimes I didn’t even deserve a chance. But they saw what I was about and they followed whatever God told them in their heart about me. I’m forever in debt to those individuals. I’m thankful; I shouldn’t say in debt because it was a free gift.
Ron then continued on to mention specific university employees and recount why these individuals impacted his college experience:

Even from the time he [Professor Patterson] first met me to the last time he saw me at the wedding he told me, ‘You were built to be a great man and a great husband. I have nothing but high hopes for you.’ He was just like, ‘You are a great individual. Don’t let anyone else tell you any different.’ I was never a number, I was never a Black man, I was just a person. It was a great reminder that there are people out there who treat you like a person. They genuinely just like you. There’s no rationale, they just like you and will do anything for you…I was pretty friendly with most people…the Johnovichs’ [professor], Bob Wilcox [staff member], I just like most people. Peter Sampson [staff member], he opened his house up for me to live with him. All of these people who started coming in to my life was all based on who they saw me to be.

The supportive community theme was further highlighted by Jay when he mentioned college faculty he never had in class with whom he had a meaningful relationship. A husband and wife faculty duo would host students at their home and provide a place of respite that was mentioned during the interviews by several students including Jay:

And so there was other people as well, like Dr. Madison and Mrs. Madison of course everyone just really loved them. Even the times where we were able to get away just for a minute, you know. Just like you feel that Midwest University is 100 miles long. You just feel like you're here by yourself. And the school was really starting to grow and everyone was everywhere and ahh, and you were
tripled and quadrupled in rooms, you know. And it just felt like sometimes it was just overwhelming and I really liked those times where I could just get away with Dr. Madison, and there were people who were going to give me a chance to succeed and just, you know, understand and go on the lake to go tubing. You know those little things really contributed a lot when I look back to the success of graduating, just because it was able to just replace where I was at. To get away. To go regroup. To rethink and then start over again.

Jay also described the impact a work study supervisor had on his feeling of connectedness to Midwest University. The employment supervisor verbally praised Jay in a way that affirmed his work, which in turn, made Jay feel included in the university operations as a valued student employee. Jay also mentioned that this work supervisor probably did not even realize the way he treated Jay bolstered his feelings about the university:

And I remember Robert [supervisor’s son] telling me, ‘My dad thinks your something special.’ And, you know, I think that's when I actually tapped into my understanding of, you know, like I can be anything and you know. I really appreciated how Richard [work supervisor] even though I would never do [specific department function] things, but I really appreciated how, you know, caring and how nice that the whole department was just because he was a good leader, you know? And he really contributed on days when I thought that I'm just messing everything up. He was like, ‘Wow, we've never met someone as good as you.’ And that was just something that really started to make me feel like I was a part of the University, you know. He was someone, you know, that in little
different areas that I was really appreciated….it felt like a family. And I just met a lot of neat people over there, and the ABC program used to be over there. And I just really think that was something that really contributed a lot to my success. And still even when I would come back to visit campus, I would always go back over to the department and see who is still there and just communicate and talk with everyone and so that contributed.

Joe graduated from Midwest University over a decade before Jay, yet like Jay, Joe can recall being encouraged by Mrs. Madison and her work with him towards developing good study habits, which resulted in his academic success. Joe also mentioned the “open door policy” and attention his resident director gave him and his peers. Again, Joe’s comments reinforce the supportive community ethos that is so prevalent in the participants’ recollection of their college experience:

I always got an encouraging word from Mrs. Madison. She was the kind one that just stepped in and would say, ‘Okay, hold on, hold on. Let's go.’ She'd help me work it through. She helped me figure out I actually work better at night, but I study better early in the morning. So I was kind of surprised to find that out…just working things through even with the way the Learning Center was designed. She was helping me get through it. We had tutors that I worked with, and I wanted to take advantage of it. So she was like, ‘We've got tutors here. We can actually find you a tutor that can help you. They can explain it a little differently than the professor can.’ So that was like a blast and a half once I got that kind of figured out, how to access students. It worked out so good.

Joe went on to mention the lasting impression his resident director made on him
and his peers:

I was really inspired by Bruce Hamill. He was my RD, and to see Bruce not only have a job and be in graduate school himself, but the attention that he gave us no matter what. Because he had like this open door policy.

Another participant, Josh, mentioned the support he received to plan the type of activities that he and his peers were interested in but were out of the ordinary for Midwest University. Josh said that the staff in the Student Development department took a chance on him in such a way that it communicated their confidence in him. The support Josh received was not lost on him, even years later when he made these comments during the interview:

I was in situations [leadership over a campus event], Student Development really had a lot of confidence. Which made for me to do crazy stuff that Student Development’s butt was on the line. Then you know, now that I realize Student Development was doing their job, and I really thank God for having people in my life that were willing to let me be creative and try new things. You know, not having some type of big deal control over it but letting me do it and, you know, letting me just be out there and do it because it really just helped me to help me get jobs. If it wasn't for you guys allowing me to do it, then it wouldn't have happened.

In the ranking exercise participants rated faculty interaction as having the greatest impact on their ability to persist in college. The outcome of the ranking exercise reinforces the importance of the faculty role, while the interview portion of the data
collected for this research study furthers the understanding through the description of varied faculty interactions.

The storytelling portion of the data collection gave the participants the opportunity to recollect personal stories of their educational journey. It did not take Ron very long into his freshman year to realize the support available to him. Ron explained a situation from his freshman year when he was a music major but learned in the very first music theory class that majoring in music was not for him. The help he received when he was struggling academically showed him that people in the college community were willing to assist him. This assistance was not just a one-time opportunity as Ron shared that this experience was repeated time and time again during his college career.

So, I got tutoring and I went from a D+ to a B+ in Music Theory with Professor Blue… People were willing to help. People were willing to give me an unabridged unbiased chance. It wasn’t help this black kid, this struggling student. It was, he’s hungry, let’s feed him. He’s willing, let’s give him a chance…I never felt, you know how some people will say they will help you but you feel like you are burdening them? I never felt that…At Midwest University, I had several individuals that helped me out but never asked for anything in return. It was concentrated. I yearn for that. I wish I had more of that in my life now.

Ocean shared a story about a time when he was having marital issues and how he felt comfortable enough to admit his struggles to his professor. His professor not only helped him to finish the class but checked in on Ocean during Christmas break, opening his home multiple times to Ocean’s family. This professor offered the type of support Ocean needed to not only continue in college but to keep his family together:
He actually, you know, called me from his house, from his personal house, to see if I needed anything. That started in his wife and him to watch my kids and me and my wife got back together. He watched my kids for me so we could go to marriage counseling. He actually had dinner for me and my kids and stuff when my wife was gone. God, he just really went all out to, you know, he touched my heart. You know, he gave me an extension on a couple papers when she left because, you know, I was kind of devastated. She took my kids and everything. And he had us over at Christmas time. He spent time with us on Christmas. His door was open. I don't think I'd be here at this point without that relationship. That was huge, because he said to just make sure I was alright. He had my back. He stepped up and he told me to keep focused. It was two days it took me to get out of that fog.

_Institutional Contributor Theme 2: Campus Mentors’ Support_

For research question three regarding institutional contributors to college success, the second theme is campus mentors’ support. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Campus mentors’ support is a dominant theme because a total of nine out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme and it is well supported by data collected through the Ranking and Storytelling Exercises. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise will also be presented to support this particular theme.
### Table 12

**Institutional Contributor Theme 2: Campus Mentors’ Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>&quot;Dr. Roberta allowed me to be me. Not a black man, not a prominent black man.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;He [Dr. Madison] gave me a lot of fatherly advice and support (he) gave me hugs every time you (he) saw me.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;He would tell me…what he thought was right and what I did was wrong and what I need to do to fix it.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>&quot;I still call him up on the cell phone and he gives me encouragement or word or look at Scriptures or if I just needed something to laugh at…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;...but it was actually through the words of my mentors…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>“He had me in about three or four different groups and that kept me from you know doing silly stuff in college that I could've done.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;...my main core teachers…those teachers constantly were like, you can succeed, you are succeeding, and it was a shift in a mindset.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;Dr. Madison…he was just there to kind of to be a listening ear...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>&quot;...having that time out of the class and being able to go to them about different things.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The definition of a mentor is “a close, trusted and experienced counselor or guide” An influential senior sponsor or supporter” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1963). Eleven of the 12 participants referenced members of the Midwest University faculty, staff, or administrators who played vital roles in their lives both inside and outside the classroom. The term mentoring is a chosen theme because some participants specifically mentioned the term, or in their description of the relationship with the person, it fit the definition of a mentor. As evident from the following participant discussion, the most meaningful moments referenced by the participants were those that took place outside the classroom and often focused on the non-academic struggles the undergraduates faced.

The interview questions that contributed mostly to research question three and this theme were the ones asking participants what helped them to successfully graduate and who were the significant people that contributed to their success citing specific contributions. For the most part, participants responded to the question, “What helped you successfully graduate…?” by offering examples of relationships, conversations, meaningful life lessons, and details about the conditions or atmosphere that contributed to their ability to persist.

During the course of his interview, Ron mentioned 10 university individuals by name and gave examples how eight of the 10 individuals fulfilled nuances of the mentor role of coach, advisor, teacher, or counselor. Below are abbreviated portions of his response to what and who helped him successfully graduate. Ron started his response by naming three faculty and two administrators followed by these comments:
Really, those individuals there had a role in allowing me to have a person to talk to that was a level above me. What can I do to be better… to improve? Just having someone to talk to. I feel the real world every employee and or manager should have the same type of counsel, they have the same goal for you. That’s what the campus did for me.

Ron then went on to describe a special relationship he had with one administrator who was known for her sensitivity to students of color. Ron described the focus of their relationship was not based on his ethnicity but his individuality, which he described as a rare occurrence:

I really had a chance to get close to Dr. Roberta. We keep in contact. But she provided me with almost like, it was I’m sure it had to do she has a heart for people of color but that never came up. She cares for people. As a black man you don’t get that. You don’t get that from your own people, and you darn sure don’t get that from people of other races. But Dr. Roberta allowed me to be me. Not a black man, not a prominent black man. She let me be me.

Ocean shared several interactions he had with multiple members of the campus community who were available to help him cope with a learning disability along with honing his writing skills; however one faculty member became a father figure to him:

He [Dr. Madison] gave me a lot of fatherly advice and support, [he] gave me hugs every time you [he] saw me. So I got probably almost 10 years of hugs and all those hugs a lot of times I needed them. You know. He asked me how I was doing. How are the kids? And, you know, he just, you know always been there, just like a dad. That's why I call him dad. So I was like, you know, he was just as
proud as a Pop can be when I graduated. He texted me because their son
graduated the same weekend. So he texted me that weekend and told me
congratulations, so.

Like Ocean, Jay found a father figure in a faculty member who held exceptionally
high expectations for students. Jay found the faculty member’s expectations motivating
and his advice was to be trusted. Different from Ocean, Jay never openly called this
professor a term of endearment, like “Dad,” but it is clear for Jay, this faculty member
portrayed characteristics a father would play in a son’s life:

But he really played like a Dad to me, honestly. I really found a confidence in
him. He really made me really want to work. He also really made me care about
what you’re doing. And so my thoughts were, I never wanted to disappoint Dr.
Birch…He's my, he's my advisor he went out on a limb. We've come and we
worked at this and this plan, and so I couldn't take the class over because I
couldn't fit it in and I have to rearrange it, and so he he was really like this Dad to
me that he didn't really know. And I wouldn't give him the idea that I thought of
him that way. But he was really inspiring through being tough…I just felt like that
was the one person that I know, even if I had done something that was crazy and
stupid and I just wanted someone to be on my side, he wouldn't do that. He
would tell me…what he thought was right and what I did was wrong and what I
need to do to fix it. To fix the problem.

Rex, like some other participants, looked at some of his mentors as father figures.
Rex gave specific subjects and periods in his college journey where these two father
figures played pivotal roles in his college success. The staff member Rex described as a
father figure was his work supervisor who built rapport and trust with Rex enough to address time management, financial stewardship and achieving his dreams:

Wayne provided being my father. A father figure and then there's more still to this day. That's my dad. It was more to the fact of management, time management. Really enforcing time management and really enforcing how to manage the cycle of financial need and also what did it look like to really go for it in your dreams.

According to Rex, his relationship with another father figure, a professor in his major, was instrumental in affirming and cultivating skills in his chosen major, and this individual also became a spiritual and emotional support figure:

…he was also another father figure on campus. I always called him in dark moments and knew it was more that I could relate to him so much more than a professor. All the majors knew I had his cell and called him dad. They just knew that if I was having a problem, still to this day, I still call him up on the cell phone and he gives me encouragement or word or look at Scriptures or if I just needed something to laugh at…

Rex mentioned six staff, administrators and faculty, as well as one student who contributed to his ability to succeed in college. One administrator, Mr. Bingham, was a consistent figure in his life helping him to adjust to college, as well as being an Black male at a PWI:

Mr. Bingham was a really tremendous help. Not helping me understand the college life, but he helped me understand the fact what a male can be and what
they can be looked at as. Especially an African American male in a predominantly
Caucasian environment.

Like Rex, Billy counted as his mentors a faculty member from his area of study
and an administrator. For Billy, their guidance was needed especially when he became
embroiled in a racially charged situation with peers during his freshman year:

There were people who definitely were like the springs that launched me into my
college career with the head start I had…Timothy Bingham…he's phenomenal.
As far as being part of a minority student to be able to encounter a person of his
caliber and his age. So early on in my college career and have him as a support
system. It was kind of like a buffer for some of the issues that I would face later
on in my college career…particularly my freshman year…there're a couple things
that I dealt with that year specifically race related. I can say if Timothy Bingham
had not been there, there would have been a much more discouraging experience
without his perspective.

Billy shared how a faculty mentor and, again, the previously mentioned
administrator helped him navigate a stressful family crisis that made him question if he
should drop out of college:

I know that the people that I consider to be my mentors definitely played a huge
role. The two primary ones would be Mr. Fairbanks and Mr. Bingham…their
willingness to be personal. Umm, because a lot of the struggle with me with
college was not necessarily the work, purely academic question of it, but how to
reconcile my being away from my family…there was a point where I almost
dropped out because things were getting so rough…but it was actually through the
words of my mentors and just them encouraging me…just helping me keep perspective. Those are the kind of things that helped me to reconcile the things that were really tearing me apart, as far as whether or not I should or shouldn't be in school.

