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The Perceived Factors That Influenced African American Male Students' Persistence at a Southeastern Community College

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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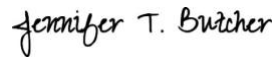
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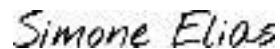
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School of Educational Leadership

The Perceived Factors That Influenced African American Male Students' Persistence at a

Southeastern Community College

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Phygenia Flowers Young

February 2020

Dedication

First, I dedicate this dissertation both to my family, especially my parents and sons, and to the African American, male, community college participants and the other students who work so hard at persistence to achieve their goals. Second, I also dedicate this dissertation to our daughter Sara Allyson, my grandparents James and Vina Boston and Rufus and Josette Flowers, my parents-in-law Joseph and Mary Alice Young, my brothers-in-law Joseph and Alvin Young, and my aunts Bonnie S. Boston and Bernice Boston Linney, cousins Marty Burch and Louelle Howell and worship pastor Whitney Rakes Vesterfelt. Thank you all for inspiring my growth as an individual and an educational leader. I thank God for how you blessed and enriched my life. I honor you always and deeply miss those who have gone before me. You will never be forgotten.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank God for His sustained presence, strength, and empowerment. To answer a more profound call to service required an embracing of continued self-growth and commitment. Abilene Christian University, thank you for providing such a platform through dedicated and inspiring faculty and administrators. Thank you, Dr. Pope, for growing me as a leader. I am grateful for my committee members Dr. Jennifer Butcher and Dr. Simone Elias. Thank you all for your willingness to support me in my quest for learning and for leading through recommendation, which strengthened my work and me. Dr. Dana McMichael, thank you for your guidance, encouragement, and words of inspiration on this journey. Dear dissertation support team, I am inspired by your gifts, acts of service, and leadership.

Thank you to my inspiring research study participants, the strong African American community college males who took time out of their academic pursuits and busy schedules to share their valuable perspectives, to verify data, and to offer words of wisdom to support other students who may follow their steps by completing a community college degree. Thank you, as well, to all the wonderful young African American male students, who assisted in any way during this process. You honor me with your gift of service to this study. I celebrate each of you and all that you will do as you continue leading the way in resiliency and strength.

To my family, I love you all deeply and thank you for your support. I am blessed to be a part of an exceptionally large family, which includes the family I was born into (the Flowers and Boston family) and the one that I joined 30 years ago when I was united in marriage to Benjamin Young (the Young family: Cornelius (Naomi), Agnes (Jim), Debra (Linwood), Curtis (Faye) Connie (Bobby), Felicia and Phillip and family). To all family members (Aunts, Uncles, Cousins) near and far—thank you! Your prayers and words of encouragement, wisdom, and understanding were the wind beneath my wings.

To my father Willie Flowers and mother Georgia Flowers, you both have always pushed me to be all that I could be in every situation. Your foundation of love and support has solidified my steps as an educator and a woman of faith. Thank you both. To my sisters Marcella Brown and Elcheva Speaks, thank you for your encouragement that kept me moving forward; I love you both and know that you have my back. To my brother Milton, thank you for your prayers: "Yes, but, God!" Thank you to all my nieces and nephews. Thank you, Danielle, Noelle, Terrilyn, Taylor, and brother-in-law Keith who started calling me Dr. Aunt/Phygenia from day one.

To the main men in my life: Benjamin, my husband and love, and Cameron James Young and Cayen Joseph Young, our amazing sons; you are mighty men of courage and strength. There are no words to fully convey my love for you all. Thank you all for your love, support, and sacrifices that supported my work, including the nights when you insisted on staying up with me as I worked late into the night (Marcie, you too!). Thank you for your encouragement and for pushing me when I felt like giving up.

To my work family, I am eternally grateful to colleagues and department and division members who pushed and encouraged me to keep it moving. I am grateful to administrators and staff who approved my project and pulled data to help my study move forward. Thank you, Dr. Cherry and Cousin Greg Young for the minority male growth opportunities and encouragement!

Finally, to all of my prayer partners at Winston-Salem First, and Mrs. Rebecca, Molly, Rachel, and Nancy and to those sending prayers via text and messages locally and all across the nation: Thank you from the bottom of my heart! All the support that I received from near and far was, indeed, a divine gift, and your faith in me was priceless.

Abstract

This basic qualitative study examined the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion in the U.S. Southeast. It investigated the academic, cocurricular, and environmental intrinsic and extrinsic support systems of African American community college students who were successfully persisting toward degree obtainment. While the work highlights the challenges of these students as outlined in the published literature to frame their concerns, the study drew on Harper's (2015) invitation to consider shifting the emphasis from Black male disadvantage to strategies that create an advantage using an antideficit framework. Harper's (2010, 2012) antideficit achievement framework informed the study to document influential factors that aid African American male students in community college degree completion. One research question guided data collection via interviews: What are the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion in North Carolina? Examining the lived experiences of African American male students at a predominantly White community college provided awareness of the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that may lead to successful academic outcomes for this student population. The 12 participants disclosed significant influences, leading to 3 categories or themes—Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence—that emerged from analyzed data; these themes highlighted specific intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that enabled their successful academic outcomes. Recommended actions are provided to assist college-level educational organizations in designing strategies for keeping all African American male community college students on their degree-completion paths.

Keywords: African American male students, persistence, barriers, community college completion, success

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Chapter 1: Introduction

African American male students tend to have the lowest degree attainment at the community college; however, although complex barriers may influence them negatively, many of these students have been able to navigate critical barriers to achieve academic success. Additional research is needed to identify organizational strategies that have supported or can support African American male students' ability to persist to achieve degree attainment in the community college (Allen & White-Smith, 2014). Identifying intrinsic and extrinsic support measures for African American male students in the community college setting can help lead to educational success, decrease the achievement gap, increasing employability, and support career goals (Davis, 2014; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015).

However, without such research, barriers may remain for these students (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Lenz, 2014; Lofstrom & Raphael, 2016). Barriers to degree attainment may include prior educational experiences, disconnection from feeling rejected and as if one does not belong (O'Keeffe, 2013) in the learning environment, limited teacher expectations, and a competing responsibility of employment against school responsibilities. These barriers have proven to be influential in African American male students' ability to persist in college to achieve degree attainment (Jones, 2014; Simmons, 2013; Wood et al., 2015). Researchers have highlighted precollege academic preparation challenges and the lack of mentors and environments committed to diversity and inclusion (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Goings, 2016; Harris & Wood, 2013; Lenz, 2014).

Chapter 1 introduces the study through relevant background. It introduces the community college as the context for the study, illustrates the impact of barriers like prior educational experiences, considers disconnection in the learning environment from limited teacher

expectations, and discusses how the competing responsibility of employment versus schoolwork may impact African American male students' efforts to finish or persist in college. The need for additional research into key intrinsic and extrinsic support measures is emphasized in this chapter. Additionally, this chapter addresses the conceptual underpinnings for the study, a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and key term definitions.

Context and Background

Educational achievement can offer improved earning potential (Anumba, 2015). Despite America's declaration that all citizens have a right to a quality education (Riegert, 2012), African American males have historically surfaced as lagging behind their peers in academic achievement (Horton, 2015; Kotok, 2017; Lewis, 2001; Riegert, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015). Academic disparity ramifications among these male students can impact current and future learning opportunities leading to toxic effects on African American males' personal well-being (Riegert, 2012). Cultural diversity impacts perception, the learning environment, and misconceptions of greater resiliency among middle- and upper-class White students as opposed to other groups, and it contributes to the persistent achievement gap (Plata, Williams, & Henley, 2017). Despite the challenges that African American males encounter at all stages of education, as noted in studies conducted by agencies, organizations, scholars, and social scientists (Quigley & Mitchell, 2018), many continue their education beyond high school with success (Harper, 2012). US community colleges are among the higher education settings that African American males attend in pursuit of educational opportunities (Harper, 2012; Harper & Wood, 2016). In order to understand the background of the study, it is important first to understand that specific barriers impact African American males' academic progress and persistence. The community college is a valuable educational option among other higher education institutions. Numerous students enroll in community colleges to support future employability, career, and transfer

college options; however, some students struggle to achieve academic success and obtain a degree (Lenz, 2014).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2018), in the United States, Joliet Junior College became the first community college in 1900 to address the need for a more skilled workforce (Joliet Junior College, 2018). Currently and in the past, the community college, two-year, postsecondary education option provided a local and inclusive open-access, low cost, community mission-driven higher education opportunity that welcomes those desiring learning avenues, regardless of prior academic standing, affluence, and heritage (Boggs, 2004, 2011; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Harper & Wood, 2016). Many African American male students have embarked on this educational opportunity. Cohen and Brawer (2003) stated that "minority students constituted 31 percent of all community college enrollments nationwide, up from 20 percent in 1976" (p. 46).

Community colleges are among the most frequently used higher education settings in which Black male students pursue educational and empowerment opportunities (Harper & Wood, 2016). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2015) reported that nationally 35% of minority students were enrolled at community colleges, noting a greater rate than the four-year institutions in 2015. However, persistence and completion rate challenges have surfaced for this student population. Specifically, the NCES reported that a focus on persistence toward degree attainment at the community college highlighted that African American male students struggle to obtain their degrees more than any other group in this setting. Identifying the causes for why African American male students surface as having the lowest degree attainment rates is necessary in order to address this concerning trend by examining persistence. Historically, the academic struggles for Black male students have

included racial and gender inequality challenges in educational institutions that occurred before and after enrolling in higher education settings including the community college (Bryant, Harris, & Bird, 2016; Caplan & Ford, 2014; Harper, 2012; Lundy & Mazama, 2014). Such barriers highlight a possible cause for why African American males struggle to achieve academic success (Anumba, 2015). At the same time, these barriers point to a need to identify support measures that have worked for African American males who have achieved degree completion (Anumba, 2015).

Barriers to Degree Completion

One barrier to degree completion is the impact of prior educational experiences (Anumba, 2015; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). While this study concentrates on African American male community college students, educational experiences leading up to postsecondary learning settings and experiences can highlight the academic disparities and disconnection in prior learning arenas. Such disparities include implicit and explicit bias that begins in early childhood settings as witnessed through increased exclusionary practices with Black children, which contribute to missed foundational learning necessary for supporting current and future educational success (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Educational experiences in the K–12 system for these students include lower teacher academic expectations and higher incidences of disciplinary actions and suspension (Bryant, et al., 2016; Lundy & Mazama, 2014). There are connections between African American male students' academic success rates and their ability and desire to matriculate from high school to college, which decreases employability and career goals. However, educational challenges of African American male students begin earlier and eventually limit or remove employment opportunities and can even lead to increased incarceration. Lofstrom and Raphael (2016) noted:

African Americans are heavily overrepresented among the incarcerated . . . 43 percent of state prisoners, 46 percent of federal prisoners, and approximately 50 percent of jail inmates, while they are 13 percent of the US population as a whole . . . most of the incarcerated are in prime working age ranges for men, ranging from their late 20s to their early 40s. (p. 115)

The lack of educational success can limit African American male students' employability and career goals. Wright and Ford (2016) stated: "The dismal and abysmal educational status of African American male students of all ages has a long history, with few reports finding positive experiences and outcomes" (p. 6). African American male students are often identified by labels and terms like *at risk* and *endangered* both in school and life (Harper & Wood, 2016; Wright & Ford, 2016). Academic difficulties for African American males continue in secondary education experiences and settings, particularly if prescribed attention is omitted in the community college setting and learning environment (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Anumba, 2015). If barriers to quality education remain for these students, African American male students will lack educational success, which can limit them by widening the achievement gap and decreasing employability and career goals.