Lamont said that he had a lot of mentors in his life to “point me in the right direction,” including his parents, but when he went to college he felt an uncertainty about who would play that role for him in the new setting. Lamont said that quickly Dr. Madison, Mr. Bingham, another female administrator, and his athletic coach were the ones that “guided me along the way,” and those relationships were “the biggest factors as far as having people helping me make sure I wasn’t getting too far off track getting distracted.” Lamont pointed out that Dr. Madison intervened early after his arrival to college:

Dr. Madison he was, he been there before everyone else…Dr. Madison was kind of one of those people. One of those people who kind of embraced me. When I came in and got me involved in things right away before I really knew what things I was going to be involved in. He had me in about three or four different groups and that kept me from, you know, doing silly stuff in college that I could've done.

Clark shared about the special relationships he had with professors in his major. Clark said that because he attended Midwest University for six years, the course catalog changed quite a few times and several faculty worked with him to navigate the changing requirements. These same faculty in his department took time to meet with Clark outside
of class and the conversations were not always about classes. Clark appreciated the verbal encouragement and support these faculty members expressed:

…they let me know that they could see the potential that I had and, ya know, they wanted to bring that out, ya know, by just taking the time to have me in their office and just to chat, ya know, sometimes not about, ya know, schooling, maybe just to get my mind off from it and just really being there. Like Lori [professor] was like a, a second mom because uh, she would have me go over to her house and different things like that and just being around her and spending time with them. Ya know, they really let me know that, that, that way just spending time other than at school, getting coffee sometimes with Dr. Patterson. It was just, it was just that, having that time out of the class and being able to go to them about different things. That's how they let me know that, and I don't know that that could happen anywhere else other than Midwest University. So, I think there’s a reason why I didn't go anywhere else.

As mentioned previously for the ranking exercise, participants ranked Faculty Interactions as having the greatest impact on their ability to persist. It is apparent through each section of the data collection process that the interviews and storytelling pieces provide support to the participants’ top ranking of Faculty Interactions out of the 12 possible categories.

Like the supportive community theme, during the storytelling portion of the data collection, participants easily recalled stories of how individuals, oftentimes several, became a part of their narrative as they grappled with motivation, family struggles, and cultural challenges. The stories told by these three participants all highlight access they
had to mentors who listened, inspired, and drew out of them the strength to push through an immediate issue. Those mentors instilled the self-confidence in them that was necessary to face what the future would hold.

Meeting with professors outside of class is what Todd said had the most impact on his ability to succeed in college. The professors that Todd mentioned were all in his major area of study. In the latter part of his college career these major professors and mentors included Todd in on some research opportunities. Todd said that the voice of a Dr. Birch still haunts him to this day encouraging him to enroll in graduate school.

According to Todd, these professors used meetings outside the classroom as times Todd was “called out” for making excuses or not working to his potential. Todd described these messages of encouragement and challenge as happening repeatedly and that they ended up positively impacting Todd’s self-confidence:

Like I'm on a road to success and just because I'm on that road to success I'm already succeeding. And that was something that Dr. Birch, Dr. Patterson, Dr. Manners, my main core teachers, you can put Dr. Bauer on top of that, it was just that those teachers constantly were like, you can succeed, you are succeeding, and it was a shift in a mindset. And I can't even describe that.

Tony brought up another relationship with a professor was made meaningful by what took place outside the classroom. Tony’s example was with a professor mentioned by several other participants, Dr. Madison. Tony shared that what was helpful to him was just as much about what Dr. Madison said, as it was that this “familiar face” was someone who would listen. Dr. Madison would listen to Tony share about struggles in his
relationship with his father, as well as cultural issues that he needed to process through with someone:

Dr. Madison…he was just there to kind of, to be a listening ear and when things would happen that frustrated me, you know, kind of culturally, um, instead of arguing with me that it wasn't that way or, you know, telling me I needed to get over it, he just listened and was kind of sympathetic to it, and I think he went out of his way to do that for a lot of Black students, particularly the males.

During the open-ended interviews, Lamont shared that there were three main men on the Midwest University campus who had an impact on his college experience. During his opportunity to share meaningful stories from his experience, Lamont recalled how two of his mentors affirmed his ability to communicate both written and verbally by providing, and in reality pushing, Lamont to put his talents into action. It was almost like these individuals, an administrator and a coach, opened Lamont’s eyes to his potential as a writer and broadcaster. For Lamont, this encouragement by these men crystalized how to combine his enjoyment of sports and gifts as a communicator.

The first story Lamont shared was a coincidental meeting between Mr. Bingham and Lamont in the university library. After finding out Lamont wanted to be a professional writer, Mr. Bingham challenged him to write him something right then and there, whatever topic he wanted to write about. Mr. Bingham did not stop there but then asked Lamont to share what he wrote at an upcoming event. Lamont described this as a watershed moment for him. This is part of that story:

And I remember telling him that I wanted to write, that was my goal. I wanted to be a professional writer. …I said [wrote] something about how the Black men in
our country need to stay focused, need to support each other, because once we, once we can do that, we will be successful. But that was just a broad stroke of something, something along those lines. In keeping Christ first…and he was very moved by it. But he made me share it with everybody…it was nerve-racking…I had never, I mean I had done speeches before…but I never did anything formal or anything that intimate…that I just wrote before and that kind of it pushed me to realize what my goal was. What I wanted to do with my life.

Due to a serious injury, Lamont was unable to complete his years of athletic eligibility. Lamont said it was at this time his coach introduced him to the idea of pursuing a career in broadcasting. Lamont shared that similar to Mr. Bingham, his former coach used the same tactic of more than gentle encouragement towards a particular career field which Lamont had never considered. This was another critical time in Lamont’s college career when the prodding of one of his mentors spurred him on:

He kind of shoved me in that direction, um, and that was, that was really beneficial. In both of those instances that kind of helped me realize what I'm capable of professionally. Um, I knew I could speak in front of people. So it kind of helped bring that out of me.

Institutional Contributor Theme 3: Peer Support

For research question three regarding personal contributors to college success, the third theme is peer support. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Five participants mentioned this theme, therefore it is an emerging theme from the study. After the table and the
substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 13

*Institutional Contributor Theme 3: Peer Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>&quot;...there is no skipping out on this class. If I have to go, you have to go.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>&quot;It helped, contributed to me staying because I already had friends here and, um, I kind of didn't leave because of them.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;...lots of people that encouraged me and stood by me when I felt discouraged.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>&quot;…I would freak out. And he'd be always saying to calm down man. &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>&quot;But I still feel like I had a piece of (hometown) with me in there with me to help me out the first few years.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support from campus peers was mentioned by the participants as playing a vital role in their overall college experience. Peer influence touched on a wide spectrum of areas among the participants. College peers were mentioned as having a positive impact on class and chapel attendance, finding a balance between academics and developing friendships, support through transition from high school to college, a relationship that felt akin to family, a morale booster, positive influence to stay in college, help to cope with stress, and even financial assistance.
When David was asked about what helped him persist in college, the friends he made in college came to mind. He said that his friends boosted his morale and he wondered if it had not been for his friends “if academics would be enough for me…as far as morale to stay,” and without them he “probably wouldn't feel too much of a commitment” to Midwest University. So, David’s college peers were a positive influence towards keeping his spirits up and increased his desire to stay at Midwest University.

Family is important to Joe. He shared that his roommate, who lived locally, and his roommate’s family “was like having a family away from home” for him. Joe also was encouraged by his roommates to go to class and attend required chapel:

They were always, ‘Let’s go, let’s go.’ They were like, ‘Got to go, got to go to class, tough it out’…And it was kind of like, ‘Okay, there is no skipping out on this class. If I have to go, you have to go.’ So I miss that camaraderie that I had up there for that, it was a good thing.

Todd shared that his college friendships helped bring a balance to his life. Prior to attending college, Todd focused mainly on academics and church. When he came to college, he developed meaningful peer friendships for the first time in his young adult life. Todd credits his college friends who invited him to be a part of a community of peers that broadened his college experience to one where he flourished outside the classroom as much as he did inside of it:

…I didn't really have very many friends. So when I got to college I gained a lot of friends, and a lot of people started hanging out with me or wanting to hang out with me and everything just kind of flipped. It gave me…a desire for
relationships and community and not just a desire to be a perfectionist academically.

Todd appreciated his peers, especially at times when his spirits needed to be buoyed and when he started to contemplate moves that were not wise:

Yeah, I walked away from Midwest University with some really good best friends and they've been kind of pillars in my life when I've made huge decisions. But yeah, lots of people that encouraged me and stood by me when I felt discouraged.

Yeah, they told me no when I started to think about doing stupid things.

Like David and Todd, the theme of support to his morale came up with Josh as well. For a while in college, Josh dated a student that was supportive of him, which in turn built his self-confidence. Josh admitted that at times he became anxious about college but described his girlfriend as one that would “keep it together,” which proved to help Josh remain steady as well.

His girlfriend also encouraged Josh academically. In his words, “she was always willing to help” and offered to proof his papers and even gave him the money when he did not have enough cash to purchase a textbook. Josh admitted that at times he would stress over assignments or professors. In addition to his girlfriend, he credits his roommate as helping him through these situations:

…I would freak out. And he'd [roommate] be always saying to ‘calm down, man. The only thing you can do in that situation is be cool today.’ And he'd really help me chill out.

Lamont enjoyed rooming with a buddy from his hometown for his first three
years. He said rooming with his high school classmate was like having a piece of “home” with him at college. His high school friend was also a Black male, so although Lamont did not mention this, perhaps he enjoyed having a fellow minority student close by his side. In a way, having his friend from home bridged the gap from high school to college for Lamont:

…and also having my roommate [high school friend] as my roommate by first three years. So, that was very helpful getting finished. Although he didn’t finish with me, it was nice knowing I had a piece of home with me. You know, because I didn't want to be out there just playing ball. We had a lot of fun in high school and won championships and all that was gone. But I still feel like I had a piece of [hometown] with me in there with me to help me out the first few years.

Of the 12 items participants ranked in the ranking exercise, three were loosely tied to the peer support theme. Social life (involvement/integration into social life) was the highest item ranked in a tie for the fifth ranked item of the 12 with engagement (involvement in academic or co-curricular programs) ranked seventh and campus life (activities/student life) ranked 10th. Reference to peers was not an overt choice among the items participants ranked, so a clear picture of the relationship is really only available through the open-ended interview questions and the storytelling exercise.

When participants were asked to describe an important event (one-time or repeated) that contributed to their success, most participants shared stories about meaningful conversations with mentors, moments of overcoming deep disappointment, and how they approached obstacles they faced. Joe was the one participant who made reference to a group of peers coming together to form the Gospel Choir. During the
storytelling portion of Joe’s interview, the two stories he told both involved collaboration with peers and that these experiences “contributed to the success and the extent of character that I have.” Joe shared that forming the Gospel Choir was an outlet for him and fellow Black students but also became a way to contribute back to the Midwest University community:

…I guess it's had to be like third or second year and a lot of the African-American students wanted some kind of outlet, and now we had music but they were never able to really do anything or never put anything together. So we got together the Gospel Choir and tried it from there. I was trying at that point to get, umm, you know get the use of the rooms and the things like that and really started to evolve and really went well. And I was pleased we were actually able to do something in chapel and we were able to contribute to chapel instead of just being a participant. The Gospel Fest, even though it was very small, the first time we ever did Gospel Fest it was a very small event but it went well. It was wonderful because we had to get down in the trenches and get people involved enough to do something, so it worked out.

Institutional Obstacle Themes

Participants were asked during the interview to talk about any institutional or personal obstacles they had to overcome to graduate. There were three major themes that emerged through the data collection and analysis that could be categorized as institutional obstacles the participants had to overcome in order to succeed. The three themes are: minority in a majority, paying for college, and campus policy disconnect.
Institutional Obstacle Theme 1: Minority Fatigue

For research question three regarding institutional obstacles to college success, the first theme is minority fatigue. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Minority fatigue is a dominant theme because a total of seven out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme, and it is well supported by data collected from storytelling exercise. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the storytelling exercise will also be presented to support this particular theme.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>&quot;...it's not culture shock because there wasn't really a culture for me to get shocked to because I, it's not like I hadn't had any exposure to White people.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;It was it was fatiguing for me after a while.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron</td>
<td>&quot;You don’t get that (respect) from your own people and you darn sure don’t get that from people of other races.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;What tribe?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>“I didn’t want to be there because of my color.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>“You’re not in Africa…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>“And a lot of students felt really uncomfortable being on campus and that was just kind of a shattering moment.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants seemed very forgiving towards or accepting that issues related to race should be expected, because they knew before enrolling at Midwest University that they would be a minority at this predominantly White institution. A few participants made no reference to race during their interview and others said they were aware of their minority status but did not credit it as a major influencing factor in their experience. Of the 10 participants who did mention race in their comments, Ron, David, Billy, Tony, and Lamont expressed that because of their background or exposure to other predominantly White settings, they did not experience culture shock or issues with assimilation with which some of their peers seemed to struggle.

Even though David attended majority Black schools during his K-12 education, he downplayed the adjustment to attending a PWI because of the campus atmosphere. David described Midwest University as “nice and accommodating” and attributed his feeling of “isolation” during his first year to being a freshman in a new environment rather than the cause of those feelings stemming from being a minority student on a majority White campus:

Being pretty much, all the schools I went to before were like majority Black schools, and this isn’t like a really big obstacle just because everyone here is so nice and accommodating and, it's more a reflection on me because I didn't exactly know how to handle it I guess. Umm, it’s just like, it's not culture shock because there wasn't really a culture for me to get shocked to because I, it’s not like I hadn’t had any exposure to White people before or anything. Um, it was a tiny bit isolating but I think that's more to do with being a freshman, um, and just getting
accustomed to the environment. So I guess just getting used to a change in
scenery would be a summary...

Billy mentioned noticing being the “only Black student” in a circle of peers and
pondered if he was selected for a leadership position based on his skin tone. Jay
lamented that he thought some faculty had lower expectations of minority students and
did not grade them on par with other students. Jay also shared that he thought minorities
in student leadership roles were there as an “exception” to White students.

Overall, no participant described being a minority on a majority campus as a
major obstacle that would potentially lead them to leave college, but rather that subtle
“fatigue” as Billy described it, or feeling “defensive,” as Jay said, that was added
pressure White peers knew nothing about. Ron shared that, “College was a good time for
me. It opened me to the opposite of what a lot other African Americans were
experiencing.” Ron shared that he actually felt respected by key members of campus
leadership and said, “As a Black man you don’t get that. You don’t get that from your
own people, and you darn sure don’t get that from people of other races.”