A second barrier to degree completion is lower or limited teacher expectations focused on minority students, which can fuel disconnections in the community college for African American male students, thus hindering degree attainment. Nationally, racial gaps in education remain a concern (Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Jenkins Robinson, 2018; Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2011). Despite educational progress and efforts to support inclusive and diverse learning environments, some minority students encounter discriminatory experiences on predominantly White college campuses, which includes lower academic ability expectations (Caplan & Ford, 2014; Harper, 2012). Students' perceived disconnections in college experiences contribute adversely to the learning environment as the student attempts to obtain an education,

and these could hinder progress, directly countering positive interactions at the college (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Despite research findings demonstrating the influential role every environment plays in the human development of students, historically African American male students often experience low teacher expectations (Marks & Reid, 2013; Wood, 2011). Black male students at predominantly White institutions have experienced separate and segregated relationships on campus, and they have been conscious of how they acted, dressed, and carried themselves to counteract the many deficit viewpoints of lowered expectations in the classroom (Brooms & Davis, 2017). White normativity and cultural biases also may play a vital role in teachers' perceptions of African American male students (Emerson & Yancey, 2011); thus, a focus on how faculty perceive African American males in the learning environment is fundamental.

A third barrier to degree completion is the competing responsibility of work with school, hindering engagement that is a quality that supports degree attainment at the community college. The need to balance work and school responsibilities is common in this setting as 32% of students attending college part-time in 2015 also worked part-time (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, as cited by AACC, 2017). These competing obligations further hinder engagement opportunities for African American male students, presenting additional challenges to help these students excel in the college setting (AACC, 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Nationwide, in 2015, 43% of the students at the community college were African American (AACC, 2015). In one community college in North Carolina, where a study of barriers to African American male students' degree attainment at a community college was the focus, a total of 55,013 students enrolled in the fall semester of 2016 and 9% of the population consisted of African American male students (North Carolina Community College System, 2017). Such students often must balance school rigor with work obligations, which can impede their

academic success when they are forced to choose between competing responsibilities (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Martin, Galentino & Townsend, 2014; Wood, Harrison, & Jones, 2016). Related to African American male students particularly, part-time and non-traditional students (i.e., those over the age of 25) who have other responsibilities and distractions outside of college requirements tend to have higher negative perceptions of their academic environment and decreased engagement with faculty members (Newman, Wood, & Harris, 2015).

Pinpointing viable solutions to this continuing concern remains difficult (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). However, well-informed and thoughtful faculty and staff directly influence college student success and engagement in the organization despite competing priorities (Bergman et al., 2014; Ryder, Reason, Mitchell, Gillon, & Hemer, 2016; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Nationally, African American students experience difficulties achieving consistent degree attainment (i.e., completion or graduation rates) in higher education settings including the community college. According to *The Journal of Blacks,* in a higher education poll in 2006, Black students had a graduation rate of 42%. Black students achieving a certificate (37%) or associate degree (66%) in higher education improved from 2003–2004 and 2013–2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016); however, Black students continue to lag behind in degree attainment, notably at public two-year institutions. When comparing degree attainment of Whites (62.3%), Hispanics (16.8%), and African Americans (11.9 %), African American male students reflected the lowest degree attainment at the community college from the 1976–1977 academic year through the 2013–2014 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Degree attainment consists of receiving an associate degree or a certificate. The certificate provides job-ready skills, positions the student for increased job availability, and offers an entry

option for students that may lead to an associate degree at the community college. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics Institute of Education Sciences (2016), postsecondary institutions' technical certificate completion rates revealed that only 16.9% of African American male students completed a certificate in the United States in 2013–2014 with Whites (57.6%) and Hispanic (17.7%) completing at higher rates.

Clearly, too few African American males achieve their degrees at the community college level. In 2016, 4,951 first-time African American male students (9%) out of 55,013 students enrolled in community colleges across North Carolina (North Carolina Community College System, 2017). It is critical to learn how to help this student population persist and achieve their degrees. Although there is substantial research about why and how such individuals are challenged by barriers, there is less research about why and how some persist to degree achievement. To help address this gap, this study was developed to investigate the perceived experiences of African American males who are able to persist and progress toward degree attainment at one community college in the Southeastern United States.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale for this study was that a study of the kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that have helped African American male students to obtain degrees at one community college in the Southeast may be used to help other African American males persist to degree completion. In other words, the premise of this study was that what has worked for some individuals may be put into place more systematically to support others. The study is significant because it provides an avenue to explore the perceived experience of African American males as they navigate challenges to achieve degree attainment. This basic qualitative research study investigated the academic, cocurricular, and environmental support systems of African American

male community college students to gain better awareness of the elements that inspire successful persistence toward degree completion.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, many researchers have examined academic barriers facing African American male students. However, differently focused research can identify effective ways to support African American males' degree attainment in the community college to achieve educational success, increase employability, and meet career goals. Therefore, I developed this research study to explore the lived experiences of African American male students who have been academically successful at the community college by focusing on the academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors that have influenced their progress toward degree achievement. It is important to learn from the students themselves what has worked for them in their higher education experiences. This study drew upon Harper's (2015) invitation to consider the success of these male students through antideficit considerations in order to shift the emphasis from Black male disadvantage to strategies that create advantage. To study the experiences of Black male students in the college setting, many researchers use interview techniques to analyze this population (Lewis, 2016), and I also used interview methods in this study.

A comprehensive community college in the Southeast, local to the researcher, provided the research context to examine how African American male students may better achieve degree completion. A review of this college's 2016 enrollment revealed approximately 9,000 students. Student demographics of that time period indicated that 24% of the student body was African American; 58% was White, 10% was Hispanic, and 7% identified as "other ethnic minority." The average student age was 24 or under at 58%, and 42% of students were 25 years old or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The college offered and continues to offer a

wide variety of curricular programs and extensive industrial workforce development options at two campuses and eight off-campus centers.

This study is significant because many students consider the community college as an educational option for future employability and career options (Martí, 2016a). Despite continual enrollment and increased efforts to support degree completion, some students struggle to achieve academic success and obtain a degree (Lenz, 2014). Notably, the completion rate of African American males, the group with the lowest success rate of any group in the community college setting, continues to surface as a needed focus. Administrators, faculty, and staff must create effective educational environments to promote students' success, course completion, and degree attainment. Identifying solutions to this ongoing concern remains a challenge (Donaldson et al., 2016). Thus, finding and focusing on the intrinsic and extrinsic support systems and measures that have enabled some African American males to achieve graduation may help others in this population to do so as well. McClenney argued: "College leaders must step up and decide to create institutions focused on student success and completion" (2014, p. 4). This study provided some information useful for assisting community college leaders in doing just that.

Research Problem and Research Question

I focused the research problem at the center of this study on learning what kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic support measures can help mitigate the dismal degree attainment of community college African American males by studying markers of persistence at a community college in the Southeast. The following research question served as a foundation for this research: What are the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion in North Carolina?

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual underpinnings for the study stemmed from a theoretical base that inspired this topic of focus. A conceptual or theoretical framework based on student success models provides a network of related concepts influencing African American male students' ability to persist to achieve degree attainment. Meaningful theoretical models provide recommendations for enhancing institutional responses, interactions, and awareness of ways to support minority students (Dabney, 2014). Among these models is Harper's (2015) antideficit achievement framework, developed from the largest-ever qualitative research study analyzing the links among institutional racism, social identity, and success among Black undergraduate males.

Harper (2012) created the framework in conjunction with a three-decade research focus on Black men's experience in education and society. He was further motivated to alter the predominant focus by researchers and the media from the limitation of African American males (Harper 2012, 2015) to the positive experiences that enhance achievement. In consideration of Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) work stressing how peers and faculty influence students' progress and success in college, Harper (2012) desired to include a specific focus on increased awareness or understanding of this critical connection for Black males that demonstrates academic achievement as a guide.

Additionally, Harper was among other scholars and researchers who conducted research on understanding the experiences of Black males in higher education (Harper, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2014). A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article titled "Federal Panel Seeks Cause of Minority Students' Poor Science Performance" (Schmidt, as cited by Harper, 2010) conveyed the notion that students of color were incompatible with institutions that offered highly rigorous science courses; it suggested that these students could not successfully master such courses as a result of affirmative action policies granting them access to institutions in which they could not

compete with fellow students (Harper, 2010). Harper stressed that those who endorse this theory seemed less intent in exploring explanatory insights as to why these seemingly outmatched students actually *excelled* rather than *failed* in STEM courses. Harper reframed the discussion to one of success instead of limitation. While Harper did not specifically state that critical race theory (CRT) has a direct connection to the development of the antideficit achievement framework, it is worth noting that CRT has informed some of his previous studies centered on Black males (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Harper & Wood, 2016).

The antideficit achievement framework offered a structure to aid scholars, teachers, and administrators in thoughtful consideration of how to support success for Black male college students by studying the critical, lived experiences of these male students both in and out of the classroom. This framework reverses the commonly focused question about disadvantages in education, underrepresentation, inadequate preparation, academic deficits, detachment, and African American male student attrition to one of success and resilience. The framework questions seek to reverse the reliance on existing theories and conceptual models that readily examine deficits among students of color to a deliberate effort to uncover how these students were able to succeed with the goal of assisting others with future success. Theories based in psychology, sociology, and education informed or inspired the framework (Harper, 2010).

Qualitative research in the community college through an antideficit achievement lens allows researchers to document the lived academic and social experiences of African American male students. Such a study captures specific strategies or intrinsic and extrinsic support measures these male students experience and/or embrace to persist toward degree achievement. Reflective practices in an organization such as a community college can provide a platform to examine existing viewpoints, interest, applications, dispositions, and concerns that may fuel

innovation and change (Coghlan & Shani, 2014; Purcell, 2014; Ripamonti, Galuppo, Gorli, Scaratti, & Cunliffe; 2016). Such practices support studying the phenomena of African American male students in the community college regarding their ability to achieve degree goals.