Although Billy attended a predominantly White private Christian high school, he
said that “especially” at Midwest University he “instinctually” wondered when he met
people if they saw him “as another Black face” or if they were willing to see him for who
he really was and not define him by his skin color. Billy shared that he struggled with a
lot of self-doubt over whether or not he was chosen for some leadership roles. This ever-
present self-doubt and immersion into a predominantly White university was stressful for
Billy:
But for me, I knew that was a tag that I couldn't escape. That I couldn't escape preconceived notions about who African Americans were and what black people are like. And why is this Black kid wearing these kind of clothes? And speaking this kind of English? And it doesn't really make sense with what I've been told or what I'm used to. And for as much as the educational process by walking through that process with other people was doable. It was fatiguing for me after a while. Because it was like every single person that you met…it was always a wall that had to be broken down. And so socially, even the people that were open to it, it was still something that had to be acknowledged and it had to be dismantled. Even if it blossomed into like a really great relationship. It was always a hurdle. Which is, which it just took its toll.

Billy struggled with the idea of being accepted for who he really was as opposed to being sought after because of his race when it came to student leadership opportunities as well peer relationships:

It was just how much I doubted myself, because I didn't really know whether or not I was earning it or whether or not people were just being nice because they knew they had to. Because we’re in a private school in a Christian school setting and they were trying to do the right thing by tolerating me. Just a lot of self-doubt.

Like Ron and Tony, Billy thought that his middle school and high school experiences at predominantly White schools gave him added skills and tools to cope with being a minority at a PWI. Billy described his high school experience in this way:
There was a lot of distance. Because at that age, a lot of kids have not been exposed to people like me…all that they had to go on were stereotypes. I was kind of lonely, so I learned to, in fear of not pushing people away, to tolerate a lot of things. I found that for White people or any other people who are like nervous around African Americans, their ability to joke is one of the things they use to break tensions and it reached its peak my senior year [of high school].

Tony and Jay were the only two participants to make reference to insensitivity by faculty in the classroom. Both men described these instances as shocking to them because they displayed what they described as “ignorance” and insensitivity by the faculty members. Jay shared an incident from class his freshman year where an adjunct professor singled him out and asked him an embarrassing question. Jay said that he was caught off guard by the question, and other White classmates later told Jay they found the question offensive as well. As Jay recalled the incident, it was obvious it left a negative impression on him and may have impacted his academic performance as well:

And I remember sitting down in her class, and I wasn't doing as wonderful as I would like and one of the obstacles was that she kind of attacked me in the middle of class. She asked me what tribe was I from because even in my writing things she could tell that I was different. And I just from that moment my freshman year first semester in college I just felt like I can't believe it. It was just traumatic, you know. And so I was very upset and other people in the class found it offensive. And I thought, ‘What tribe?’ And I just, you know, can laugh about it. But at that time I just felt very horrible about it, and needless to say, one of those obstacles. I didn't like that class. I just instantly had a bad memory from it and I
just couldn't wait to get done, and I never really failed any class but I got a D in that class.

Tony’s story involved feedback on a paper he wrote where he referenced his “experience around this particular subject was different because he was African American.” Although he could not recall the professor’s exact comments on his paper, they were akin to, “You’re not in Africa, you’re in America and it’s the 20th century and you need to get over it and move on with your life.” The comment bothered Tony but he also used it as motivation to finish his college degree to prove to the faculty member that he was “over it” and was not using his different experience as an African American as an excuse not to achieve success. Additionally, what may have helped Tony use these remarks as a challenge rather than become bitter was that he found another professor who was a “listening ear” when he was frustrated with the culture around him. Tony said this faculty member, Dr. Madison, “just listened and was kind of sympathetic.”

Lamont and Josh shared a minority perspective from their experience of being in college as the first-ever Black person was elected as President of the United States. Since Lamont shared about this event during the Storytelling section of his interview, his experience will be covered later in the storytelling section of this theme.

For Josh, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States came up when he was asked about the obstacles he faced while in college. Josh said that as a Black male he was not treated differently, but he grew uncomfortable because of his “color” when he felt campus tensions rise as the historical election grew near:

Yeah, but I think that, um, being a Black male at Midwest wasn't very, I don't think it was really like something where I was treated differently or anything like
that. I think I was treated pretty equal by everybody. I did have one situation where I was, um, a situation you know that I didn't want to be there because of my color, so other than what happened in like, you know. The election is the only one that I can really remember. During the election there was a lot of tension as far as who are you going for and it's not like it was none of your business. I'm here, I'm going to school not the election, I don't think it should really matter. Why is it being brought up and why is there so much tension about this? Where is I feel like politics is, you know, I feel politics is like a big game anyway. I really could care less about it honestly, um yeah, so that's the only difficult situation that happened. You know where I was kind of like, you know, just I don't know, it kind of turned me off a little bit, but I mean I'm sure that was going on at other college campuses also so, so I mean that's about it.

During the storytelling portion of the data collection, Lamont told three stories: two situations involving Mr. Bingham as a central figure and the other, his athletic coach. The third story that is relevant to this theme was about his experience as an Black student at Midwest University during the historic election of the United States’ first Black President, Barak Obama. Lamont said that he and other students felt “uncomfortable on campus” during this “shattering moment.” As Lamont described election night, he said that Mr. Bingham gathered most of the Black students into his house and asked Lamont to speak to them:

I remember we met in Mr. Bingham’s house after President Obama had been elected. And a lot of students felt really uncomfortable on campus, and that was just kind of a shattering moment. You know it was a huge, huge moment and a
lot of students on campus were feeling uncomfortable, and I remember Mr. Bingham even pulled most of the African American students on campus into his house. And he told me to speak to them, and once again, one of those times where he didn't tell me what to say, he said just speak and kind of made me be a leader, so that helped me a lot. Especially after that time because I was, I was just as emotional, just as emotionally strung out as everyone else.

From this story and the fact that Lamont identified it as an important event that contributed to his success as a student, the moment seemed to be especially meaningful because for the first time ever a Black person was elected as the leader of the United States. In the midst of that “shattering moment” Lamont was called upon to be a leader in his own right, among his own minority peers, to help them process what they were feeling, be a vision of strength in a time of mixed emotions and to celebrate the historic election.

*Institutional Obstacle Theme 2: Paying for College*

For research question three regarding institutional obstacles to college success, the second theme is paying for college. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. Five out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme; therefore it is identified as an emerging theme. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise will also be presented to support this particular theme.
When asked about any institutional obstacle that had to be overcome to make it to graduation, five of the 12 participants said that paying for college was the biggest obstacle they had to overcome. It is important to note that at Midwest University the 2013-2014 cost for tuition, room, board, and fees is $31,570. One participant shared that at least once every year he was faced with the struggle to pay for college. Another participant said that finances were especially an obstacle for him and other minority students. Two other participants shared that their financial picture changed while in college, and they were faced with how to continue to afford attending Midwest University.

Table 15

_Institutional Obstacle Theme 2: Paying for College_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
<td>&quot;So monetarily, or financially, that was the biggest obstacle that I had to overcome.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>&quot;A lot of the more personal internal struggle that I was having at home was a result of the financial crisis that we were having and the pressures that that put on the family unit as a whole.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;But the obstacle was always financial.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>&quot;So that was a little pressing. But it worked itself out. &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>&quot;I just felt like God said that he was going to provide and he would take care of everything financially.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clark said that at least once a year there were financial issues that came up that threatened his ability to stay and finish his education at Midwest University. In fact, Clark mentioned financial issues five times during his interview, more than any other participant. Finances were a true obstacle for him that became a regular part of his college experience. Clark also described finances as the most discouraging part of his college experience. Thankfully, he found the assistance he needed by working with a Midwest University employee in the Business Office:

…going into see Nickel Fletcher that works at school there. There was always either, uh, something that I was able to receive or something that could, or another loan that I could, uh, seek to take out. There was always something that I could do that ended up, ya know, enabling me to continue at Midwest University. So monetarily, or financially, that was the biggest obstacle that I had to overcome.

Billy identified finances and family issues as the chief obstacles for him and said they were “closely paired.” He said going away to college and the burden of paying for college compounded other financial crisis for his family. Even while away at school Billy contributed what he could to his family’s income by working up to three jobs and 80 hours during the summer and working on campus during the academic year too. Billy described the financial and family challenges this way:

“…you know the final financial situation which was closely paired with just some of the struggles I was having back home. A lot of the more personal internal struggle that I was having at home was a result of the financial crisis that we were having and the pressures that that put on the family unit as a whole. Tensions are
always going to run higher when money is tight and so there were arguments at home…”

Like Billy, Jay worked while in college too. Only Jay worked full time, sometimes juggling three part-time jobs while taking an overload class schedule in order to graduate on time with a double major. He described life as “chaotic” between his jobs, class load and co-curricular involvement in Gospel Choir. Jay described his struggle to pay for college like this:

A lot of the financial obstacles I had I feel like minority students, I wasn't the only one going through this. So, umm, just that Midwest University is a really expensive university. I had a good packet [financial aid package] but I just never felt like I could have the newest things, or it just felt like I was barely still making it. Just barely getting by. So it was really hard for me to be able to meet my needs for books and to live…And I worked full-time the whole time through college and it was very difficult, and there was many times that I stayed up till 3:45 in the morning. I was a night supervisor, you know, at different places just to get through college and even then financial aid still, I mean did not like give you living expenses. It was still, it's never enough and especially since I was double majoring, taking 21 to 24 credits a semester, you know. So I just always needed more because I was over, you know. But I had a plan, and so it was one of the things that I chose to do. But the obstacle was always financial.

Joe was fortunate to have what he called a “beneficiary” his first two years of college, but his junior and senior years’ finances became the main obstacle:
First, I would say I guess that would be after the first two years my beneficiary ran out. So, trying to find out about loans and things that could get me through the last two years. That was kind of interesting. It got me a little more involved in my finances. So that was a little pressing. But it worked itself out.

Todd, like most of the participants in the study, did not have the family resources to foot his college bill. In fact, Todd said that because he had the main responsibility to pay for college, he had to decide for himself if he would continue at Midwest University when his financial aid package changed later in college:

When I first came to Midwest University, I had a great financial aid package. I didn't have to take out very many loans…but at some point my financial aid package changed a little bit. And I had to decide whether or not I was going to take out more loans to complete school or, and that was kind of hard, and I really had to pray about that. And I just again, I just felt like God said that he was going to provide and that he would take care of everything financially. Yeah, I did end up having to take out more loans, but in the end, I also ended up getting scholarships out of nowhere. Music scholarships out of nowhere…after my second year, I ended up getting scholarships from the music program that I wasn't really expecting. So that was kind of beneficial. That was something that I was worried about and kind of had to get over because my family doesn't really have a lot of money at all.

According to the ranking exercise completed by 10 of the 12 participants, financial aid packaging ranked fourth and the second institutionally-linked item behind faculty interaction, which was ranked number one overall.
During the storytelling portion of the interview Clark was the only participant to mention finances. When asked to tell a story about a one-time or repeated event while in college that contributed to his success as a student, Clark first mentioned finances as a “big part” but then went on to tell a story about being academically dismissed and the effort he put in to successfully appeal that dismissal in order to return to Midwest University the following semester.

Clark was the one participant who said that he faced financial issues at least once every year, so this must have almost become normal to him, and although stressful, somehow always worked out. The story that Clark went on to tell about being academically dismissed truly became the turning point in his college career that sparked his motivation towards becoming a more serious student. So even though Clark started out the storytelling portion of the interview by saying that finances was a “big part,” he did not finish the thought before moving on to tell the story about his dismissal.

*Institutional Obstacle Theme 3: Campus Policy Disconnect*

For research question three regarding institutional obstacles to college success, the third theme is campus policy disconnect. The following table illustrates the theme by using verbatim excerpts from the interview to substantiate the theme. A total of five out of the 12 participants mentioned this theme; therefore it considered an emerging theme for this research study. After the table and the substantiation using the interview data, data from the ranking and storytelling exercise, if any, will also be presented to support this particular theme.
Table 16

*Institutional Obstacle Theme 3: Campus Policy Disconnect*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>&quot;...I did accumulate chapel misses so institutionally I would say my difficulty was chapel…&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>&quot;I felt like I saw very few attempts to make chapel a multicultural kind of a worship experience&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont</td>
<td>“I just felt like there were times they just kind of kept us in the shell and kept us from doing things that most adults would do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>&quot;And it put more pressure because I had to give up that hour and I need to do this it was very stressful.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>&quot;There (are) lifestyle changes that you have to make.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though 10 of the 12 participants specifically mentioned their appreciation for the Christian atmosphere at Midwest University, five of the 12 participants highlighted a couple campus policies in place, because MU is a faith-based institution, they felt were obstacles during their college experience. Campus policy disconnect is an emerging theme of this study. Of the five who mentioned frustrations over campus policies, such as required chapel and limited residence hall visitation hours, only one said that he ever considered leaving Midwest University because of such policies. From the way the participants discussed the policies, the policies seemed more like a nuisance than
an obstacle so significant they could have driven the participants to discontinue their studies at Midwest University.

David mentioned that because he attended a public high school, he “wasn’t used to the idea of a Christian university” before coming to Midwest University. David said that he did not mind required chapel at first, but later in his college career, as classes became more difficult, he wanted to use this time on his studies rather than attending chapel:

At first it was alright. It was interesting. It was a new thing, like chapel, alright, I can do this, and then like when my class load got a little bit heavier and I was trying to, you know, work on my time management. You know, it was a lot easier to just do other stuff like homework during chapel…I did accumulate chapel misses, so institutionally I would say my difficulty was chapel…

David said that at one point he thought about transferring to a larger university mostly because of the required chapel policy, and he “never really understood the open hour policies” that limited males and female visits in opposite gender residence hall rooms to set hours and specific days each week. It is significant that David identified the chapel attendance policy and limited visitation hours as institutional obstacles, but apparently the positive experiences at Midwest University outweighed negatives like these.

Jay said he grew up Baptist and “really wanted to go to a Christian–based institution.” Jay said that when he visited Midwest University as a high school student, he attended chapel and remembered, “It was wonderful and I really enjoyed it.” Later in his college career, the event he enjoyed when he visited Midwest University became a
source of stress. Similar to David, for Jay the chapel attendance policy became a requirement that impinged on other commitments, such as studying and his employment schedule:

And when I got to Midwest University I just felt like it was a challenge sometimes I felt that I really enjoyed the chapel speakers and everything, but I just think with the times that we were missing or if you missed…I think I was on probation once. From that when you're working and trying to meet those things it was really hard for me to even give up. You know, because I didn't have a class before, it was very difficult for something to get to the Chapel, and I just didn't want to get on probation and just getting all these different obstacles. So, it put more pressure on finance, you know. And it put more pressure because I had to give up that hour, and I need to do this it was very stressful.

Tony was another participant who struggled with required chapel. Like a majority of the participants, Tony was raised in a Christian home and grew up in the county where Midwest University was located, so he too was aware that Midwest University was a faith-based institution. Tony said he “struggled” with chapel the entire time he attended Midwest University. In fact, Tony shared that he was dismissed from Midwest University after the fall semester of his sophomore year because he had missed too many chapels. Tony said he fought the dismissal and due to a “technicality” he was allowed to return to Midwest the next semester. In his own words, Tony did say he “learned his lesson” after the dismissal scare and never had any further chapel attendance problems the rest of his time at Midwest University.
Even though Tony “learned his lesson” and never exceeded chapel absences again, that did not change his attitude about chapel. Tony said he “hated” chapel and “did not enjoy it at all.” When asked what he disliked about chapel, Tony indicated a lack of connection to the chapel worship style that did not represent his faith tradition:

Not my style and, and I felt like I saw very few attempts, there were some, but I felt like I saw very few attempts to make chapel a multicultural kind of a worship experience… I realized I signed the thing saying I would abide by all the rules and everything, but to be forced to sit through something that you feel kind of no attachment to. I don't feel like that was entirely beneficial.

Similar to David’s experience, Lamont shared that although the rules at Midwest University would not have kept him from graduating from college, they did cause him to consider transferring to a larger university with fewer campus rules. Lamont said that at times he felt like Midwest kept students from being “grown,” and “I just felt like there were times they just kind of kept us in the shell and kept us from doing things that most adults would do.”

Lamont added that as an athlete, he had another set of eyes on him through his team coaching staff, and so in a sense, there was “a double set of rules” by which he had to abide. Lamont considered transferring because he felt like Midwest University did not “fit” him:

Because there was a time, I felt like that would've been the best option for me. Because I came in as a freshman and I was ‘the man’ on a basketball team, and I was not playing as much as I thought. And then on top of that, I've got a RA telling me I need to keep a shoe in the door when I got people in there. And it
was just, like, kind of frustrating at times…and I remember at the end of my sophomore year it felt like maybe I should stop playing basketball and go pursue my journalism career at XYZ State.

Ocean’s perspective on the institutional policies and culture changed when he re-enrolled at Midwest University after being academically dismissed. Unlike the other participants, Ocean did not mention a specific behavioral policy, like required chapel or residence hall rules. Ocean’s comments addressed how for him, the experience of just attending a Christian university with the required religion courses, class assignments, and corresponding lifestyle expectations were an obstacle for him and others. The integration of Christian beliefs, required religion courses, and reading assignments in the Bible were difficult for him until he became more serious about his faith. Ocean said until students become “intentional” about their faith development, they will be in “conflict” with Midwest University:

Well the thing is, an institutional obstacle is when you come to a Christian university, like this. There are lifestyle changes that you have to make. So if you come here, you either have to get in line with everybody else or not come here. So I mean that's the kind of avenue. Hmm, because if you're not looking to be intentional with your walk with Christ then, and trying to have a total commitment, you're going to have a hard time here. I noticed until I did that, I was having a hard time. Because you're here, the classes in the religion and it's forcing you to do some of the stuff that you you're not trying to do, you're going to have a conflict. You're going to have a bad attitude about the Bible, but you have to read it for some of your classes.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

Chapter four presented the results of the research study, examining the College experiences of Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, PWI. The study’s research questions focused on their overall college journey as well as the personal and institutional factors that most contributed to their experience and the greatest obstacles that had to be overcome in order to persist to graduation.

The major themes that emerged from research question one included how nine of the 12 participants described their overall experience as “Enjoyable,” yet the same number, nine of the 12, experienced periods of “Struggle, Discouragement and Stress.”

Research questions two and three explored the personal and institutional factors that most contributed positively to their experience as well as the obstacles that had to be overcome in order to persist. The dominant and emerging themes were organized under the personal contributor and personal obstacle as well as the institutional contributor and institutional obstacle headings.

For research question two, the personal contributor themes included self-efficacy, family support, and faith to face challenges. The personal obstacle themes included academic challenges, coping with suspension or dismissal, and minority sub-community drama. For research question three, the institutional contributor themes included supportive community, campus mentors’ support, and peer support. The institutional obstacle themes included paying for college, minority fatigue, and campus policy disconnect.
The four different elements of the data collection included interviews, participant questionnaire, ranking exercise, and storytelling exercise. Once analyzed, these streams of data consistently supported one another and offered to the researcher a rich and in-depth understanding of the 12 participants’ college experiences at a private, faith-based, PWI.

Chapter five presents the research conclusions, comparing and contrasting with other research studies, followed by the researcher’s recommendations, study limitations, and opportunities for further research.

Introduction

The study of college persistence and graduation rates has been thrust to the forefront of conversations in the media and around board room tables as higher education has come under great scrutiny because of low graduation rates, higher than inflation tuition increases, and mounting college student debt. What took everyone so long? Persistence and attrition have long been discussed and studied in graduate and doctoral programs and researched by retention experts like Astin, Sedlacek, Terenzini, and Tinto. Even so, persistence and graduation rates for all students, especially certain students of color, have not improved and in some cases have declined. Perhaps it is time to flip the conversation focusing more energy on what can be learned from the experiences of those Black males who do persist to graduation rather than rehearsing the reasons why they do not.

This study was designed to take an in-depth look at the college experiences of 12 Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution. Most studies on this topic have focused solely on the barriers Black students face. There
is a growing recognition that although obstacles should be considered, support for research on those who have risen above challenges and persisted to graduation should be explored further (Freeman, 1997). This study followed Freeman’s recommendation to focus on the experiences of those individuals who overcame obstacles to persist to graduation.

Through studying the lived experiences of Black males who completed a bachelor’s degree, this research offers insight into the important personal and institutional elements that most impacted their educational journeys. The most prominent understanding gained from this research study was that noncognitive factors were the major influencers over their college experience and most prolific contributors to their ability to persist to graduation. The results of this study are summarized in this chapter by discussion of the three research questions. The opportunities for further study, research limitations, recommendations, and conclusions will also be discussed in this final chapter.

Twelve Black male graduates from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education accepted the invitation to participate in this qualitative study. The data collection included a face-to-face or phone interview divided into four parts, including demographic survey; open-ended interview questions; a ranking exercise; and a final question answered in story form which asked participants to recall an important event (one-time or repeated) that contributed to their success as a student.

The researcher followed Creswell’s six steps of data analysis, as described in the previous Research Methodology chapter, in order to discover the themes that collectively communicate what Moustakas (1994) describes as the “essence” or meaning of the
participants’ college experiences. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants in order to protect their identity, and whenever a participant specifically mentioned the actual name of the college they attended a pseudo-name, Midwest University (MU), was substituted.

A qualitative research study was conducted. The literature review informed the conceptual framework for the study. The study’s conceptual framework represents an eclectic combination of the major factors that influence the college experience of students of color and, in most cases, specifically Black males. According to the conceptual framework presented in chapter three, the main factors influencing Black males’ ability to persist fall into three areas: institutional factors, personal factors, and their college experiences.

Because not all of the themes were of equal strength, a decision rule was created to identify which themes were dominant in the research and which themes were determined to be emerging. For Research Question One, the major themes include how participants described their overall college journey as an “Enjoyable Experience,” with periods of “Struggle, Discouragement, and Stress” as well.

Through the interview process, participants were asked to describe factors that contributed to their ability to persist to graduation as well as obstacles they had to overcome. The analyzed data from the participant interviews was then categorized as personal and institutional contributors as well as personal and institutional obstacles.

Research question two focused on each participant’s perception of the personal attributes that contributed positively to their ability to succeed and the personal obstacles they had to compensate for or overcome. The personal contributor themes included self-
efficacy, family support, and faith to face challenges. The personal obstacle themes included academic challenges, coping with suspension or dismissal, and minority sub-community drama.

Research question three asked participants to reflect on the institutional contributors to their success as well as the institutional obstacles that presented barriers they had to overcome in their college journey. The institutional contributor themes included supportive community, campus mentors’ support, and peer support. The institutional obstacle themes included paying for college, minority fatigue, and campus policy disconnect.

The elements of the conceptual framework and the themes found in the study support each other very well. The 12 elements of the conceptual framework represent an eclectic array of the major factors that influence the experiences of Black college students as found in the literature review. Of the 12 conceptual framework elements, nine are either specifically identified or related to this study’s themes. Of the nine dominant and emerging themes from this study, eight are categorized in this study as noncognitive. The themes will be covered in greater detail through review of the study’s three research questions.

Review of Research Questions

Research Question One

How do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe their college experience?

Enjoyable Experience Theme
The participants’ approach to research question one really does typify their college experience at Midwest University. The participants expressed how much they “enjoyed” their college journey. There were some great social times and periods of personal growth. For the most part, Midwest University was a good personal and academic fit for the participants, and they valued the campus environment. But this was only part of their story. Yes, they enjoyed the experience, but along with all the good times there were hard times too. The participants’ approach to answering questions related to research question one exemplified the attitude of the participants. Yes, they enjoyed their college experience. Yes, each participant came face to face with his fair share of obstacles. Yet they persisted. This ability to persist despite significant obstacles will be covered in the second and third research questions.

The first interview question asked participants to reflect on their overall college experience. It is worth noting that none of the participants led with a focus or story about major obstacles. Instead, their instinctual response, as a broad smile swept across many of their faces, was an overall expression of how they “enjoyed” their experience. This theme can come across as too simplistic for a dissertation study, but when nine out of the 12 participants used adjectives such as “enjoyable,” “phenomenal,” and “life changing” to describe their college experience, this became a dominant theme of the study.

The overall positive attitude towards their college experience speaks to participants’ high level of self-efficacy. Although self-efficacy will be covered in more detail later with research question two, it came through in the way participants answered research question one as they were asked to reflect on their overall college experiences.
For the participants, it was as if they understood and were prepared for the challenges they knew college would present. Although the men led off their comments with the positive aspects about college, as the interview progressed they shared the obstacles as well. Through the challenges and successes these men had a goal in mind and had pre-determined within themselves that they were going to overcome all barriers between them and earning their degrees.

As the participants reflected on their college journey, they mentioned the opportunity for spiritual, academic, and social development; the “people” of Midwest University being very receptive; and again, recognized and valued that the campus ethos made for a positive and “enjoyable” experience. The manner and way in which the participants experienced the Midwest University campus community obviously contributed to their ability to enjoy their undergraduate days.

This research affirms Holmes et al. (2000) who theorized that Black college students’ success is largely determined by whether the students feel a sense of appreciation and hospitality both socially and academically through each developmental stage of college. In contrast, the findings of this study was dissimilar to the experience of the Black students enrolled at PWI’s in studies by Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) and Swail et al. (2003) where study participants viewed the institutions as hostile, alienating and socially isolating as compared to their White peers. One of the themes in this study that participants had in common was they found the Midwest University to be a supportive community, making them feel valued, appreciated, and welcomed into the campus community. The participants in the previous studies by Smedley et al. (1993) and Swail et al. (2003) did not share that same experience.
So, as simplistic as it may sound, the participants’ description of their overall college experience was an initial and hearty “enjoyable,” and then when given more time to reflect, respond to additional questions, and the researcher’s analysis of the entire dataset, the next theme for research question one emerged.

*Struggle, Discouragement, and Stress Theme*

Nine out of the 12 participants shared stories or mentioned periods during their college journey when they struggled, were discouraged, or experienced stress. With the vast majority of the participants sharing how struggle, discouragement, and stress were all a part of their college experience, this theme is a dominant one for this study. Three participants specifically mentioned during the interview that they were convinced college was their best option to achieve success in life. This mindset alone was most likely a stressor for these men. Some of the stress and struggle Ron experienced was due to the high standards he had for himself. Ron called himself the “trailblazer” as he was the first male in his family to go straight from high school to college. Family support was invaluable to Ron, yet created self-imposed pressure as well. Uncertainty in what major to pursue and his one and only failing grade in his school career were obstacles Ron plowed through to make his family proud and achieve his personal mission of graduating in four years.

Like Ron, Jay was determined to graduate in four years. For Jay, this was complicated by his desire to complete a double major, lack of family financial support, working full time while in college, later getting married, and starting a family while carrying 21-24 credit hours per semester. Jay, Billy, Clark, Todd, and Tony all experienced periods of discouragement caused by financial concerns. For Clark, his lack
of academic motivation correlated to the semester-by-semester struggle to pay for his education. Five participants, Tony, Jay, Billy, Rex, and Ocean, shared how at times pressures from home or absence of strong family support added to their struggle to engage or persist at Midwest University.

College is a time when, regardless of students’ race, there will be periods of struggle, discouragement, and stress as individuals acclimate to the different demands and new environment. According to other research, Black males enrolled at PWI’s encounter higher incidences of depression, experience lower levels of academic motivation, receive negative treatment, and are generally dissatisfied with their college experience (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Lee & Ransom, 2011). The same set of research studies believe that the largest factors impacting Black male attrition are the psychological barriers, isolation, alienation, and hostility they experience on PWI campuses (Allen, 1992, Fleming, 1984, Lee & Ransom, 2011). Yet in this study, the participants’ main stressors were more often related to other unique noncognitive factors, including financial struggles, high personal expectations, and intermittent family support. Perhaps not the absence of stress, but the various types of struggle, stress, and discouragement these participants experienced, which was different than the stress of hostility, alienation, and isolation, and the presence of a support network were why these participants were able to persist to graduation.

Research Question Two

What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key personal factors that contributed
to their success? Were there personal obstacles they had to overcome in order to succeed?

Research question two focused on the personal factors that both contributed to their ability to succeed as well as obstacles they had to overcome in order to persist to graduation.

**Personal Contributor Themes**

As mentioned in chapter four, the participants in this study were able to easily recall and describe a support network that surrounded them while in college. This network of support which consisted of family, personal faith, a supportive college community, campus mentors, and peers coupled with their individual desire and commitment to graduate were the key contributors to their ability to persist to graduation.