Figure 1 provides a visual outline of this theoretical framework, which includes three primary categories—precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. In each category, subcategories break down potential success or deficit measures; Harper (2012) offered questions to probe each subcategory. This theoretical framework is helpful to studies such as this one because it offers specific potential areas for interview questions geared to learn more about the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that may have helped African American male community college graduates to achieve their degrees.
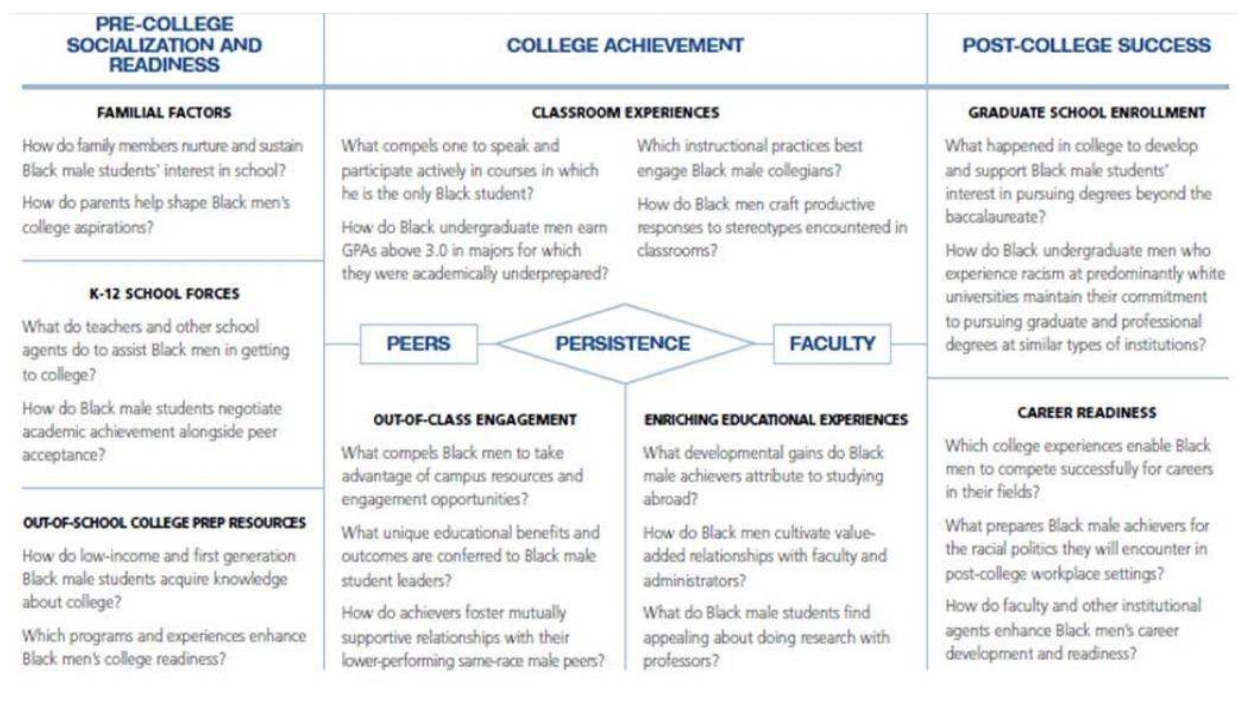
Figure 1. Antideficit achievement framework. Adapted from "Black Male Student Success in Higher Education: A Report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study," by S. R. Harper, 2012, *Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, p. 5. Copyright 2012 by The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.

Harper's (2012) National Black Male College Achievement Study of 219 college students from 42 different college and universities inspired the use of antideficit questions to to better understand how Black men in undergraduate programs achieved degree completion and were positioned to pursue graduate school options. To date, that study has been the largest qualitative research study centered on evaluating the association of established racism, social identity, and achievement among Black male undergraduate students (Halfkenny, 2017; Harper, 2012). The focused questions in the study sought to provide an understanding of three pipeline points and the associated essential dimensions as "precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success" (Harper, 2012, p. 7). Harper (2012) also identified, "eight researchable dimensions of achievement"—familial factors, K–12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness—to provide insights into the antideficit questioning (p. 7).

The antideficit achievement framework consists of pipeline points with specific questions for each, centering on precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college persistence, and was developed to provide an understanding of the pipeline points and the associated essential dimensions. In Harper's (2012) work, each question undergirded an examination of the success of African American male students in each area and yielded essential information in the study of influential factors linked to their successful college degree completion. The precollege socialization and readiness pipeline points consider familial factors, K–12 school forces, and out-of-school prep experiences. The college achievement pipeline consists of the following dimensions: classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences. Peer and faculty impact on the overall success of African

American male students' college student growth, persistence, and achievement should be additional considerations in the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012).

This theoretical construct assisted me as a researcher in developing interview questions and coding and analyzing interview responses for a basic qualitative study. A goal was to assess the perceived academic and social experiences of American-American male students at a community college in the Southeast pursuing degree attainment or having achieved degree attainment. Additional goals were to learn and then to increase awareness around the benefit of an antideficit examination and focus for these male students. Harper (2015) stressed the need for a discussion change to focus on the success of African American male students using more research on antideficit factors to shift the focus from Black men's disadvantage. Knowing about situations that disadvantage students is helpful information, but learning what gives them advantages changes the focus to specific areas in which such students can receive positive guidance and targeted assistance; this focus is one of strategy and action. Therefore, this dissertation study's focus became why these male students experience positive academic discrepancies compared to other African American males through "a more balanced and multidimensional understanding of Black men's lives in schools and other social contexts" (p. 27).

Definition of Key Terms

African American male students. African American male students are defined as Black male students, and *Black males* or *Black men* are used interchangeably in this work to denote men of color having origins in any of the ethnic groups of Africa (NCES, 2018).

Degree attainment. *Degree attainment* and *educational attainment* are used interchangeably in this dissertation; the terms refer to the highest education level of completion (NCES, 2018; Nettles, 2017). For the purposes of the study, the completion of a certificate, a

diploma, or a two-year degree from the community college represent examples of degree attainment.

Disconnection. *Disconnection* is a term representing African American male students feeling rejected and/or a sense of not belonging in the setting (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Persistence. For the purposes of the study, *persistence* refers to students who remain continuously enrolled in a postsecondary organization, specifically the community college (Schuh, Jones, & Torres, 2017).

Summary and Organization of the Study

Multifaceted barriers explored in Chapter 1, for example, earlier educational experiences, disconnection in the learning environment, and work obligations, influence community college African American males to have the lowest degree attainment. Conceptual underpinnings linked to additional research can help researchers identify organizational strategies to help African American males remain continuously enrolled to obtain degree attainment in the community college. Community colleges offer valuable postsecondary education options for African American males. However, these students may continue to lack academic success that can extend the achievement gap, lessen employability, and deny career targets if problems and barriers endure for these students in this setting (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Lenz, 2014; Lofstrom & Raphael, 2016). Research into the intrinsic and extrinsic success factors that enable these students to persist and achieve degree attainment is crucial. Chapter 2 provides a review of published literature that illustrates past research into barriers to degree attainment, persistence, and reasons for degree success. I argue that research into how and why African American males persist and do achieve degree attainment is necessary.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. Multifaceted barriers such as earlier educational experiences, disconnection in the learning environment, and work obligations certainly influence these students and their lack of persistence in completing their degrees. To gain a deeper understanding through published literature on African American males' ability to persist and progress in the community college setting, it is first necessary to understand barriers to persistence. Therefore, prior to considering literature about intrinsic and extrinsic support measures for persistence, I first address the literature about barriers, leading to increased awareness of how barriers before and after entering the community college play a significant role in these men's experiences. Second, in this review I consider research that addresses individual and organizational strategies that researchers have studied as supportive structures for African American male students who have remained continuously enrolled to obtain degree attainment in the community college. In Chapter 2, I used published research literature to illustrate the importance of learning more about these students' educational successes in their educational pursuits.

Complex barriers affect and prevent these students from completing their community college degree. In addition to obstacles linked to prior educational experiences, others include disconnection in the learning environment due to limited teacher beliefs about their success, and a competing obligation of work (Jones, 2014; Simmons, 2013; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015). Researchers also have emphasized precollege academic groundwork limitations, the lack of diverse mentors, and non-inclusive learning environments as barriers that hinder their degree attainment (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Goings, 2016; Harris & Wood, 2013; Lenz, 2014). Barriers

to academic success of these students can start in early childhood, leading to poor educational and damaging adult outcomes linked to their first classroom experiences (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Thus, it can prove beneficial to limit barriers in the community college setting for these students by identifying organizational supports to help fuel their ability to persist to achieve degree attainment (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

Chapter 2 provides a discussion of literature tied to barriers and supports for African American male students, informing the literature review through the lens of student success and retention. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework as a guide for the study and builds on the history of these students in the community college. Chapter 2 additionally outlines examples of barriers and supports including the impact of organizational culture on their educational experiences in the community college.

Literature Search Strategy

Literature search strategies included using Abilene Christian University's (ACU) library resources and online search engines. *African American male students*, *Black men* and/or *Black male students* and the *community college*, and *academic barriers of African American male community college students* were some of the search keywords and terms used to contribute to this work. I employed a variety of relevant keywords and databases to obtain current and historical context using a query of reference databases that matched my focus, expanded my vantage point, and the content of the literature (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

History of African American Male Students in the Community College

The community college, birthed in the 1900s (Brint & Karabel, 1989), remains a valuable educational option among other higher education institutions. Joliet Junior College became the first community college in 1900 to address the need for a more skilled workforce (AACC, 2018; Joliet Junior College, 2018). African American male students were among the many students

who sought enrollment in this setting to strengthen financial and educational agility and to support future employability, career, and transfer college options (Davis, 2014). The postsecondary education option provided a local, inclusive, open-access, low cost, community mission-driven higher education opportunity that welcomed those desiring learning avenues, regardless of prior academic standing, affluence, and heritage (Boggs, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Harper & Wood, 2016). African American male students have pursued these educational opportunities. Cohen and Brawer (2003) stated, "Minority students constituted 31 percent of all community college enrollments nationwide, up from 20 percent in 1976" (p. 46).

These students' historical journey in the community college began in 1970 as they responded to increased recruiting efforts (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Black male community college students are often older, married, fathers, considered low-income, and have delayed seeking enrollment in higher education (Horton, 2015; Wood & Williams, 2013). However, enrollment in this setting has not guaranteed success (Lenz, 2014; Wood, 2012). Martí (2016b) contended that, "community colleges have been called America's Colleges because our leaders, administrators, and teachers believe that opportunities are limited only by one's persistence" (p. 120) and posed the question of whether community colleges are adequately meeting their mission to educate all students via resources and support. Although student persistence complications are common in higher education and do not exclude any student population (Tolliver & Miller, 2018), African American male students represent a significant population and reflect a group that has struggled to obtain degrees.