**Self-Efficacy Theme**

For the researcher, this theme was the most unexpected and most prolific of all the themes. With 10 of the 12 participants saying almost verbatim that “quitting was not an option,” this sense of self determination came across as largely an intrinsic attitude but provided the essential foundation for their success. The “quitting was not an option” mantra came from some participants with seemingly little formal support structures, while for others, this attitude was likely influenced heavily by their parents and family. In this researcher’s opinion, the participants largely held the “quitting was not an option” as a personal attitude but the root or origin of that perspective varied. It is immaterial the basis for the “quitting was not an option” attitude because the strength of this mindset was clearly a perspective the participants dearly held and strongly felt.
For Todd and Ron, this attitude may be connected to not letting people down or a sense of responsibility because they were the first in their families to enroll in college. Then for Josh, David, and Jay they shared the perspective that for a Black man, there was not a better option out there than to get a college degree. While Tony, Lamont, and Ocean proclaimed they could not imagine an obstacle that would have prevented them from graduating. Josh said, “you gotta have confidence in yourself that you can do whatever you put your mind to…” The staunch sense that they would prevail was present in these participants. The only hesitation was whether or not they would finish their degree at Midwest University, and that thought was only shared by David and Lamont.

Tinto (1993) determined that the student’s level of desire towards achieving a goal positively correlates with their ability to persist to graduation. The results of this study support Tinto’s theory that persistence is an outcome of an individual’s level of commitment or individual intention. In a study by Goodman (1972) Black students’ perception of themselves contributed to their ability to interact in a healthy manner with individuals and institutions. The degree to which a person’s self-concept is affirmed or disrespected by others is integral to the person’s maturation and to social and academic engagement. Hall (1999) supported that when a student feels affirmed and encouraged, that student is likely to experience academic and social integration.

It is likely that the high level of self-efficacy expressed by the participants in this study coupled with the strong personal and institutional support positively contributed to their college experience.

*Family Support Theme*
There is ample research on the importance of family relationships and their impact on Black student persistence in college. With nine of the 12 participants sharing their appreciation and dependency on family support, this is a major theme for this research study and can be added to the literature base. Cabrera et al. (1999) found that parental encouragement was the single strongest factor influencing the persistence of Black students and had four times the impact than other variables influencing their goal commitment. Hinderlie and Kenny (2002) found that for Black students at a PWI, strong maternal and paternal attachments were positively correlated with academic and personal-emotional adjustment as well as institutional attachment.

The type of family support the participants experienced was both seen and unseen. The unseen support was alluded to by Lamont, Tony and Josh who benefitted from the culture their parents established in their homes. Lamont said, “…having parents who finished…that was a big deal for me. I didn’t want to be the one that didn’t. I kind of just followed suit.” Tony’s comment was similar, “…there was never any discussion in my house about anything other than going to college after high school.” So, for some participants, earning their college degree was a forgone conclusion or expectation.

The unseen family support was most likely coupled with the overt or “felt” support mentioned by nine of the participants. In Josh’s case, he said his parents “decided” for him in that their ultimatum was graduate from college or do not come home. Josh said that his parents backed up that ultimatum by checking in on him on a regular basis while he was away at college.

Six of the nine participants who highlighted family as being a positive contributor to their experience mentioned varied ways and times their families found to encourage
them. Participants recounted phone calls, texts, and emails sent by immediate and extended family members at pivotal times when they needed words of inspiration and affirmation to “push through,” as Clark specifically recalled. In the storytelling portion of the data collection, Tony described that at family gatherings there were many conversations and lectures about the importance of getting an education and the doors a degree would open for him.

In addition to the data collected through interviews and storytelling, participants completed a ranking exercise rating 12 terms from one to 12 according to their impact on their ability to persist to graduation. Family Support ranked second behind Faculty Interaction. The three streams of research from this study affirm research discussed in the literature review on the positive impact family has on African American college student persistence.

*Faith to Face Challenges Theme*

The participants’ personal faith as well as the opportunity to grow further spiritually was an important part of their experience at Midwest University and qualifies as a dominant theme in this study. The participants’ reliance on their religious faith came through both in the interview and ranking portion of the data collection. In the ranking exercise, out of the 12 terms, the participants ranked “Spirituality” third behind only Faculty Interaction and Family Support. This is consistent with a study by King (2009) at a private, faith based institution and by Nance (2009) at a large, public, PWI, which found spiritual perspectives and practicing spiritual disciplines played an important role in the persistence of minority students.
Nine out of the 12 participants shared that their relationship with God was a major influence on their college experience, and 10 of the 12 expressed appreciation that Midwest University was a faith-based institution. In a survey by the Higher Education Research Institute administered to over 100,000 college freshmen, 47% of Black students scored high on the “religious commitment” scale compared to 24% of Latinos and 22% of Whites (Teichmer, 2005). The participants from Midwest University provided evidence on the importance of their spiritual life in both their responses to the interview questions and the ranking exercise.

The participants in this study found their relationship with God both a comfort and a resource during their college experience. Todd shared that he looked to God to provide the necessary financial resources to continue in college, “I just felt like God said he was going to provide and that he would take care of everything financially.” Rex, Ron, Billy, and Todd shared examples of experiencing ease from stress, release of emotional pain, added strength, clear direction, and needed encouragement through times of prayer, scripture reading, listening to worship music, and being discipled/mentored. This study dovetails with previous research by Stewart (2002, 2007) where Black students relied on practicing spiritual disciplines in order to overcome challenges, combat effects of racial stereotyping, and to make-meaning of their experiences as college students.

Lamont, Ron, Rex, and Todd specifically mentioned that the atmosphere and structure of Midwest University provided them opportunity to develop their faith through attending chapel, class lectures, relationships with faculty, students and staff. The results of this study support findings in research as recent as Nance (2009) and Stewart (2002,
2007) to Love and Talbot (1999) and McEwen et al. (1990). Previous research by McEwen et al. (1990) along with Love and Talbot (1990) and Styles (1985) found that spiritual development is important to psychological maturity and overall college students’ developmental process.

*Personal Obstacle Themes*

Just as each participant answered questions about what “helped” them through their college experience, they were also asked about personal obstacles they had to overcome in order to persist to graduation.

*Academic Challenges Theme*

Like many of their college peers, the participants faced academic challenges; even so, they persisted to graduation. Seven of the 12, or 60% of the participants, were placed on academic probation, including three who were eligible for academic dismissal. Academic challenges qualifies as a dominant theme for this study but should not just be taken as an issue attributed solely to the cognitive ability of the study participants. Upon further analysis of the academic challenges experienced by the participants, their struggles were not purely because of an inability to handle the academic rigor of college, but rather how to manage outside forces of stress.

Five of the participants related their academic challenges were not because they were unable to perform well in the classroom but the presence other stressors such as physical injury, managing newfound freedom, financial struggles, and family crisis. This finding is consistent with research from Tinto that found for students of color, only 15% of their attrition can be attributed to academic dismissal (1987).
For Billy, he described his academic dismissal came after years of struggling alone through family, financial, and personal crisis. Once he opened up to his campus support system, they advocated for his academic dismissal to be repealed. Those same advocates came alongside Billy to guide him through a healing process, which in turn allowed him to achieve success in the classroom. Clark’s academic dismissal was precipitated by an ongoing struggle with paying for college. Bolstered by encouragement from his mother and assistance through the Midwest University business and financial aid offices, Clark overcame academic dismissal and increased his grade point average high enough to graduate. Ocean found out because of work with the university learning center that he had a learning disability, but this was well after he had been academically dismissed. Again, Ocean said that it was his inability to handle the pain and stress from a divorce coupled with resisting any type of institutional support Midwest University offered that caused him to be academically dismissed.

Through listening and analyzing their interviews, demographic information, and stories, it became apparent that the major obstacle for these participants was not their cognitive abilities but was the result of other stressors competing for their attention and demotivating their efforts. For all seven who struggled academically, they were able to overcome their academic challenges once they addressed the stress that impeded their motivation to focus on their studies.

This conclusion is supported by the ranking exercise where participants ranked Classroom Experience fifth and Cognitive Ability eighth. This would seem to communicate participants ranked academically related terms as having moderate impact on their ability to succeed. If the ranking by the participants and demographic data
collected on the participants showing seven of the 12 participants were placed on academic probation were alone considered, one could draw the conclusion that academic challenges had a higher impact than the participants’ ranking reflected. But upon further analysis of the participants’ reflections on their academic struggles, outside forces causing various forms of stress was the root of their academic issues more so than their cognitive abilities.

Minority Sub-community Drama Theme

According to the results of this study, the influence of peers can at times be a double-edged sword. Later in this chapter when institutional support is discussed, peer support will be shown to play a favorable role in the college experience of most study participants. For Ron and Billy, navigating the minority student “sub-community,” as one of them called it, was a source of frustration and stress. As mentioned in the previous chapter, minority sub-community drama is designated as an emerging theme in this study. This theme was mentioned by two of the participants but later affirmed during the data analysis member checking stage by a third participant. Another reason for its inclusion as a theme is the pervasiveness of the theme in the two participants who shared multiple examples from their college journey.

For Ron, his approach to creating a circle of friends was to seek out peers who held his same interests regardless of their race. Ron said this approach gained him a negative reputation: “Environment wise, I didn’t get along with a lot of the Black students…they thought I was arrogant. Some of them thought I didn’t want to be bothered…I was very to myself. Low drama and all that.” Ron felt like his struggle with peers was more with minority students who treated him poorly.
Billy shared that his most difficult experiences at Midwest University came because of conflicts within the university’s minority student population. Billy said, “…you got a lot of criticism for hanging around people that I didn’t, for not congregating with the rest of the African American students, for not being involved like they felt I should be involved in the little sub-community.” Billy went on to share two volatile incidents where members of the minority community were divided, but the tensions present in the scenarios were fueled by the fact that he did not socialize much with other Black students.

There is very little in the literature about tensions among minority college students. One study by Ancis et al. (2000) found Black students were more sensitive to inter-cultural conflicts in the residence halls and felt a heightened pressure to conform to racial norms. The study did not delineate whether the pressure to conform to racial norms was an expectation from within their minority culture or from the majority culture. 

*Coping with Suspension or Dismissal from College Theme*

Any time a student is separated from the college he is attending there is a danger the student will throw in the proverbial towel and decide either college or the institution is not for him. Six of the 12 study participants were suspended or dismissed from Midwest University for either falling out of good academic standing or violating a campus community standard. Coping with suspension or dismissal from college is an emerging theme of this study and appears later in the recommendations for further study section. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, three participants were academically dismissed from Midwest University, but two of them successfully repealed their
dismissals and went on to graduate. Two participants were suspended for violating community standards and one was briefly dismissed for chapel absences.

For Tony and Rex, their suspensions were filled with the lessons they needed to learn in order to create a new understanding of institutional policies, for one and to choose friends more wisely for the other. Surprisingly for Jay, when he was suspended he felt supported by the university during a time when he expected to be shunned, but instead felt cared for by the Midwest staff.

In all six cases, these men did not allow a suspension or dismissal to become the issue that caused them to give up on their goal to graduate from college. Through each participant recounting his suspension or dismissal experience, it is apparent their high level of self-efficacy paired with family and/or Midwest University community support contributed to their ability to persist to graduation.

*Research Question Three*

What do Black males who graduated from a private, faith-based, predominantly White institution of higher education describe as the key institutional factors that contributed to their success? What were the key institutional obstacles they had to overcome to succeed?

*Institutional Contributor Themes*

As was mentioned in chapter four as well as earlier in chapter five, the theme of support came through over and over as the participants discussed their college experience. The support that the participants experienced was from likely relationships, such as family members, faculty, and peers but also included the support they received from their relationship with God and the greater community at Midwest University.
Research question three turned participants’ focus to their interaction with the institution of their undergraduate experience, Midwest University. When answering the interview questions pertaining to the institutional contributors to their success, the participants’ discussion focused on the support they received from the overall campus community, specific relationships with campus mentors, and relationships with peers.

Supportive Community

Standing alone, one may question whether positive experiences with a campus community significantly impact minority students’ experience enough to propel them through college and overcome obstacles to graduation? Holmes et al. (2000) believe that in order for Black students to succeed, students need to feel a sense of appreciation and hospitality both academically and socially. Hall (1999) suggests that for Black students who do not persist to graduation, institutional climate and other non-cognitive factors play the largest role in determining success. Therefore, as our participants shared, a supportive campus ethos plus the other positive themes mentioned in this study combined to create the environment conducive for their success.

When the study participants were asked interview questions about what helped them successfully graduate, seven shared how the supportive campus community significantly contributed to their college experience. Because a majority of the participants discussed the supportive community theme as a major factor in their college experience, it is a dominant theme for this study. Some participants mentioned names of 10-20 individuals as well as “people” in general or departments that encouraged them along their educational journey. Todd said:
“I think the best part of my entire season at Midwest University was that everybody I ran into encouraged me…I should name every single person at MU. You know everybody encouraged me. I could name hundreds of people because everybody encouraged me.”

Ron shared, “I was never a number, I was never a Black man, I was just a person. It was a great reminder that there are people out there who treat you like a person.” Jay said, “There were people who were going to give me a chance to succeed.”

A research study by Hall (1999) upholds the concept that a supportive campus community which affirms and encourages a student’s self-esteem is likely to enhance academic and social integration. Kuh and Whitt (1988) add that a campus culture can be so pervasive, and likely unfamiliar to students of color, that it can impede a minority student’s ability to thrive. Research by Tinto (1993) emphasizes that social and educational congruence heavily influences a student’s ability to persist. Students may experience social or intellectual incongruence resulting in questioning if there is a mismatch between their intellectual capacity and institutional expectations. This social or educational incongruence can influence a student to leave a particular university, or pursuit of a college degree at all, purely on the basis of perceived lack of institutional “fit.”

Campus Mentors’ Support

Eleven of the 12 study participants shared an individual name or names as well as told stories of how campus mentors were a meaningful part of their college experience. Therefore, campus mentors’ support is a dominant theme for this study. Most participants told stories about multiple campus mentors. These mentors were
predominantly faculty within the participants’ area of study, yet most of the conversations and interactions with these mentors took place outside of the classroom and were not always about a particular class or major. The participants reflected on conversations that served as incredible sources of encouragement and support as mentors verbally expressed their belief in the participants’ ability to achieve success. Other conversations with these mentors covered an array of whole-life issues, such as: coping with family struggles, navigating cultural challenges, managing time, stewarding finances, selecting a major, growing spiritually and how to be a person of character in today’s society.

Ron shared that his relationship with a top female administrator and an academic dean allowed him to better understand the minds of executives, talk with individuals he described as “a level above me,” and to ask, “What can I do to improve?” Todd recalled conversations with professors outside the classroom when he was “called out” for making excuses or for not working to his potential. He specifically named four professors who, in his words “constantly” told him, “You can succeed, you are succeeding.” Todd said that this created a “mindshift” in the way he saw himself and that those faculty voices still “haunt” him to this day encouraging him to attend graduate school. Clark appreciated the verbal encouragement and support he received from faculty within his major. He said they would set special times to meet outside of class where the faculty members would express their support and encouragement:

…they let me know that they could see the potential that I had and, ya know, they wanted to bring that out…by just taking the time to have me in their office and
just to chat…sometimes not about schooling…I don’t know that that could happen anywhere else other than Midwest University.