A study to examine the experiences of these students in higher education, particularly at the community college, must include a focus on previous research conducted on men in this setting. The late 1990s marked a rise in postsecondary studies related to men of color (Harris &

Wood, 2013). Research on the African American male students' higher education experiences has centered primarily on four-year institutions (Strayhorn, 2012). There has been limited exploration of factors and experiences at the community college for this population. However, the literature provides insight into barriers to success for these students and perceived supports that have made a significant difference to them particularly regarding academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors.

Student Success

Efforts have increased around building awareness and support for African American men at the community college, specifically in regard to student success. While community colleges provide easy access to students, it is worth noting that with an open-door policy comes tremendous responsibility. College student success begins with access; yet, access without success is useless, while "access with success is everything" (Strayhorn, 2015, p. 58). Strayhorn (2015) contended that all students desire to be successful when they enroll in college, but both a lack of academic preparedness and an inability to navigate the environment to identify resources that can undergird their success contribute to success barriers. Society expects colleges to fulfill their educational missions to produce effective postsecondary education where students succeed, graduate, and achieve their career goals (Caruth, 2018).

Thus, creating environments where African Americans can thrive is necessary, and precise initiatives should be used. Reduced enrollments, persistent disconnection, and limited degree attainment are among the reasons many college administrators have developed and implemented mentoring programs, hosted Black male summits, started community and campus men-of-color missions, and promoted other efforts on a large scale to advance student success (Harper & Wood, 2016).

Retention

Research has illustrated the challenges that this student group faces as they strive to achieve their educational goals (Anumba, 2015; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Harper, 2006, 2010, 2012; Harris & Wood, 2013). Over the past four decades, the retention of college and university students has been a significant concern for educators and administrators in higher education (Kerby, 2015). In considering leaders who greatly informed the movement to identify and understand strategies for retention, Tinto (1975, 1988) surfaced as a premier contributor.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure

Ongoing considerations of why African American males have difficulties remaining in college are necessary and vital. Tinto (1975, 1988) applied the idea of community integration of care for college student departure (Schuh et al., 2017), which provided insightful factors in identifying ways to combat males' lack of persistence. Tinto's theory became a premier worldwide model to study the anomaly of why students left college in 1975, and this theory emerged as an essential focus of administrators and student affair professionals. Tinto's (1975; 1988) model of student departure outlines how a student's campus academic and social systems' interaction contributes to their persistence as a college student. He built his model on the notion that skillful progression of student stages leads to new levels of interaction and awareness for students enrolled in college. Schuh et al. (2017) stated, "Central to Tinto's theory is the degree to which a student becomes integrated into the academic and social realms of the institution" (p. 255). Student interactions inside and outside the classroom with faculty members have been linked to academic matters and the perceived fit with the institution's intellectual values promoting academic integration (Schuh et al., 2017). Students leave college at a higher rate in

the first year over all other years (Tinto, 1988), indicating a need to begin intervention at the beginning of their college experience.

Tinto (1988) suggested that the higher the student's levels of commitment to the institution and the goal of college graduation, the more likely the individual would persist in college. An effort to help students identify and fulfill their goals is paramount for student success at an organization. As goals change, avenues to help nurture commitment in the institution must also be readily available. The role of the institution in creating an environment that is more or less conducive to student success remains an essential undertaking for faculty and staff. Direct correlations exist between college student success and the support of faculty and staff (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Goings, 2016; Hall, 2017; Myers, 2012; Smittle, 1995).

The original 1975 Tinto theory focused heavily on the integration of students into the college environment to the exclusion of critical external influences on students such as family, work, and community. With the 1993 revision, Tinto added financial resources as a relevant factor and included the role that a student's world outside of the institution plays in educational decisions (Schuh et al., 2017; Tinto, 1988). A primary focus becomes the institution's response to understanding and supporting students in their development as they adjust to college.

Tinto's (1975, 1988, 1998) theory of student departure provided a foundation for examining the persistence of community college students. His (Tinto, 1975, 1988) model outlined how a student's campus interactions, including academic and social systems, impacted the persistence of the student. With the mastery of the different stages, the student encountered new levels of interaction and awareness of the college environment. Personality type, educational goals, and commitments affected students' ability to manage and cope with separation and transition in the pursuit of education. Tinto (1975, 1988) noted that there are

stresses associated with separation and transition for all college students as they adjust to the college environment. In addition to personality types, the individual's goals and commitments tied to education surfaced as the most effective personal qualities for persistence. Thus, specific support linked to the unique needs of the student is necessary if persistence is to occur. Tinto (1988) highlighted the power that student interaction within the college environment has on a student's decision to stay or leave college.

Past and new experiences inform student responses to college. In 1993, Tinto added the *stages of institutional departure* to his original theory. Via this revision, Tinto's (1988) stages served as a form of transformation from youthful interaction to adult membership in society. Tinto examined Van Gennep's (1960, as cited by Tinto) rites of passage to adulthood that outlined patterns of change in how an individual and others in society interact and identified three stages: *separation, transition,* and *incorporation*. Separation reflected parting from past associations. Transition represented the second stage and occurs when an individual begins to interact and behave in new ways with others, seeking to achieve membership in a new group (Tinto, 1988). The third and the last stage is incorporation. This stage involves new patterns of interaction that the individual embraces as a member of the group as reflected in a reciprocal member (Tinto, 1988).

The stage of passage calls for the consideration of Van Gennep's (1960, as cited by Tinto) approach to understanding how students automatically become new community members, which is similar to how college students adjust in college settings. The similarities provided a basis for developing or understanding the procedure of institutional persistence as separation, transition, and incorporation; Tinto (1988) theorized that these three significant passages must be experienced and considered for students to complete their programs.

The stage of separation, the first stage of the college career, denotes separation from past communities, usually those from high school. In this stage, students adapt by rejecting behaviors and norms necessary to embrace habits in the new college setting. The transition passage connects the old and the new, and the goal is transformation. It is a time noting the associations of the past with anticipation of new community associations (Tinto, 1988). Intentional attention is essential to undergird this transition to help students adjust to stress and change, which may help prevent students from leaving college (Tinto, 1988).

Tinto's contributions (1975, 1988) that explained how college students process through change and construct new ways of interacting are useful for supporting African African male students' persistence in the community college. Xu and Webber's (2018) study combined Tinto's work with that of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004, as cited by Xu & Webber, 2018) to explore whether an integration model of persistence was beneficially useful for students of different racial backgrounds. In addition to improving academic excellence, it is possible that Black student retention can be improved by using accessible institutional interventions like faculty support, guidance, and the implementation of social engagement programs that inspire effective communications around the significance of job-related college degrees and financial outlook (Xu & Webber, 2018).

Much of the research on African American males has focused on academic deficits and this population's historic underachievement (Wood & Williams, 2013). Yet, focusing on students and organizational experiences has proved useful in aiding them in achieving degree attainment (Harper, 2012; Wood, 2012). A theoretical framework geared to promote overall student success is found in Harper's (2015) antideficit achievement framework as it encourages a change in a

perspective to study effectiveness over a focus on educational deficiency. This theoretical framework was defined and described in Chapter 1.

Academic, Cocurricular, and Environmental Factors as Barriers

A review of the literature highlighted several commonalities that have affected the success of African American male students in higher education around academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors. African American male students, like other minority groups, are in jeopardy of having skewed educational and career prospects, which leads to feelings of powerlessness due to oppression. (Harris, Hines, & Hipolito-Delgado, 2016). Potential barriers in education have centered on the inability, or a missing institutional response, to address the challenges of these students (Anumba, 2015; Bergman et al., 2014; Harper, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2013).

Academic factors in the research literature have centered on prior learning experiences and course and class engagement opportunities. Cocurricular opportunities supplement the student's curriculum and allow students to build connections outside the classroom through organized learning opportunities (Rutter & Mintz, 2016). Environmental factors include aspects outside of the academic setting that impact or support a student's ability to persist in college. Bergman et al. (2014) stated that "major environmental factors include finances, family support, employer support (tuition, flextime, work hours), and significant life events . . . including family problems, lack of childcare, and job demands" (pp. 93–94).

Academic barriers. Identifying academic barriers remains a focus of administrators in a quest to facilitate student success. Academic barriers to success at the community college vary greatly. Bahr (2013) highlighted the lack of a seamless, comprehensive understanding of student pathways within an institution as an academic barrier. Such barriers hinder necessary interventions, and institutional policies and practices to improve students' outcomes. Thus, Bahr

(2013) recommended a deconstructive approach to understand the purpose and specifics of each students' academic pathway to align students' characteristics, behavioral choices, desired outcomes and support. Barker and Avery (2012) similarly argued the need for more programs and services to promote identity development of Black male students, cultural networks within an institution, and opportunities for these male students in community engagement to prevent success barriers in higher education.

The study of whether thoughts about race can emerge as barriers to the academic success of students is also a relevant consideration factor. Johnston-Guerrero's (2017) study revealed a close alignment of racial reasoning and analytical thinking about multiple perceptions of race and experiences. Racial authority happens within two dimensions (self and others or experiential or scientific), resulting in varying outcomes for the examination of influential factors for African American male college students. Self and others act as an authority, which helps to define one's racial authority. Individual racial authority ownership develops because of racial discrimination experiences. In other situations, racial authority is submitted to peers who have experienced perceived racial discrimination and act out of the experiences as the holder of authority. Experiential or scientific factors inform racial authority as individuals look to others who have more experience and knowledge of race to influence their racial authority or because of one's acceptance of scientific evidence to encourage racial authority. In both situations, the holder and source influence the racial authority of students of color especially if these students do not foster their authority level on racial matters; for example, they might defer to so-called experts when reasoning through racial realities. Such authority experiences, including those resulting from science or scholarship and the combination of the experiences, inspire the acceptance and engagement of one's overall racial authority (Johnston-Guerrero, 2017).

Similarly, Jones (2014) found a statistically significant relationship with some variables of interactional diversity among students. Race surfaced as one of the most obvious variables. Student engagement forecasters of interactional diversity at four-year institutions surfaced as significantly associated with interactional diversity at two-year organizations and can provide an avenue to explore locally. The dimensions follow a continuum similarly; Jones (2016) found a statistically significant relationship with some variables of interactional diversity among students. Race surfaced as one of the most obvious variables.