From experiences the participants shared, these mentors played important roles during times of crisis that could have resulted in, as Billy put it, “a more discouraging experience” or even worse, the participants leaving Midwest University. Billy shared:

I know that the people that I consider to be my mentors definitely played a huge role…it was actually through the words of my mentors and just them encouraging me…just helping me keep perspective. Those were the things that were tearing me apart, as far as whether or not I should or shouldn’t be in school.

Six of the 12 participants specifically mentioned Dr. and Mrs. Madison, two professors who intentionally built relationships with students of color in order to support their college success. The participants mentioned the Madisons opening their home for large gatherings of students of color as well as seeking them out individually on campus. Ocean shared that Mrs. Madison helped identify a learning disability he struggled with for his entire life and Mr. Madison would always ask about his family. The Madisons provided academic assistance as well as personal/emotional support. Lamont said:

Dr. Madison he was there before everyone else. Dr. Madison kind of embraced me. When I came in he got me involved in things right away…and that kept me from, you know, doing silly stuff in college that I could’ve done.

Tony shared that Dr. Madison was that “familiar face” with which he felt comfortable sharing relationship difficulties Tony was having with his own father as well as campus cultural issues. Tony said this about Dr. Madison, “…he just listened and was
kind of sympathetic to it [cultural issues], and I think he went out of his way to do that for a lot of black students, particularly males.”

Four of the 12 participants likened their relationship with some campus mentors as playing the mother or father role in their lives. Ocean shared, “He [Dr. Madison] gave me a lot of fatherly advice and support, [he] gave me hugs every time [he] saw me. He would always ask how I was doing and about the kids...you know always there, just like a dad.” Jay said this about Dr. Birch, “But he really played like a Dad to me, honestly. I really found a confidence in him.” Clark said that one of his major professors, “Lorie,” was like a second mom, because she would have him over to her house and articulated the potential she saw in Clark. Rex shared he enjoyed relationships with two men, his work supervisor and major professor, who both played the father figure role for him. Rex said this about his work supervisor, “Wayne provided being my father,” because he taught Rex how to better manage his time and money. Rex’s other father figure, a professor in his major, provided him emotional, spiritual, and academic support.

The experiences of the 12 participants in this study seem to affirm research by Tracey and Sedlacek (1985) focusing on the minority student experience at a PWI. The research found that having at least one support person was a key element in a student of color’s ability to succeed in the face of racism and discouragements. With 11 of the 12 participants sharing details of engaging in one, if not multiple, mentoring-like relationships with faculty and staff, it seems they found the “one support person” needed in order to succeed. Further research by Hall (1999) and Ugbah and Williams (1989) emphasize the importance of formal and informal mentoring through faculty and staff
contact, especially if available from a person of color, as effective strategies to support student success.

Peer Support

Tinto’s research on the college student experience emphasizes the often repeated notion that “fit is it” when it comes to student persistence (1993). Tinto believes that a “personal fit” with the dominant student culture plays a vital role in whether a student persists in college. According to Kinzie and Kuh (2004), when controlling for college preparation and previous academic performance, one of the best indicators of minority student success is the degree to which a student is engaged in the life of a college community.

Peer support is an emerging theme because five of the 12 study participants shared about how important peer support was to their overall college experience. The breadth of examples the participants shared during the study interviews speaks to the close relationships they enjoyed with their peers. The influence of peers helped the study participants face a wide range of challenges, and for the majority, had a positive influence on their college experience and desire to persist to graduation. David shared that if it had not been for his college friends he pondered, “…if academic would be enough for me…as far as morale to stay” and that his commitment to graduating from Midwest University would have been in question. This supports Tinto’s theory that peers are the dominant influence on a student’s social connection or congruence with an institution.

Participants Joe and Josh both shared stories of how peers encouraged them to go to class, attend chapel, and work hard in class. Allen et al. (2004) in their research on postsecondary enrollment support exactly what Joe and Josh experienced, in that they
found for students of color, academic achievement is a social process influenced by personal interaction within defined social and cultural venues. Joe, Josh, and Ron shared examples of organizing social events for all campus students. This little detail may seem trivial but it should not be overlooked. During college, these three participants were not in official leadership roles but took it upon themselves to organize and implement social events that appealed to their personal interests and entertainment of their peers. Joe was a founding member of the Gospel Choir which is still in existence today at MU; Ron started a weightlifting club for his peers; while Joe and Josh organized multiple dances, movie nights, and even a three on three basketball tournament.

Todd shared that he was academically motivated, maybe too motivated at times, and that his friends broadened his understanding and desire for community which in turn enhanced his college experience. Lamont appreciated the relationship he shared with his roommate, a classmate from high school, especially his freshman year as he became acclimated to living away from home in the residence halls.

It is apparent from the examples shared by the participants that their individual peer friendships and peer group relationships enhanced their perceived social congruence and academic congruence with Midwest University. It is important to note that 11 of the 12 participants lived in university-owned apartments or residence halls for at least six semesters of their undergraduate experience. According to Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009), even when controlling for a multitude of factors, including SES, pre-college academic scores, and background characteristics, those students who chose to live on campus were seven to eight times more likely to graduate than comparable students who commuted to campus. The participants in the study benefitted from the campus
policy requiring them to live on campus until they were 22 or married. Their experiences affirm research by Astin (1975), Chickering (1974), Panteges and Creedon (1978), and Pascarella (1984) purporting the positive effects on-campus living has on student satisfaction, retention, and engagement.

Institutional Obstacles

When the question about institutional obstacles was approached in research question three, the participants shared about the experience of being a minority student on a majority campus, struggles with paying for college and difficulties with some campus policies.

Minority Fatigue Theme

From the participants’ comments, they were well aware when they enrolled in Midwest University that they were joining a predominantly White campus. Ten of the 12 participants made reference to race during their interview with seven sharing either a story or something more than a passing comment about their awareness of being a minority on a majority White campus. Minority fatigue is a dominant theme for this study. Except for perhaps two, the participants seemed to not want to put much emphasis on being a minority on a majority White campus. This may speak more to the fact that their experiences at Midwest University, although not perfect, were positive overall. Again, their high level of self-efficacy combined with their awareness that Midwest University was a PWI most likely positively influenced their ability to combat the negative experiences they seemed to expect.

Five participants shared that because of their diverse background before enrolling at MU, they were more comfortable at MU than some students of color with less
exposure to a predominantly White culture. Jay’s references to the campus culture were unique observations. He said he felt some faculty had lower expectations for minority students and graded them easier than majority students. Jay also described minorities in student leadership positions as “exceptions.” His comment seemed to insinuate that minority students were selected as student leaders more because of their race than their abilities and qualifications.

Billy shared similar thoughts because he was often the lone student of color among other undergraduate leaders. Like Jay, he wondered if he was a “token” selection or if he truly earned the leadership roles. Billy attributed these questions to a struggle with self-doubt and that with MU being a Christian university they may have been “doing the right thing by tolerating me.” These examples support research by Neville, Weathers, Poston, and Atkinson that found Black students reported feelings of being singled out for differential or inferior service or treatment by faculty or staff (1990).

Jay and Billy expressed sensitivity to what some would call reverse discrimination, in that they perceived academic standards were lowered and student leadership roles may have been awarded because students were minorities, which they did not appreciate. Conversely, Ron did not struggle with these questions but felt respected by leaders at Midwest University, “College was a good time for me. It opened me up to the opposite of what a lot of other African Americans were experiencing.”

The comments by Jay and Billy support research by Hall (1999) on the value students of color attending PWI’s place on having a “critical mass” of other African American students on campus. Billy, more than any other participant, articulated clearly the struggle he felt as a minority on a majority campus. Billy said that he “instinctually”
wondered when he met people if they saw him “as another Black face.” He questioned if they had a “preconceived notion about who African Americans were,” and about the clothes they wore and the way they talked. Billy went on to say:

And for as much as the educational process by walking through that process with other people was doable. It was fatiguing for me after a while. Because it was like every single person that you met…it was always a wall that had to be broken down. And so socially, even the people that were open to it, it was still something that had to be acknowledged and it had to be dismantled. Even if it blossomed into like a really great relationship. It was always a hurdle. Which is, which it took its toll.

Comments made by Billy during his interview echoed the research by Watkins et al. (2007) comparing levels of stress experienced by Black students versus their White peers at PWI’s. One participant in the 2007 study shared that as a Black man, he must process and try to determine the campus dynamics and perceptions, which adds a level of psychological stress and pressure that never crosses the minds of his White peers. Billy’s previous comments speak of the “processing, toll, obstacle, dismantling, and wall” discussed in the 2007 study.

Two study participants talked about the importance of honoring historical moments that also have significant cultural meaning to students of color. Lamont and Josh shared interesting insights into how they felt after the historic election of the first Black person as President of the United States. Even though eight of the 12 participants were enrolled at Midwest University when Barak Obama was elected, only Lamont and Josh made reference to their experiences during the election. Josh shared that he felt like
he “was treated pretty equal by everybody” but that during the election was the only time “I didn’t want to be there because of my color.” He said that he felt tension because people were asking one another who they were voting for and he just wanted to stay focused on his studies. Lamont shared that the advisor to multicultural students gathered most of the Black students in his home. Lamont said this about the evening the election results were announced:

“…a lot of students felt really uncomfortable on campus, and that was just kind of a shattering moment. You know it was a huge huge moment and a lot of students were feeling uncomfortable…I was just as emotional, just as emotionally strung out as everyone else.”

Although Josh mentioned in his comments that, “I’m sure this was going on at other college campuses,” the fact that the staff member gathered the minority students into his home may be a subtle detail, but worth noting. It seems to support other research stating that Black students are more likely than White students, attending the same institution, to view PWI’s as hostile, alienating, socially isolating, and less responsive to their needs, interests and opinions (Smedly, Meyers & Harrell 1993; Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

Only two participants shared specific classroom experiences at Midwest University. Tony’s experience involved insensitive remarks on a paper he wrote for a class where he was reflecting that his perspective on a particular subject was influenced by the fact he was African American. In his recollection, the professor’s comments were essentially, “You’re not in Africa, you’re in America and it’s the 20th century and you need to get over it and move on with your life.” Fortunately, Tony was able to process
through this issue with a trusted faculty mentor and turned around the offense to fuel his fire to graduate from MU.

Jay received a similar insensitive comment from a faculty member, but his was in front of an audience of peers. A professor in a history class asked Jay what tribe he was from. Of course, this moment was traumatic for Jay. But like Tony, Jay found solace in the supportive peers in the class who also found the comment offensive.

Although both experiences were completely uncalled for and showed very poor judgment, Jay and Tony did not allow these negative experiences to thwart their trajectory towards graduating from MU. Again, this speaks to the importance of other types of support needed in times where issues arise to help assuage their impact. Jay and Tony’s situations were unlike a study by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) in which a Black student at a PWI who in addition to feeling “uneasy and misunderstood,” felt like he also did not have any allies. Instead, Jay and Tony were more like the successful Black students in a study by Hall (1999) who accepted being the lone representative of their race as a challenge and not as a threat.

Paying for College Theme

The increasing cost to attend college is a growing concern for students, families, and now the federal government. Minority students seem to be more concerned and have fewer resources available to them than majority White students. Research studies show that minority students are more sensitive to the cost of tuition, the amount in grants, and scholarships they are awarded and are generally less willing to use student loans to finance their education (Kaltenbaugh, St. John & Starkey, 1999; St. John & Noel, 1989; St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005). In addition, the most common personal factors related
to minority persistence include parental income (Astin, 1982; Douthat, 2005; Evelyn, 2003; Fuller, Manski & Wise, 1982, 1983; Johnson, 1980; Lewin, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Simmons, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001) and positive attitude towards financial aid (Astin, 1975, 1982; Ekstrom, 1991, King, 1999; Nora, 2001). Finally, in a study by Bowen et al. (2009), socio-economic factors, race/ethnicity, and gender had the strongest correlation with time-to-graduation than any other factors.

The findings of this research study support those previously mentioned in that five of the 12 participants said that paying for college was the biggest obstacle they had to overcome in order to graduate. Even though the other seven participants did not mention finances during the interview, they placed a high importance on financial aid through the ranking exercise. In the ranking exercise when they were asked to rank in order of importance the items having the greatest impact on their ability to persist in college, Financial Aid was ranked 4th out of the 12 items. The only institutionally-linked item ranked higher than Financial Aid was Faculty Interaction. Even though finances was heavily represented in the literature, for this study, paying for college is an emerging theme.

Financial issues came up at least once a year for Clark, and he described the struggle to pay for college as the most discouraging part of his experience. Billy identified finances and family issues as being “closely paired” as the dominant obstacles for him while in college. Jay paid for college completely on his own so finances were a constant concern for him. All five of the participants who discussed their struggle to pay for their studies worked during college in order to contribute to their expenses. When
asked to identify institutional obstacles, the five participants used words like tension, stress, pressed, difficulty, pressure, and discouraging as they described their struggle to pay for college.

_Campus Policy Disconnect Theme_

Midwest University is a faith-based institution affiliated with a church denomination. Although not all faith-based institutions are the same, MU, like some others, has campus lifestyle policies that students must agree to abide by before they can be admitted to the university. Even though 10 of the 12 study participants expressed their appreciation for the Christian atmosphere at MU, when asked about institutional obstacles, five participants shared varying levels of distaste for a few of the campus policies. Campus policy disconnect is an emerging theme for this study.

None of the 12 participants said that the campus policies alone would have caused them to leave MU; however, for David and Lamont, the policies did contribute to a period when they questioned if they should transfer to larger public institutions. For David and Jay, required chapel attendance competed with their desire to work and study. Tony and, to some extent, Jay, shared they did not enjoy chapel because they felt there were few attempts to integrate their preferred style of worship into the chapel setting. The participants’ specific issue with chapel somewhat supports research by Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) and Livingston and Stewart (1987) where study participants expressed frustration over the lack of sincere efforts by PWI’s to offer student activities that piqued the interest of minority students. Their feelings were further supported by the research covered in research question two relating the importance of spiritual development in the lives of African American college students.
Conclusion

Through studying the lived experiences of Black males who graduated from college this research offers insight into the important personal and institutional elements that most impacted their educational journeys. Looking back to the study’s conceptual framework and literature review, this research affirms much of what is known through previous research, but in addition, contributes to greater clarity towards understanding how African American males can successfully navigate their college experience.