In contrast, other researchers considered barriers linked to race in different educational settings before enrollment in the secondary educational environment that informed African American male students' academic success or failure (Wright, & Ford, 2016). Exploration of barriers tied to academic factors of these students informed the study. Past research efforts of Wesley and Ellis (2017) illustrated the effects of bias dispositions that lead to discriminatory disciplinary procedures and practices in preschool for young Black boys, resulting in an increased exclusion rate that blocks critical learning opportunities in the early childhood learning environment. These learning opportunities can affect future learning outcomes for these male students (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

Research addressing academic barriers that these students faced prior to postsecondary settings offered useful information for assessing community college best practices. For example, Wright and Ford (2016) noted the bleak statistics of African American children emphasizing injustice at all academic levels of their education, especially during the early grades, and they stressed excessive special education enrollment, pre-K–3 suspension, and expulsion as injustices that tend to result in lost learning opportunities and school success expectations. Additionally, Adamu and Hogan (2015) noted that the punitive actions of suspending and expelling young

children, of which many are African American male students, can negatively impact them. They pointed out that such disciplinary actions toward these students interrupt learning opportunities at a keenly critical time in their development; contribute to feelings of disconnection from friends, teachers, and the educational setting, and influence the likelihood of negative future behavior (Adamu and Hogan, 2015).

Studies show that these barriers in K–12 settings, while challenging, are not evidence that these students lack determination or drive. For example, Harper and Davis (2012) noted that despite the educational barriers Black male students experience, they care about education and want to succeed beyond high school. The authors specifically discovered three themes that highlighted an uncommon viewpoint regarding Black male students' and their responses to discriminatory school experiences: (a) educational inequities awareness, (b) belief that education will be the great equalizer for them, and (c) purposeful pursuits of the PhD in education. Their work explored best practice constructs, one of which might be how educators consider Black male students' success and struggle in academic achievement as well as their responses to both. Wood (2012) stated, "Many black male students describe a deep apprehension to engage in the classroom, particularly with faculty members in some cases, this [*sic*] apprehension extends to interactions with fellow students in class or on campus with other academic professionals, such as tutors or librarians" (p. 31). Such apprehension is deleterious to developing positive academic relationships with educational personnel of all types. Overall, these findings indicate that educators must consider barriers to engagement in the total learning environment and not just the classroom.

Research that focuses on academic barriers prior to postsecondary settings also revealed systems that limit academic success, providing insight into best practices for African American

male community college students. For instance, Allen and White-Smith (2014) examined strategies and steps to dismantle the school-to-prison channel. They considered how teacher and community education interact to support systems of disconnect or support using a conceptual framework of critical race theory. The authors provided detailed examples of teachers, educators, and researcher dispositions on teachers' performance tied to Black male students. Allen and White-Smith included examples of how teachers, counselors, and school administrators contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. They highlighted the benefit and need for five critical roles of a teacher education program to equip future teachers with cultural competencies to transform schools and community settings. The interconnectedness of comprehensive, collaborative networks for Black male students proved essential in fueling effective changes.

Cocurricular barriers. Some researchers have advanced awareness of academic and cocurricular barriers that influence African American male students' college experiences. For example, Harris and Wood (2013) examined African American male student success in community colleges using five domains—academic, environmental, non-cognitive, institutional, and social—as a conceptual framework identified barriers to student success. The researchers' consideration of the educational experiences and outcomes of men of color through each domain illustrated historical underrepresentation of and service to this group.

Simmons (2013) noted the relevance of cocurricular support and identified a problem of practice as the need for higher education organizations to implement successful retention services for African American men, a noticeable challenge for numerous institutions that highlights a barrier to education. Simmons examined persistence factors and the organization's ability to address African American male students' retention occurred through the campus-based organization, Project Empowerment. The researcher studied the phenomena of Project

Empowerment's impact on Black male students' retention using Tinto's (1975, 1998) interactionalist theory. The results revealed influential personal and institutional factors tied to these male students' ability to persist. Four themes were tied to professed persistence factors: college readiness, high ambitions and goals, social influences and relationships, and growth by student organizations that supported adjustment to college life.

Another cocurricular exploration highlighted Caplan and Ford's (2014) study of whether lower minorities' graduation rates were connected to campus experience and to increase the sensitivity to various bias expressions of mistreated groups. Theories of causation tied to individualistic and structural descriptions of minorities' decreased retention and graduation rates guided the study of 57 students from four public and private pseudo-institutions with four targeted groups: African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. Comprehensive findings revealed a wide range of racism and sexism, showing that students experienced regular, silent suffering within their universities. This study highlighted the struggles of students who suffer in silence until they are encouraged to speak out against discrimination.

Environmental barriers. Environmental factors beyond the community college emerged as barriers to degree completion for African American male students. Economic, family, and work obligations compete with these students' ability to persist in college. Researchers like Harper and Wood (2016) have contended that environmental factors are the most influential among others in halting the educational progression of these students. Harper and Wood (2016) stated:

> Unlike four-year collegians, community college students tend to be at greater risk of succumbing to environmental variables, which include factors that occur outside of the institution (i.e., in students' homes, communities, and work settings) that can have negative effects on students' experiences and outcomes inside college. (p. 1949)

These researchers discovered that community college students were more likely to need to halt their academic pursuits because of impactful environmental variables once enrolled in college. Black community college male students are more prone to be older, start college later, have dependents, be married, and have to work while studying to obtain a degree (Harper & Wood, 2016; Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019). These environmental factors are likely to compete with Black male students' efforts toward degree completion. In consideration of such environmental factors, Harris et al. (2017) examined practices in California community colleges to support developing interventions and applying equity targets to improve student retention, enrollment, and completion rates. Their work points to the impact of environmental factors on men of color and the need to address them in higher education.

Environmental pressures such as work experience, transportation challenges, family care needs, and life-event stress of men of color within the community college also prove influential in shaping their academic experiences differently from other students (Harris et al., 2017). For example, a chief difficulty among postsecondary students is food insecurity (Bruening, Argo, Payne-Sturges, & Laska, 2017); however, Black men experience food insecurity at a higher rate than students of other races (Wood & Harris, 2017a). Some Black men also face significant transportation challenges in getting to college, which reflects an environmental pressure that can compete with their academic experiences (Wood & Harris, 2017b) given the need to be in class in a timely and regular manner.

Other researchers highlight environmental factors impeding or presenting challenges for African American males as they seek educational pursuits. Researchers Wood, Harrison, and Jones's (2016) qualitative study collected data from 28 Southwestern community colleg estudents. Results revealed that students perceived employment as an obstacle to their academic

success due to emerging challenges. Grouped constructs with multiple themes surfaced as following factors that affect these Black male students' pursuit of education: personal, academic, and psychological. The empirical study illustrated Black male students' perceptions regarding how they navigate perceived barriers to balancing school and work life. Specific constructs like adjusting to the work and school schedule, exhaustion, and poor supervisor and employee relationships revealed essential factors for administrators to consider when identifying ways to support Black male students in overcoming barriers at the community college. The consideration of multiple factors like economic and racial experiences or bias, which can influence the success of community college students, yielded additional barrier insights.

Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) offered recommendations for educational institutions and policymakers around common factors linked to demographics, educational and financial barriers, career development desire, and relationship building with faculty and staff to address influential factors related to low-income community college students. Their study provided an example of how to use student responses to inform practice in educational settings for marginalized groups. The researchers' approach to a purposeful sampling question centered on the resilience of minorities that can provide a guide to study the development of Black male students in the community college.

In another study tangential to environmental barriers to African American male community college student success, Schudde and Goldrick-Rab's (2015) research illustrated the importance of using the study of sociology to transform community colleges to adequately meet the needs of students instead of stratifying students through open access operations. The researchers explored sociology's role for better understanding community college and its competing challenge to embrace enrollment despite inequity in college completion rates among

students of color and lower socioeconomic status. The authors considered how postsecondary education and community colleges affect social stratification. Sociological theories outline the community college connections to community characteristics that affect academic success for students who are most likely to enroll in this setting but have difficulties attaining a degree.

The Lack of Collaborative Solutions to Barriers

The lack of collaborative solutions fuels barriers to change in an organization and can influence organizational members' ability to address academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors affecting African American male students in the community college. Specifically, the difficulties in determining the root cause of low rates of African American degree attainment and in finding the most effective responses to this problem can hinder change in an organization, leading to continuing barriers for these students. When organizational members cannot identify collaborative solutions to multifaceted social problems that align diverse stakeholders around "a common public purpose" (Stroh, 2015, p. 2287), barriers surface that hinder achieving outcomes. Stroh (2015) provided insight into some of the causes of this disconnect: "The diversity of concerns held by different stakeholders makes it difficult to not only align people with one another but also to align each stakeholder's highest aspiration with their own immediate self-interests" (p. 2280). Individual and organizational goals and interests can clash in that each individual or group might think their needs are foremost among many identified needs; in such cases, collaboration is hindered, making needed changes challenging or difficult to realize.

A willingness to embrace collaborative solutions that can transform African American community college male students' experiences will require some individuals and groups to embrace change even when it means a shift in the familiarity of approaches or interferes with comfort levels. Thus, examining the assessment and evaluation process for supporting these students collaboratively is a goal that may yield broader results beyond deficit thinking.

Discussions of the pros and cons of expanding the current support systems provide beneficial information and justifications for change; yet, consensus may not be a reality initially as barriers to change can occur in the pursuit of collaborative solutions through assessment. For instance, Fuqua, Newman, and Dickman (1999) stated, "Barriers to assessment related to conceptual issues may take the form of (a) a lack of common constructs and (b) a perspective on the system that is necessarily different from an individual or group perspective" (p. 15). Such differences in ideas and perspectives can present challenges that prevent consensus. The passion for embracing the focus on African American male students' improved academic success—and lack thereof—could move beyond the needs of students and the entire organization toward self-interest instead. Again, collaboration is key. Stroh (2015) stated: "We have to let go of something such as comfort, security, and independence to have what we want even more. By contrast, the unwillingness to let go of such benefits to the status quo is the greatest obstacle to change" (pp. 2361–2363). Joint effort may be needed to find the best solutions while encouraging people to deal with their discomfort with change.

To realize lasting results, administrators, faculty, and staff navigating the many polarities at the community college need to commonly focus on how they can adequately address the most marginalized group of students from a place of genuine engagement (Martí, 2016a, 2016b). Stroh (2015) suggested that it appears essential to examine mental models to determine whether current ways of thinking and operating are unproductive or should be altered from espoused views to better support the organization. Therefore, systems thinking can help break down barriers to change that impact one's stance toward evaluation and assessment. In support of systems thinking, Marquardt (2011) stated that it "helps organization members clarify patterns and identify more effective approaches to changing them. Recognizing and understanding the

links between actions enables them to explore the reasons behind successes, challenges, and failures" (p. 216). Cheney and Terry (2018) similarly emphasized that systems thinking can provide a lens to address complicated challenges accompanying educational innovativeness within an organization from an internal level to inspire systems-level change.

Overall, barriers to change were tied to lack of collaborative solutions, as well as evaluation and assessment in an organization, and these surfaced in the published literature as needed areas of focus when considering ways to support African American male community college students. Efforts to increase degree completion rates of African American male students included a focus on resistance to change and collaborative solutions. The importance of appropriate assessment and evaluation approaches to inform processes and systems to support African American male students emerged in the literature as well. Systems thinking was offered as a possible solution to these problems.

Systems Thinking and Organizational Culture

The review of literature emphasized the importance of the support of African American male students in higher education settings success around academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors to fuel degree completion or academic success. Intentional interactions within the institution can stimulate engagement, build connections, and provide support to African American male students (Harper, 2012). One critical support component is an awareness of the organizational culture and how it addresses academic, cocurricular, and environmental challenges of African American male students at the community college. Institutional supports affect an organization's academic considerations for students.

To offer necessary support for these students requires intentional, administratively led initiatives as institutional factors impact the overall success of these students at the community college (Bush & Bush, 2018). Organizational culture influences interactions in an organization

(Brettel, Chomik, & Flatten, 2015). Learning about and promoting a keen awareness of influential factors that hinder or develop an organization remains a timely endeavor for leaders. It is imperative for organizations to encourage flourishing leadership rather than stagnation or positionality, dissemination instead of centralization, and responsiveness versus unyielding behaviors (Hickman, 2016, p. xi). Leaders must inspire needed change by building an awareness of current systems requiring change. Institutional leaders have an obligation to design organizations centered on student success and achievement (McClenney, 2014). Prescriptive actions to drive results must center on organizational efforts to identify and remove barriers to college completion for the group that struggles the most in the community college setting (Harper, 2012).

To be keenly aware of the required change, leaders must manage by example, exhibit a willingness to examine systems, and commit to reaching viable change through understanding one's conscious and unconscious influences (Stroh, 2015). Systems thinking inspires change leadership, which increases self-reflection of thoughts, intention, and activities as well as the consciousness of one's influences on the difficulties one seeks to resolve (Stroh, 2015). Stroh (2015) noted that systems thinking inspired leaders to lead from their strengths and past instantaneous self-interests to activate varied stakeholders' actions over time to ensure the total system effectiveness. The ultimate goal is for leaders to encourage the analysis and avoidance of possible negative longer-term consequences of well-intentioned solutions (Stroh, 2015). Leaders are the chief change managers charged with generating and fostering the culture and vision of the organization around the same purpose, ideas, and vision to support change and students' outcomes effectively (Wilkinson, 2011).

Systems thinking can undergird interventions in an organization. Stroh (2015) stated: "One of the benefits of systems thinking is that it helps people understand the purpose that a system is accomplishing. This process prompts individuals to reflect on the difference between what they say they want (their espoused purpose) and what they are actually producing (their current purpose)" (p. 453). Leon and Williams (2016) presented an example of systems thinking at work. Providing a theoretical framework based on contingencies deemed necessary for strategic diversity leadership formation in an organization, their study assessed whether organizational goals were aligned with the diversity committee. Multiple-level, data-based research findings highlighted the benefits of the diversity committee's efforts to shape and advance diversity goals and work in an organization, allowing them to understand the system's distinctive and influential elements.

Systems Thinking and Collaboration

As discussed previously, collaboration among all organizational members is critical at the community college. Assessments of espoused beliefs and values around the work commitment and the need to promote collaborative action among stakeholders in the organization can inform an organization's culture (Stanley, Watson, Reyes, & Varela, 2019). Addressing barriers to collaborative practice is an ongoing commitment; thus, steps to unearth unconscious assumptions around supporting African American male students in successful degree attainment could guide an organization's work (Schein, 2010).

Organizational practices that encourage recognition and acknowledgment of areas needing growth require creating safe places for sharing growth needs where all members of the organization can embrace systems around transformation and transparency (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Kegan and Lahey (2016) expressed that the vital step to collaboration is to tap into each member's ultimate desire for growth. They indicated that the focus becomes how leaders can

encourage, motivate, and create safe spaces for employees to share concerns and professional development needs to inspire greater transformation and transparency in the organization. African American male students are key members of the community, and their voices can provide valuable insight into effective best practices to help address their needs in the community college setting; thus, Kegan and Lahey's work would suggest actively including not only students generally but Black male students specifically in the systems collaboration. Not surprisingly, Wood and Palmer (2014) noted the importance of Black male students having a sense of belonging during their college experiences, which contributed to fewer conflicts and increased feelings of being welcomed and a part of the environment, reflecting a way to promote collaboration.

Collaborative processes and efforts to get buy-in from all stakeholders is necessary and beneficial, yet a challenge in some cases. Chen (2015) stated, "Because an intervention requires changes, its demands may be highly challenging to both clients and implementers" (p. 27). An intervention's development, implementation, and evaluation are factors that require collaborative attention because they can impact all members involved in the new intervention or response. Working to gain consensus on shared goals and objectives to inform organizational improvement can be difficult even with evidence to support a needed change if individual agendas prevail or if differing views for how to use resources or funds emerge among stakeholders (Stroh, 2015).

Awareness of Resistance to Change Systems

Engaged conversations inform practice, particularly around systems of resistance to change at all levels of the organization—the micro-, macro-, and mega- levels (Guerra-López & Hicks, 2015; Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Leaders should champion the cause for change within the organization and help advocate for that needed change to support the success of all students, primarily African American male community college students.

To inspire needed change that leads to transformation in an organization calls for groups and individuals alike to deeply examine motives and actions, which primarily is an assessment of mental models (Marquardt, 2011). However, to undergird continuous organizational members' learning and organizational viability, Marquardt (2011) contended that emphasis must be on the development of five connected subsystems: "learning, organization, people, knowledge, and technology" (p. 23). While these subsystems are components of learning and change, people may be most important. According to Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, and Flowers (2004), to influence change in people, organizations, and society, the steps toward transformation begins with the individual. Using Marquardt's (2011) invitation to focus interconnected efforts at the college, leaders who invite each individual to partake in conversation, dialogue, and team-learning around the issues of African American male students can present opportunities for leaders within the organization to be active agents of change.

Academic and Environmental Supports

Supplemental academic and environmental support opportunities emerged in this literature review through a study of peer relations, faculty connections, and mentoring (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Research findings revealed that connections and associations with other Black male students and mentorships from Black faculty members shaped the persistence of these male students. For instance, Brooms and Davis (2017) used examples of how specific factors impacted Black male students' ability to continue their educational pursuits while navigating challenges.

Cartwright and Henriksen (2012) also examined factors that influence the success of Black male students in college, finding the following five key themes: male role models or mentors, a supportive mother, wanting to achieve an education, respect for their father, and resiliency. These five key themes particularly reveal insights tied to the family, suggesting that the home life may especially support or hinder African American male students (Cartwright &

Henriksen, 2012). Institutional, academic, and environmental factors also have surfaced as influential in adult student persistence to continue in higher education (Bergman et al., 2014). Bergman et al. (2014) discovered that there was not a significant difference in persistence outcomes by gender, race/ethnicity, or age among a comparison of students who persisted compared to those who did not. Work/class conflict, a supportive instructor/advisor, encouragement from home, the overall institutional encouragement to their needs, and finances to complete their degree all made a difference in whether adult students continued to pursue higher education.

      Academic support. Ways to support African American male students academically prior to college enrollment also emerged in the review of the literature. Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014) focused on a primary determinant to persistence for community college students based on the student's characteristics when entering college. Their hypothesis supposed that other factors beyond the income status and academic limitations of minority students could contribute to low graduation rates at the community college. The authors identified several themes linked to goal setting, motivation, external factors, and self-empowerment; and they studied the impact of cultural capital, college-going plans, and academic preparation of community college students' persistence thoroughly. Motivation and self-empowerment tied to African American community college students' success rates surfaced as relevant completion indicators in Martin et al.'s study, suggesting factors that I considered in this dissertation study.

      Researchers have considered the power of human desire to thrive (rather than just survive) as a motivation informing academic support (Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017). Some researchers have considered the notion of thriving over surviving. For instance, Brown et al. (2017) conducted a review of published literature to explore what others had found

regarding why some human beings thrive while others struggle or fail in their endeavors. The authors outlined theoretical arguments, and they constructed conceptual viewpoints and applications around thriving from various populations and field perspectives. They focused on a critical understanding of issues linked to thriving, existing research, and areas needing further research. Multifaceted influential factors like psychosocial variables, and personal and conceptual enablers surfaced as causes of human thriving. Brown et al.'s (2017) study can support both students and faculty in an organization, while Zell's (2011) research specifically indicated that educators should understand the power of human thriving alongside providing opportunities for building connection or relationships in the organization.

      Environmental support. Research has suggested that a variety of influential academic and environmental factors contribute to limited degree attainment for African American male students. For example, Wood and Palmer (2013) and Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) illustrated the importance of the educational setting and also highlighted areas of influence on African American male students' academic persistence beyond this focus. Wood and Palmer (2013) noted the importance of an awareness of personal goal-setting in contributing to African American male students' academic success linked to self-efficacy. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) concluded that multiple relationship factors like aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital impacted success rates in college. They illustrated the need for community college administrators to focus on how social capital and student success affect African American and Latina/o community college students' ability to persist academically. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) reconfirmed that underrepresented students, such as African American men, need additional support tied to self-efficacy and cultural and social capital. Other researchers such as Harper (2012) asserted the relevance of the parental impact on these students' pursuit and

persistent toward education. Different academic and environmental influences surfaced as contributing factors that limit the degree attainment of these students, thus grounding the need to support these students both inside and outside of the organization.

The literature review further showcased the significance of goal setting by African American male students. Wood and Palmer (2013) hypothesized that a study of personal goals of Black male students in community colleges could provide a framework for community college administrators to assist in the academic and psychosocial development of these male students in these settings. Results revealed the importance of personal goal setting and administrative action to support Black male students' success. Wood and Palmer used the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study data to help analyze minority students' success rates, which revealed retention and graduation rates that were lower than their peers. Additionally, the researchers provided recommendations for community college administrators to focus on Black students' self-efficacy tied to setting personal goals as contributing factors to school success.

Taking a different approach, Lewis (2016) provided awareness into current research methods for comprehending the transitional college experiences of these students. The researcher explored and aggregated the methods and results of recent and current qualitative and quantitative studies used to increase an understanding of the social interactions and internal personal experiences of Black male students in college. Twenty-three qualitative and eight quantitative research studies provided the specific information for this review. Lewis's study illustrated the frequent use of qualitative techniques (i.e., interviews and focused groups) and that quantitative approaches are not as standard in recent research studies on African American male students. Quantitative research approaches on this population included the use of survey and questionnaires.

Goings (2016) used Harper's (2012) antideficit achievement framework to conduct a phenomenological study of four nontraditional Black male high-achieving college students at a historically Black university. Goings (2016) examined the academic success factors of these undergraduates via interviews and centered research questions on how Black male undergraduates juggled work and family obligations while maintaining academic success. The researcher also sought specific examples of ways the faculty supported these high-performing male students. The study's findings revealed that such key influential factors as nurturing campus environments, the support of peers and faculty, and a natural desire for better avenues to support themselves and their families contributed to Black male undergraduates' ability and motivation to embrace educational opportunities. By illustrating the importance of adult education with emphasis on diverse and racial contexts, Goings (2016) also provided an example of influential factors that influenced Black male undergraduate students' academic success. The research yielded evidence that the nontraditional Black male undergraduates at historically Black colleges and universities thrived in part due to their college environment and nontraditional student experiences that differed from other settings. The study yielded strategies of consideration around students' feelings of acceptance in the organization, which can also inform practice at the community college.