As mentioned in the literature review, Tinto’s research (1997) on college student behavior found that the degree of integration by a student into the academic and social activities of an institution correlates positively to a deeper sense of institutional and goal commitment which then contributes to a higher rate of persistence. The participants in this study shared their stories detailing significant engagement into the Midwest University social life through participating in campus programs and activities, close relationships with peers, as well as academic engagement through meaningful mentorships with faculty within their area of discipline and various staff members. Although Tinto’s assertion was meant for all college students, regardless of their race, the findings of this research study support the application of those claims for Black males as well. The college experiences of participants in this study were heavily influenced by their own self-efficacy, congruence with the institution’s community through overall welcoming “feel” of campus, personal alignment with the campus culture, and availability of support through family, faith, campus mentors, and peers.

First Conclusion
For this research study, the self-efficacy theme was the predominant characteristic of the study participants. The “quitting was not an option” mindset drove participants to overcome every obstacle in order to graduate. All possessed an internal drive while some benefitted more than others from the presence of outside support through various relationships, including family and campus-related contacts as well as their faith in God.

This researcher was left with a strong impression that the participants’ high degree of self-efficacy influenced their level of commitment to graduating from college which in turn contributed to their connection to Midwest University. Tinto (1993) determined that a student’s level of desire towards achieving a goal positively correlated with their ability to persist to graduation. For this study, I chose to use self-efficacy with its definition, “the capacity or quality to produce a desired result” to represent the participants’ words, “quitting was not an option” and Tinto’s goal commitment definition “desire towards achieving a goal.” For these study participants, their self-efficacy was one of the factors that gave them a significant advantage as they faced the inevitable challenges that came along with leaving familiar surroundings of home for a predominantly White college campus. They each had a clear desire to earn a bachelor’s degree and possessed the inner fortitude to achieve their goal.

Second Conclusion

That high level of self-efficacy or determination was combined with an outward support system that was a different combination of family and the Midwest University campus community. Because this study asked participants to reflect on the entire span of their college experience, it confirms research by Holmes et al. (2000), asserting Black college student success is largely determined by whether the student feels a sense of
appreciation and hospitality both socially and academically through each developmental stage of college. For these participants, the Midwest University campus culture, including availability of mentors, positive relationships with peers, and alignment with most campus policies, provided the ideal conditions for them to not just survive their college experience, but to thrive and “enjoy” it as so many mentioned.

The participants shared that as stressors and issues pressed in on them, their ability to withstand the discouraging tumult was combated by their determination to achieve, strength and encouragement found in their faith, as well as a support network of family, peers, and/or campus community. Again, this research correlates with other studies on the positive impact family and faith has towards successful academic and personal-emotional adjustment, institutional attachment, and persistence of Black college students (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; King, 2009; Nance, 2009).

Third Conclusion

The demographic data collected on the participants yielded a pivotal finding for this study. Surprisingly, each of the 12 research participants lived in the Midwest University residential facilities for all or a significant portion of their time in college. The participants in this study lived on campus an average eight and one-half semesters and completed their degrees in just under 10 semesters. This researcher believes that the fact that, for the vast majority of their college experience, the participants lived on the Midwest University campus which positively influenced their overall positive college experience and persistence.
This study supports research by Bowen et al. (2009) who found that when controlling for several factors, including SES, pre-college academic scores, and background characteristics, those students who chose to live on campus were seven to eight times more likely to graduate than comparable students who commuted to campus. It is probable that living on campus exposed these men to university resources including mentors and peers as well as encouraged their engagement in campus programs, such as chapel and social activities, which in turn, contributed positively to their college student journey. This supports the Midwest University housing policy.

Fourth Conclusion

Nine out of the 12 participants shared that their relationship with God was a major influence on their college experience and 10 of the 12 expressed appreciation that Midwest University was a faith-based institution. As was explained in the major themes outlined in research question one, stress, struggle and discouragement was a familiar part of the participants’ college experience. Add to that varied levels of family support, financial challenges, and six of the 12 experiencing a campus suspension or dismissal these men faced down obstacles that many of their peers did not withstand.

Because the great majority of the participants talked about how their faith was an integral part of their lives and 10 expressed regard for MU being a faith-based institution their faith was a fount from which they drew strength and comfort throughout their college days. Again, this study supports two studies by Stewart (2002, 2007) which found that Black students relied on practicing spiritual disciplines in order to overcome challenges, combat effects of racial stereotyping, and to make meaning of their college experience. In addition, this study is consistent with other research by King (2009) and
Nance (2009) which found that minority persistence is positively influenced by spiritual beliefs and practicing spiritual disciplines.

Fifth Conclusion

For several of the participants, encouragement from relatives was an important part of their support network. It is interesting to note that even though the participants ranked Family Support second only to Faculty Interaction, not all of them shared examples of family succor. The family structure of the participants varied greatly. Four of the participants’ parents were never married, four were married, three divorced, and one widowed. After examining those participants who did share examples of how family was an essential part of their college experience, there seemed to be no correlation as to whether the parents were married, divorced, or widowed.

What proves to be more telling than the marital status and consistent with research by Bowen et al. (2009) is that households where at least one parent has completed a college degree increases the likelihood of their children succeeding in college too. As mentioned previously in chapter four, nine of the 12 participants, or 75%, were from a household where at least one parent had completed an associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced degree. This figure is high compared to a study by Swail et al. (2003) that reported 17% of Black adults over the age of 25 had earned a college degree. Parental college achievement, not marital status, appears to be correlated to Black male student success.

Final Conclusion

At the conclusion of this study reflecting both on the published research on the minority student college experience and the data collected through this research, I agree
with other higher education researchers that, once enrolled, the college experience of these successful graduates was most impacted by noncognitive factors rather than their cognitive abilities. These results support earlier research by Hall (1999) as well as Schwartz and Washington (2002) purporting that three noncognitive variables, academic self-concept, integration to campus, and commitment to gaining an education significantly contribute to academic success and persistence of Black males. Factors further related to the three noncognitive variables include availability of a strong support person, academic adjustment, attachment to college, personal emotional adjustment, and social adjustment.

This research study on the experiences of successful Black males studying at a private, faith-based, PWI adds to the literature in that it explains the “who,” “what,” and even “where,” those noncognitive variables come into play for Black males. Schwartz and Washington say that those three noncognitive variables contribute to Black student success and persistence, but I would go further to say they are essential and no lone variable is robust enough to impact the student experience.

This study stretches the traditional definition of noncognitive variables by including family, mentors, personal faith, peers, overall campus ethos as well as self-efficacy, in combination together, as the necessary elements these Black males needed in order to persist to graduation. The experiences of these participants were reliant on their own self-determination and interaction with their support network both personally through their relationship with their family and God, to the hospitable Midwest University campus culture and availability of mentors.

Reliability and Validity
The study conclusions outlined in this chapter were drawn from various streams of data collected through a demographic survey, interview, ranking exercise, and storytelling exercise. The themes that emerged through the study were triangulated by the patterns that emerged through analyzing the four separate forms of data into codes and eventually the major themes presented in this chapter. Each separate stream of data assisted the identification and strengthening of the themes of the study.

Through the member-checking process the accuracy of the findings was further bolstered. The researcher sent a draft of the findings to two of the study participants. The researcher then discussed the research findings with these study participants giving them the opportunity to share feedback.

Although both participants’ college experience may not have included each theme, they voiced their hearty agreement and support for the major findings of the study. In regards to the minority sub-community drama, Todd said that although he did not become embroiled in this type of inner-race turmoil, he did see it occur and made an intentional effort not to become involved. Todd also said that his lack of experience with the theme, coping with suspension or dismissal, was more out of fear for how his mother would react than it was for the actual punitive action taken by the institution.

Billy offered insight that he believed family history contributed to the high level of self-efficacy exhibited by the participants. Billy also said that he did not experience the campus policy disconnect largely because of his deep involvement with the Midwest University Student Affairs department and added that students should know the campus policies before enrolling. The member-checking and triangulation process both affirmed the accuracy of the study findings.
The researcher used Nvivo software to figure Cohen’s kappa coefficient, an inter-rater reliability test. After the researcher coded the 12 interview transcripts, she provided the coded sections of the transcripts as well as the themes to a second researcher to code independently. The average Kappa coefficient was .6164 and the individual coefficients for each theme are represented in Appendix A, Table 1. Landis and Koch (1977) outlined the Cohen’s kappa coefficient ranges in order for researchers to benchmark against to determine the level of coder consistency. The .6164 average between the primary researcher and secondary coder is within the “substantial agreement” range of .61-.80. According to the standards set by Landis and Koch, the individual code agreement between the two coders ranges from “fair” to “almost perfect” for this research study. The high level of agreement between the two coders indicates strong congruence with how the interview data was coded, thus affirming the themes presented in the findings.

Suggestions for Further Research

Suggestion One

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, persistence and graduation rates are being examined closely and discussed broadly by higher education administrators and government officials. It is widely known in college student retention that the highest percentage of attrition occurs during the freshman year. A similar study could be designed to look specifically at the experience of Black males focusing just on the components of a successful freshman year. Success would be defined as a sophomore returning to the same institution they enrolled in as a first-time freshman. Understanding the intricacies of the freshman year, when universities lose the highest percentage of
students, would assist higher education professionals in designing the ideal freshman year experience building a whole-person approach to what happens both inside and outside the classroom for Black males.

Suggestion Two

The determination of these participants to graduate from college was formidable. Higher education could benefit from a greater understanding of the elements of all students, including Black males, who possess a high degree of self-efficacy. Research specifically honing in on particular races, in addition to Black males, can then build the understanding needed to create programs and initiatives informed by the experience of successful students. A research study focusing on successful graduates but drilling down to the specific intrinsic qualities without focus on the extrinsic motivators, could potentially assist K-12 policies and programs leading to persistence as well as increase access to post-secondary institutions.

Suggestion Three

Because six of the 12 participants in this study were suspended or dismissed during their college journey through Midwest University, this could be an obstacle for other Black males. A study could be designed to determine if, on average, minority students experience a higher percentage of suspensions and dismissals than majority students. After this determination, a follow-up study could be conducted specifically on the college experience of those students who were suspended or dismissed but eventually graduated from the same institution.

Suspension and dismissals are inevitable at any institution of higher education. What can be gained is an understanding of how to enforce a suspension or dismissal in a
way that honors the universities’ policies, but is not so discouraging or detrimental to the student eventually graduating from that institution. Successful graduates could share keys to overcoming the suspension or dismissal obstacle so institutions could develop programs and policies to address student attrition.

Study Delimitations and Limitations

It is important to note the purposeful sample of 12 Black males of traditional college age, and the setting of the research being a private, faith-based, PWI. The investigator benefitted greatly from the research process and results in order to better understand the experiences of the 12 participants who all graduated from Midwest University. The research was designed to delve deep into the experiences of Black males who enrolled and completed a bachelor’s degree at not just any university, but specifically a private, faith-based, PWI. The qualitative approach to the research, the number of participants, guiding research questions and the research setting were each intentionally selected in order to focus the scope of the study. The results of this study will prove to be informative to others in higher education seeking to understand the experience of Black males attending a similar type institution but not assumed as the experience of all Black male college graduates.

For institutions of higher education, there are several findings from this research study that would be under the locus of their control. Liu and Liu (2000) suggest that higher education leaders not only have the responsibility but the ability to bring about real change in the opportunity for success among all minority student groups. They believe that by addressing structural and societal cultural factors will impact the success of all minority student groups. In light of Liu and Liu’s recommendation, these research
findings can offer direction towards addressing key structural and societal cultural factors.

One study limitation that is important to note is that the second coder used to determine the Cohen’s Kappa Coefficient is employed in the same department and is supervised by the primary researcher. Neither the second coder nor the primary researcher believes this created a bias in the coding process.

Impact on Policies and Procedures

Recommendation One

Because of my background as an administrator, I naturally gravitate towards the “no cost or low cost” initiatives, so I will start there. One of the compelling findings from this study is the fact that 11 of the 12 participants lived on campus for the vast majority of their college experience. Especially for institutions with residence hall capacity, changing the housing policy requiring students to live on campus two, three, and even four years is a step in the right direction.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this research study as well as others, shows that living on campus increases student persistence. Again, as an administrator, I realize policies like this may be unpopular at first, but after a few years, living on campus will become a part of the known culture and hopefully institutions will report greater retention and graduation outcomes.

Recommendation Two

As mentioned earlier in chapter five, among retention professionals, there is a common mantra that says, “Fit is it.” This means that there is a greater likelihood of a student persisting to graduation if he is enrolled at an institution that “fits” his personal
preferences. For students and colleges, “one size fits all” is simply not a truism. Student preferences come in all shapes and sizes, including combination of majors, campus recreational amenities, variety of academic honors opportunities to whether or not the campus has a chess club. The preferences are literally endless. What became clear through this research is that these successful graduates held an appreciation for Midwest University.

Any campus culture is a combination of its history, traditions, employees, location, and students, etc. Universities would serve themselves and future students well by identifying the “type” of student that is successful at their institution and then focus their recruiting efforts on that “type” of student. It is far better for a university to own their brand than conduct chameleon-like marketing appealing to every type of student. For the participants in this study, Midwest University was an excellent fit. Even though at times they may have crossed the proverbial line academically or in conduct, their overall appreciation for MU being a faith-based PWI was evident.

Recommendation Three

In concert with the above policy considerations, institutions should also include some programmatic changes. Two of the most obvious programmatic recommendations would be to operationalize a mentoring program for Black males. Eleven of the 12 participants mentioned having a mentoring-type relationship with one or more Midwest University faculty or staff members. The one participant who did not mention a specific faculty or staff person, had a strong attachment to students within his academic discipline. A formal mentoring program connecting Black males with an adult who
offered focused support could yield incredible benefits for both the student and institution.

*Recommendation Four*

The findings of this research as well as previous research studies acknowledge that Black students cherish their faith more than any other student type. Institutions would be wise to develop both campus programs and community outreach programs with local churches aimed at helping Black students cultivate their faith. Most faith-based institutions collect denomination affiliation information from their students. Institutions could take that data and develop partnerships with local denominations that represent the variety of faith traditions within their student body. Like Midwest University, if an institution offers chapel services, the college could invite local pastors from the variety of faith traditions represented in the student body. This would be a low or no cost initiative that would offer an additional resource and support to both the student body as well as the local congregations. In turn, the university town-and-gown relationship would strengthen.