In contrast, Bush and Bush (2018) took a different stance by asserting that a study of African American male students cannot rest with a focus on nondeficit or deficit mindsets; instead, they believed such a study needs a more comprehensive focus using an ecological systems approach to explore influential elements influencing these male students individually and collectively. Bronfenbrenner (1974, 1979) defined ecological systems as interactions among self, parents, peers, and environments, which lead to interconnectedness of systems that impact

development and contribute to an individual's response to life situations. Bush and Bush (2018) advocated moving away from merely focusing on telling positive African American male students' stories to a view that African American boys and men need to govern and author their own stories. They indicated that to achieve desired results for African American boys or men's academic success, there must be a paradigm shift that promotes a different lens for assessing and understanding deficit-laden and nondeficit frameworks in order to include the interconnectedness of all systems impacting these male students.

Service Gaps Awareness

African American male students' low degree achievement and often poor persistence rates concern higher education administrators. A needs assessment of African American men at the community college is a useful means of identifying service gaps and guiding necessary intervention (Chen, 2015). For example, using evaluation research, Leavy (2017) found that influential factors linked to these students' success or lack of success can help build awareness that can lead to new perspectives. Kaufman and Guerra-López (2013) noted the value of using appropriate needs assessments at the mega-, macro-, and micro-level when an organization "recognizes that what they use, do, produce, and deliver should be aligned and add value to internal and external clients, including society" (p. 599). Kaufman and Guerra-López (2013) stated, "The Organizational Elements must be linked and aligned if we are to deliver organizational improvement and success" (p. 411). Such research suggests that all levels of an organization must be considered to achieve the desired results for all students.

Aligning resources and services at all levels of the college requires comprehensive and collaborative planning and efforts across the organization as well as consideration from all stakeholders (Doh & Quigley, 2014), including students. Hickman (2016) stated, "Organizational change requires the creation of designs or structures that meet the demands of changing

environments or business models, technology, and human capacity" (p. 498). Leaders must mobilize other leaders to embrace desired changes to fulfill the organizational mission and core values around shared goals and outcomes that will facilitate meeting the needs in the organization. Organizational practices that welcome and allow for creating safe places where members can acknowledge and share their growth needs requires that they embrace systems around transformation and transparency, particularly in their efforts to support African American male students (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). There are growth benefits when organizational members engage in honest conversation to inform practice around serving these students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Harper, 2012). Dialogue around perceptions, hidden assumptions, and resistance to change also have fueled desired change in an organization (Emerson & Yancey, 2011; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). The literature illustrated the value of conducting a needs assessment of African American men at the community college to help detect service gaps for directing crucial interventions and the service needs of these students.

To offer such specific services, shared or collective leadership must emerge to undergird African American male students. For example, Wassenaar and Pearce (2016) stated that "with shared leadership, the role of leadership does not reside in one person's hands, but rather in the group's arms as they move together toward common objectives" (p. 179). Group leadership can shape the operational vision as a collective leadership disposition, which shifts direction to the team of leaders and followers for answering a service call for these students while promoting organizational growth and student success. Utilizing increased transparency and considering the concerns of all stakeholders is a benefit of shared leadership (Pearce, Wassenaar, & Manz, 2014). An element of the vision to support and empower leaders in support of these students also might include energizing student leaders around clearly established, shared goals (Harper, 2012;

Wassenaar & Pearce, 2016). Tolliver and Miller (2018) discovered the instrumental benefit of four prevailing themes: "mentorship, socialization, on-campus supports, and family and community expectations" (p. 305), which surfaced as significant in African American men's ability to stay in college and graduate. These themes highlighted specific supports that proved vital to these male students' ability to realize graduation.

Summary

A review of the literature provided insight regarding both barriers and support systems connected to African American male students in higher education focused on academic, cocurricular, and environmental factors—any of which might inform organizational culture in postsecondary education. This chapter outlined Harper's antideficit achievement theoretical framework as a guide for the study and builds on the history of African American male students in the community college. Attention on the significance of student success and retention enlightened the literature review. Chapter 2 also considered examples of supportive structures, including how organizational culture affects the educational experiences of these community college students. Based on this literature review, the current state of knowledge regarding this topic is that despite barriers to African American males' ability to persist and progress academically, some of these male students have found ways to achieve. The literature review reveals that educators and scholars do not know enough about the lived experiences of African American male students in community college, leaving a gap that I developed this dissertation study to address.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion of the methodology of the study, which includes the research design and method, population, sample, materials, and instruments.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. Despite the barriers to graduation, some African American males achieve academic success at the community college. As reviewed in Chapter 2, several research studies examined obstacles to success for African American male students while fewer examined persistence and success. However, further exploration into the intrinsic and extrinsic success factors that have assisted Black male community college graduates can help to uncover effective ways to encourage increased degree attainment for this population (Lenz, 2014). This research study examined successful avenues that African American males have navigated to achieve degree attainment at the community college successfully using Harper's (2015) antideficit achievement framework to study Black males' academic success.

I defined the perceived factors generally as academic, cocurricular, and environmental. One of my goals in this study was to identify intrinsic and extrinsic success factors that have positively influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. African American males who had completed their second academic semester or who were enrolled in their last year before graduation from the selected community college in the Southeast provided the sample. One primary research question guided the study; to respond to this question, I asked participants to provide insight about support measures they had received that made a significant difference in their ability to persist to achieve a community college degree. I expected this research to yield information to inform practice and to gain a better awareness of the elements that lead to successful persistence toward degree completion for African American male community college students. Chapter 3 provides a rationale for selecting

a basic qualitative research design for the study. A description of the basic research approach, the research site, and participants also inform this chapter. Additionally, a discussion of semistructured interviews and procedures for member checking follow. This chapter includes the researcher's role in piloting the research, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Research Question

The research topic and the problem of practice lends well to an inquiry framework of student interviews (Patton, 2015). The research question informed readers of how intrinsic and extrinsic support factors influenced participants' abilities to persist in college to achieve degree attainment. The research question was the following: What are the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion in North Carolina?

Qualitative Research Approach

I utilized a basic qualitative research approach to capture the perceived academic, cocurricular, and environmental experiences of African American males enrolled at the community college. Qualitative research "is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Specifically, basic qualitative researchers often focus on "(1) how people interpret their experience, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experience" (p. 24). Yates and Leggett (2016) stated: "Qualitative research gets at the how and why of the story, in ways that quantitative research cannot. The key concept of the study is often referred to as a central phenomenon in scholarly writing" (p. 225). These characteristics of a qualitative research approach highlight the necessary steps to implement the appropriate elements of research. Patton (2015) stressed such

foundational questions as the following: "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 115). This dissertation's research topic and the problem of practice lent themselves appropriately to an inquiry framework since the primary research question focuses on identifying successful avenues or stories that inspired persistence toward degree attainment directly from participants. The framework for forming interview questions emerged from the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012); these questions allowed African American male participants to voice specific examples and experiences.

A key focus of the study was to increase awareness around the benefit of an antideficit examination and focus for African American males. Harper (2015) stressed the need for a discussion change to focus on the success of African American males using more research on antideficit factors to shift the focus from Black men's disadvantages. The concentration was on why these males experienced academic discrepancies compared to other cultural groups through "a more balanced and multidimensional understanding of Black men's lives in schools and other social contexts" (p. 27).

I conceived a basic qualitative research study to aid in identifying the perceived academic, cocurricular, and environmental support systems that African American male students used when seeking community college completion. My goal was to illuminate strategies that might promote organizational awareness, and collaborative and reflective practice among administrative, instructional, and student services to encourage persistence among these male students. Reflective exercises in an organization can set the stage for scrutinizing prevailing viewpoints, interest, applications, outlooks, and concerns to inspire advancement and change

(Coghlan & Shani, 2014; Purcell, 2014; Ripamonti et al., 2016). I discuss these exercises in Chapter 5 to fuel support for African American male community college students.

Researcher's Role

I am a department chair and senior administrator of an offsite campus at a community college in the Southeast. I have nineteen years of experience working with community college students, and I am a former elementary school teacher. For this study, I collected data at a community college with which I have an association. My connection to community college teaching and administration inspired my interest and desire to explore ways to support the group that struggles the most to achieve degree obtainment in this educational setting.

My role was to collect robust data by posing thought-provoking, open-ended questions during one-on-one semistructured interviews with African American male students; these questions focused on intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that proved influential in their efforts to persist in college. I followed the research protocol of Abilene Christian University (ACU) and the selected college's Institutional Review Board (IRB) safeguard systems to protect participants (see Appendix A).

To establish systems of organization to support the study, I kept files of the research processes, drafts, reflexive journaling, collected data, and transcripts. A component of the study entailed my responsiveness to all feedback from the dissertation committee, which I considered valuable from my stance as a novice researcher.

With qualitative research, the researcher becomes the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Thus, I employed contemplative and interpretative thinking to ensure accurate assessment of the topic examined in the study (Clark & Vealé, 2018). Clark and Vealé (2018) stated: "Qualitative researchers must minimize and disclose their personal assumptions and biases while collecting, coding, and sorting qualitative data to acquire an accurate

representation of the phenomenon or topic" (p. 484). One of my vital roles as the researcher was to engage in the study without biased predispositions.

Assumptions

There are assumptions that surface in the development of any study. Assumptions related to the African American male students in this study included the thought or belief that similar themes would emerge as influential in hindering and supporting these students in persisting to degree completion. Although community college administrators support all students in the organization, the realization that some students actually may be hindered in their progress proves that there exist practices incongruent with the organization's goals. Another assumption was that all the participants would share accurate and true accounts of their academic, cocurricular, and environmental experiences. I decided that interviews might provide the best opportunities for the participants to share their lived experiences associated with the community college and to respond fully and openly to the open-ended questions. This format had the potential to enable these participants to extend their responses beyond the original questions as needed. I addressed each assumption, showcasing evidence that aligned or disproved a given assumption. To ensure both participant safety and information accuracy, I provided the participants with opportunities post-interview to read their transcribed interviews and note any areas that they wanted to revise or that they did not want to have used in the study.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are deliberate decisions concerning how to limit the population or focus the scope of the study (De Chesnay, 2017). Delimitations of this dissertation study included the following: (a) a targeted population as African American male community college students, (b) the sample size, (c) the community college as the location of the study, and (d) the use of one research question.