*Final Recommendation*

The final recommendation is last but certainly not least. As highlighted in chapters two, four and five, in both previous research and this study, paying for college is one of the top obstacles for Black students. The study participants mentioned financial issues in the interview, ranking exercise and storytelling exercise. Institutions that hope to increase the access and persistence of minority students should review their financial aid policies to determine if they have appropriate resources dedicated towards assisting historically underrepresented populations.
Appendix A

Additional Tables
Table A1

*Nvivo Coding Comparison Data*

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Note. 0-.20 slight agreement, .21-.40 fair agreement, .41-.60 moderate agreement, .61-.80 substantial agreement, and .81-1 almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).
### Table A2

**Personal and Institutional Contributor Themes**

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Appendix B

Invitation to Participate Documents
Initial Request to Participate for Potential Participants

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership
Principal Investigator: Dr. Jianping Shen
Student Investigator: Kim Hayworth

Dear ________,

My name is Kim Hayworth and I am inviting you to participate in a study of the college experience of African American males who graduated from a private, predominantly White, faith-based institution of higher education. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership through Western Michigan University. I am the investigator in this study (517-936-9119, kimh@arbor.edu). The supervising professor is Dr. Jianping Shen (269-387-3887, shen@wmich.edu).

You are being invited to volunteer as a participant because as a graduate of Spring Arbor University, you graduated from a private, predominantly White, faith-based institution of higher education. If you choose to participate in this study, you will participate in up to a 90 minute private interview discussing your college experience. The interview can take place on the campus of Spring Arbor University, at another location convenient to you or by phone. The interview will be recorded so your answers can be transcribed accurately and so I can take written notes during the interview.

During the interview, you will be asked questions regarding your college experience as well as your individual and family background. Let me describe in more detail what you can expect if you choose to participate. The interview is estimated to take 90 minutes divided into four sections: short demographic survey, interview question and answer section, card sort ranking exercise and storytelling exercise. The short demographic information will be used to describe the participant group as a whole, not individually. The card sort ranking exercise involves giving 3 x 5 cards with one factor written on each card. Each participant will be asked to rank the cards according to the factors that were most important to least important as it pertained to their college experience. For the storytelling exercise, participants will be asked to answer the question “Describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while you were in college that contributed to your success as a student.” After the story, the participant will be given an opportunity to reflect on their story.

As a participant at a later date, you will be asked to review the written transcripts and draft of the final report to affirm there were no errors in the transcription process and to gain your feedback on my analysis of the interview data. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up telephone conversation, if clarification of your interview response is necessary. After the initial interview, your participation in this part of the study is estimated to take up to 60 minutes total. If you prefer, email correspondence can be used to contact you during the study if clarification of information is necessary.

The participants of this study will only be graduates of Midwest University. All interview responses are strictly confidential and participants can withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant will be given a fictitious name which will appear on any papers on which information is recorded. The master document with the participant names, demographic information and audio tapes of the interviews will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.
All other research data, including Consent Documents, will be held in a secure file at Western Michigan University for three years after the study closes.

I will be contacting you via phone within the next week to discuss your possible voluntary participation in this study. If you decide you are interested in learning more about the study, please feel free to respond to this email. If you agree to participate, an appointment will be scheduled where I will review the Consent Document with you before the interview starts. You will also receive an interview guide in advance, so you can be fully prepared to respond to the interview questions.

If you have any questions, you may contact either me or Dr. Jianping Shen, as indicated above. Thank you for considering possible participation in this study. It is my hope the results of this study will be of interest to institutions of higher education.

Sincerely,
Kim Hayworth Hayworth Dissertation HSIRB Project Number: 12-03-05
Script for Follow-up Phone Call to Potential Participants

Hello, my name is Kim Hayworth. I contacted you via email/mail over the past week inviting you to participate in my dissertation research study focusing on the college experience of African American male graduates of private, predominantly White, faith-based institutions of higher education. As I indicated in the invitation, this study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of my Ph.D. in Educational Leadership through Western Michigan University. Your participation in this study would be voluntary, although very much appreciated. The results of this study may be of interest to you as well as institutions of higher education. The purpose of this call is to see if you have had an opportunity to read the email/letter and if you have considered your participation in this study. I’d like to share more details regarding what each study participant can expect.

Study participants will participate in an interview estimated to take 90 minutes divided into four sections: short demographic survey, interview question and answer section, card sort ranking exercise and storytelling exercise. The short demographic information will be used to describe the participant group as a whole, not individually. The card sort ranking exercise involves giving 3 x 5 cards with one factor written on each card. The participant will be asked to rank the cards according to the factors that were most important to least important as it pertains to their college experience. For the storytelling exercise, the participants will be asked to answer the question “Describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while you were in college that contributed to your success as a student.” After the story, the participant will be given an opportunity to reflect on their story.

Finally, participants will be asked to review the written transcripts and draft of the final report to ensure there were no errors in the transcription process and to gain your feedback on my analysis of the interview data. To ensure accuracy, you may also be asked to participate in a follow-up telephone conversation, if clarification of your interview response is necessary. If you prefer, email correspondence can be used to contact you during the study if clarification of information is necessary. Do you have any questions regarding the study or the role of the participants?

Should you decide to participate, I would like to schedule a meeting at your convenience. I would like to conduct the interview on the campus of Spring Arbor University, at a location convenient to you such as your hometown public library or by phone.

Upon your acceptance, I will forward to you an interview guide. You may review the interview guide and contact me with any questions prior to the meeting. At the time of the interview, I will review the information contained in the Consent Document and answer any questions regarding the study. Before we begin the official interview I will ask you for a signed copy of the Consent Document. Once the consent form is signed, the interview will begin.

Once again, your participation in this study is greatly appreciated and completely voluntary so you may withdraw from the study at any time. May I schedule a meeting at this time to discuss your possible participation?

Thank you and I look forward to meeting with you soon. Please feel free to contact me via phone at 517-936-9119 (cell) or 517-750-6331 (work) or email me at kimh@arbor.edu if you have any questions prior to the meeting.
OR
Thank you for considering participating in this study. I understand you are not able to participate and appreciate the time you took to speak with me and to read the information regarding the study. Hayworth Dissertation HSIRB Project Number 12-03-05
Principal Investigator: Dr. Jianping Shen
Student Investigator: Kim Hayworth
Title of Study: The Experience of African American Graduates of a Private, Faith-based, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education

My name is Kim Hayworth and I am inviting you to participate in a project titled, “The Experience of African American Graduates of a Private, Faith-based, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education.” This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership through Western Michigan University. I am the investigator in this study (517-936-9119, kimh@arbor.edu). The supervising professor is Dr. Jianping Shen (269-387387-3887, shen@wmich.edu).

The following information is provided for you to assist you in understanding the focus of this study and for you to consider participating by your willingness to be interviewed about your college experience at Midwest University (MU). 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. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without concern for your relationship with the researcher, Kim Hayworth, Western Michigan University or MU.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
We are conducting this research in order to specifically look at the factors that influenced African American males to enroll and graduate from a private, faith-based, majority White college like your alma mater, Midwest University (MU). We believe by hearing you reflect on your experience in college, we may learn how to assist more African American males in their goal of graduation from a college like MU.

Who can participate in this study?
You are being invited to volunteer as a study participant because you are an African American male who started your college career at MU and continued through graduation earning a bachelor’s degree. So your college experiences, along with other study participants, are the focus of this research. Only African American males who enrolled as first-time freshman in MU’s traditional main campus program over the last ten years will be asked to participate in the study.

Where will this study take place?
The interview can take place on the campus of Midwest University, at another location convenient to you or by phone.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
It is estimated that the total cost in time for each participant is two hours and thirty minutes.
The interview will take approximately 90 minutes. In addition, the participants will be asked to read the transcription of their interview and offer feedback to clarify points they were trying to make or errors in the transcription. This is estimated to take a maximum of 30 minutes. Finally, participants will be asked to read and give feedback on a draft of the final report outlining the findings the researcher found in the data. This opportunity is estimated to take 30 minutes.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**
Study participants will participate in an interview estimated to take 90 minutes divided into four sections: short demographic survey, interview question and answer section, card sort ranking exercise and storytelling exercise. The short demographic information will be used to describe the participant group as a whole, not individually. The card sort ranking exercise involves giving 3 x 5 cards with one factor written on each card. The participant will be asked to rank the cards according to the factors that were most important to least important as it pertains to their college experience. For the storytelling exercise, the participants will be asked to answer the question “Describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while you were in college that contributed to your success as a student.” After the story, the participant will be given an opportunity to reflect on their story. Finally, participants will be asked to review the written transcripts and draft of the final report to ensure there were no errors in the transcription process and to gain your feedback on my analysis of the interview data. To ensure accuracy, participants may also be asked to participate in a follow-up telephone conversation, if clarification of your interview response is necessary.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
Through a thorough review of current research studies the researcher has summarized the major issues of African American male students college experience overall. The focus of this study is to now move to understanding if these same factors are present in the experience of African American males who graduated from a private, faith based, PWI. How are their experiences the same or different? We are studying the experiences of 12 African American males to discover what more can be understood through more focused research.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
Because the participants will be asked questions about their personal experiences in college, some individuals may experience some discomfort reflecting on the interview questions. Because of the small sample size, a risk may be their identity as a participant in the study. To address this concern, the identity of the participants will be protected by assigning fictitious names to the individuals as well as secured storing of the data in a locked cabinet of the researcher at all times. Once the study has concluded, the tapes and documents listing participant’s real and fictitious names as well as demographic information will be destroyed. Upon completion of the research, the transcribed interviews will be held in a secure location on the campus of Western Michigan University for three years. There are no other known risks associated with participating in this study.
What are the benefits of participating in this study?
The results of this study may be helpful for small institutions as the participants in this study will be reflecting on their experience at a small PWI. Through the results of this study, administrators from admissions, professors in classrooms and student affairs professionals and President’s in higher education may gain an understanding of how programs, services and events impacted, to help or hinder the college experience of African American males.
There are no direct benefits to the participants.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
Time is one known cost to the participants. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes. In addition, the participants will be asked to read the transcription of their interview and offer feedback to clarify points they were trying to make or errors in the transcription. This is estimated to take a maximum of 30 minutes. Finally, participants will be asked to read and give feedback on a draft of the final report outlining the findings the researcher found in the data. This opportunity is estimated to take 30 minutes. It is estimated that the total cost in time for each participant is two hours and thirty minutes.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
No compensation is being offered for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Results of the research and analysis will be presented through a written dissertation and defense presentation completed by the student researcher, Kim Hayworth.
The utmost care will be taken to protect the identity of study participants. The first measure of protection includes assigning each participant a fictitious name to be used in all documents including the interview transcripts and dissertation. There will be one master document listing the participant’s names and their given fictitious names. The consent documents, master name document, audiotaped interviews, answers to demographic questions and transcription documents will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office until the study has been completed. Once the study has been completed the master name document, individual demographic information and audiotaped interviews will be destroyed. Once the study is completed, the consent documents and interview transcription documents will be held in a secure file at Western Michigan University in the Primary Investigator’s office or in the University Archive for at least three years.

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 if you choose to withdraw from this study. If deemed necessary, the investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.
If you have any questions about this study, please contact Kim Hayworth, the student investigator at (517) 750-6331 (office) or (517) 936-9119 (cell) or via email at kimh@arbor.edu. You may also contact the Chair, The Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269) 387-8293 or via email at ovpr-hsirb@wmich.edu,
or the Vice President of Research (269) 387-8298 if you have any questions related to this study.

This consent document has been approved for use by the researcher 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 upper right corner. Do no participate in the study if the stamped date is older than one year.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

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

Participant Name: ___________________________________________

Participant Signature     Date

Consent obtained by: _________________________________________

Interviewer/Student Investigator     Date
Interview Protocol

Study: The Experience of African American Graduates of a Private, Faith-based, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education

Time of interview: ______________________________
Date of interview: ______________________________
Location: ______________________________
Interviewer: ______________________________
Interviewee: ______________________________

Section One: This demographic information will be used to describe the participant group as a whole, not individually. Please complete any of the following demographic information that is incomplete:

Your age range while attending college:
College Major:
High School GPA:
College GPA:
ACT/SAT Score:
Number of semesters you lived on campus:
Number of semesters you commuted:
What was the marital status of your parents during college?
Estimate your parent’s income while you attended college:
Father’s level of schooling:
Mother’s level of schooling:

Section Two:

Thank you for your participation in this study. In order to ensure your remarks are accurately transcribed, I will be recording this interview. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point during the interview.

Interview Questions:

1) Describe your overall college experience. (If the participant struggles it may be helpful to ask about each year of college, freshman – senior year.)

2) Thinking back on your college experience, what helped you successfully graduate?

Prompt A: Talk a little about the personal attributes that you believe helped you to stay in college and graduate.
Prompt B: Talk a little about some of the things your college and/or staff and faculty did to help you make it to graduation.

3) Talk about any obstacles you may have had to overcome in order to make it to graduation. Prompt A: Talk a little about your personal as well as the institutional challenges that you had to overcome to graduate.

4) If you ever considered not graduating from college, what contributed to those thoughts? What helped you overcome them?

5) Who were the significant people in your life during college who contributed to your success? Can you site some of their specific contributions?

6) Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about your college experience that would help me understand your ability to successfully graduate?

**Section Three: participant will be given cards with one factor written on each card.**

The participant will be asked to rank the cards according to the factors that were most important to least important as it pertains to their college experience.

Card Sort Ranking Exercise Instructions: As it pertains to your college experience, arrange the factors on the cards from most important to least important.

Cognitive Variables (Pre-college ACT/GPA)

Family’s Socioeconomic Status

Family Support

Parent’s Schooling

Financial Aid

Faculty Interaction

Campus Ethos

Classroom Experience
Question for Interviewee:

What observations would you like to share related to the Card Sort Ranking Exercise or any of the items listed on the cards?

Section Four:

Storytelling Exercise: please answer the following question in the form of a story, recalling a one-time or reoccurring event. After the story, you will be given an opportunity to reflect on the story.

Question:

Describe an important event (one-time or repeated) while you were in college that contributed to your success as a student.

Final Question:

What reflections or observations do you want to share in regards to your story?

This ends the interview. Thank you for your participation in this phase of my study. I appreciate the investment of your time. I will be in contact with you to review the transcripts of your interview as well as to read the overall observations of the collective interviews being conducted for this study.
Appendix C

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Date: March 23, 2012

To: Jianping Shen, Principal Investigator
    Kim Hayworth, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-03-05

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Experience of African American Graduates of a Private, Faith-based, Predominantly White Institution of Higher Education” 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 that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. 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.

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

Approval Termination: March 23, 2013
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