African American male students were the focus of the study. African American males attending a community college in the Southeast and who were attending their final year before graduation or who had progressed from their first to the second year defined the pool. I designed the study to address a minimum of 10 students and a maximum of 20. The actual sample size of 12 males from this selected group of male students was controlled by self-selection and the above-stated criteria. The choice to use a sample size of 12 males from this selected group of males showcased a specific desire to retrieve information and interview responses from currently enrolled African American male community college students. More were initially recruited, but at least two did not continue in the study, one because he was no longer enrolled at the time his transcript was verified for the study.

The community college as the location of the study was another delimiting aspect. This research focused on what made a difference in these students' continual effort to achieve success in the higher education setting of the community college. African American males emerged in this community college and in the published literature as a group that experienced lower college completion.

Another delimitation was the decision to limit interviews to one community college and to select a Southeastern school close to my residence. These factors were bounded by the time necessary to conduct, transcribe, and analyze interviews completely. However, financial considerations also accounted for the decision given that there was no travel budget for this study.

A predeveloped interview question guide supported the prior delimiting of the topics that I investigated during the study (Patton, 2015). Thus, the use of a primary research question allowed a single focus on the participants' identifying perceived influential factors aiding degree

completion. I was able to examine the lived experiences of African American male community college students and their perceptions regarding intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that grounded their persistence to achieve degree achievement.

Limitations of the Study

The assessment of limitations enables the researcher to consider and address credible threats to the validity of the study results (Terrell, 2016). Purposeful sampling of 12 African American male students who self-selected for the study reveals that a small data sample was a possible limitation of the study. Additionally, such sampling means that the results cannot be applied to the community college at large and may not be generalizable to other community college populations.

Another limitation of the study was the sole use of interviews as the primary vehicle to retrieve data from participants. Due to the selected basic qualitative research design, researcher bias in misinterpreting participant's responses also must be noted to ensure vital efforts for safeguarding data validity.

A significant limitation of the study included the time restraints of the participants. All but two expressed a concern that the study may take up too much time if it required multiple meetings, indicating not only the time stressors on a community college student but also this population's awareness that time management is crucial for ongoing personal college success. A research method that might have taken less time would be a survey that included open-ended questions for response on the students' down time.

Participants and Site

Upon meeting the proper protocols and procedures via the IRB, I solicited participants among African American male students enrolled at the participating Southeast community college. The targeted population was African American male students within a certain date of

graduation. This population was appropriate for responding to the study problem and purpose as the goal was to increase awareness and understanding around African American community college male students' success.

The study itself took place at a large, comprehensive, predominantly White higher education setting, specifically a community college in the Southeast United States (to be called pseudonymously Southeastern Community College, or SCC). At the time of the study, the SCC had the following student demographics: 58% of the student body identified as White, 24% as African American; 10% as Hispanic, and 7% as an "Other" ethnic minority. The average student age was 24 or under at 58%, and students 25 years old or older represented 42% of the college's population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Per IRB requirements, participants had to be at least 18 years to participate in the study.

The actual number of student participants was dependent on the result of self-selection of students from various degree programs, but I sought at least 10 participants. Per the discussion below, after both self-exclusion and other elimination, the actual number of participants was 12. I utilized support staff and email messages to solicit students' participation (see Appendix B). Student service, staff, faculty, and the Institutional Research and Effectiveness Office supported the research study by providing information and assistance with targeting African American male students who met the study criteria.

Description of the Participants

The actual study group consisted of 12 African American male students who had progressed from the first to the second year of a program or who were in the last semesters of a program enrolled at the targeted community college. This population was appropriate for responding to the study problem and purpose because they had demonstrated a certain level of persistence in pursuing their degrees and were within reach of their goals. I conducted 19

interviews with the participants. Of the 19, two were test interviews for piloting both the interview protocol and the data analysis process. Five participants could not continue involvement due to their enrollment status or the number of earned semester hours at the community college. All 12 final participants in this study attended the SCC. Each sought to complete or have completed a certificate, diploma, or associate degree to support career goals or to transfer to a four-year college or university. An interview participants' table follows below in alphabetical order; students were given the opportunity to self-select their pseudonyms. Table 1 offers a view of these participants per their self-selected pseudonyms, ages, programs, course hours, and employment status.

Table 1

Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Program	Hours Completed toward Graduation	Employed
Campbell	18	IT-Programming & Software Development	25	Yes
David	18	Digital Effects& Animation	52	Yes
Jay	19	Broadcasting & Production	40	Yes
Joshua	18	Digital Effects& Animation	37	Yes
Keith	18	Welding Technology	41	No
Michael	19	Graphic Arts & Imaging Technology	69	Yes
PJ	18	Associates of Arts	20	Yes
Pete	19	Associates of Arts	41	Yes
Shawn	19	Race Car Technology	37	Yes
Steve	26	Associates in Arts	48	Yes
Tron	19	Welding Summer 2019 & Automotive Systems Technology Fall 2019	18 Completed a certificate (18) Summer 2019	Yes
Tom	59	Air Conditioning, Heating & Refrigeration: Comfort Systems	9	Yes

Methodology

I solicited students for the study via face-to-face meetings on the SCC campuses, email messages, and telephone calls. Student services staff and faculty shared information about the study to target possible participants. The Institutional Research and Effectiveness Office provided names and information to target or to confirm enrollment of African American male

students who met the study criteria. The recruitment process began in June 2019 after the IRB

approvals were complete. Participants received a printed research consent form to read and sign

as well as an emailed copy of the form. After each student agreed to participate in the study, I

scheduled the face-to-face interview for a time and location that was convenient for each

participant. During the interview, participants responded to eight primary questions and a series

of open-ended sub-questions; follow-up questions were asked as necessary. Before the study's

actual interviews, I field-tested the questions and interview process with two African American

male students from SCC. These two students interviewed during field-testing shared their belief

that the interview questions provided an opportunity to gain a wide range of perspectives. One

shared that he thought that the questions were not too invasive and would lead to "good

responses."

An iPhone digital audio recorder recorded the participants' face-to-face interviews. I then

transcribed the interviews using Trint; then I reviewed and matched each transcript to the audio

file to check accuracy. Each participant received a copy of the transcripts via email with a

request to meet for a follow-up review of the transcript at a time that was convenient for him or

the option to correspond via email. All participants elected to confirm the accuracy of their

transcripts via email. One participant also came to a face-to-face meeting to review the interview

information. Correction or clarification regarding the interview transcript occurred if participants

had questions before moving forward with coding the data.

Sampling Strategy

Qualitative sampling informed the study via a purposive sampling. Terrell (2016) stated:

Purposeful sampling, also called intentional sampling, is just as the name implies: it is a
sample chosen "on purpose" because those sampled meet specific criteria. This type of
sampling is used in many qualitative studies to allow the researcher to identify small,
specific groups to work with. (p. 66)

I used a nonrandom approach of purposeful sampling to capture a significant perception of the challenges and support systems of the 12 participating students at the SCC.

Data Collection

The basic qualitative study retrieved data from then currently enrolled African American male community college students through personal one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. It was essential to capture the students' voices related to their lived experiences while striving to remain in college. The instrumentation included the use of semistructured interviews to gain knowledge of lived experiences relating to what the study participants identified as fueling agents to their successful degree completion linked to the problem of practice around barriers (Patton, 2015). The interview questions consisted of eight primary questions and a series of open-ended sub-questions. Prior to the study's actual interviews, the questions were field-tested to enable informed revision to the final questions (Dabney, 2012; Harper, 2012). Appendix C provides the final questions.

Although specific interview questions derived from Harper's (2015) antideficit achievement framework guided the interview interactions, I expected that additional questions and/or unrelated responses would emerge as the participants informed the direction through their responses (Ivankova, 2015; Patton, 2015). Because semistructured interview design seeks to encourage responses from each participant in an unbiased way to aid the integrity of the investigation, probing can encourage the participants to share or clarify information and examples as they respond to the questions. To this end, as warranted, I asked follow-up questions to the structured ones.

Procedures

I developed specific data collection materials to guide the interviews of the participating students (Ivankova, 2015; Patton, 2015). Interview protocols included providing each participant

written information regarding the interview location, time, and length. The interview protocol required beginning by welcoming each of the participants and providing them with an introduction to the interview that included the study's purpose and an inquiry to see whether the volunteers still wished to participate in the interview (Kvale, as cited by Gibbs, 2013). With participant permission through an informed consent form, audiotaping of the interviews captured evidence of participants' lived experiences within and outside the SCC that were relevant to their persistence; I expected that common patterns would emerge among the interviews, leading to saturation insofar as possible given the limited available students for data sampling. In addition, I directed the interview protocol by specific emphasis on the categories and questions from Harper's (2015) antideficit theoretical framework. I adapted the questions that Harper asked to what the participants experienced on their path to degree attainment. I piloted the interview protocol by field-testing the interview questions with two individuals outside the sample and made adjustments to both the procedures and questions according to user feedback, which revealed strengths and weaknesses during the field test.

I placed all interview and other study-related materials (e.g., digital files, audio tapes, transcribed interviews, coded and analyzed data, and participant informed consent documents) in a safe file cabinet under lock and key. These materials will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study.

Data Analysis

In this basic qualitative study, I used a general inductive research approach for qualitative evaluation data analysis. An inductive approach allows the researcher to (a) summarize raw recorded data into a concise, summary layout, (b) determine clear connections between the assessment or research objectives and the summary outcomes derived from the raw data, and (c) cultivate a framework, a model, or a theory of the underlying arrangement of understandings or

processes that manifest in the raw data (Thomas, 2006). The purpose of the inductive approach is

to allow research findings to surface from the recurrent, dominant, or meaningful themes

representative in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas,

2006). I expected the content analysis of the interviews to provide specific examples of the

factors and dimensions tied to Harper's (2015) antideficit framework pipeline point from the

participants' perceptions. The study's focused questions sought to highlight the three pipeline

points and the associated essential dimensions as

> precollege socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. . . .
> Eight researchable dimensions of achievement [familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-
> of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement,
> enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness].
> (Harper, 2012, p. 7)

The use of a cyclical analytical process supported the capture of emerging categories in

the data among these points and related fundamental dimensions (Patton, 2015). Coding the

qualitative data assisted in categorizing notes and experiences of the data systematically. Data

analysis methods included a constant comparative method with initial coding followed by

identifying emerging thematic categories. I read, analyzed, and coded data for emergent themes,

and reread it several times until exhausting the search for emergent themes. Inductive analysis

facilitates the development of a model or framework from the emergent categories from the raw

data (Thomas, 2006). The most important categories or themes tied to the research objectives

surface using inductive analysis. This process provided an avenue for organizing and describing

the lived experiences of the African American male students at the community college

(Ivankova, 2015; Patton, 2015).

NVivo coding, emergent codes, and preset codes helped me in coding the interview data.

I particularly used NVivo coding software to categorize and illustrate the actual words of the

participants (Ivankova, 2015). I conducted initial coding without the use of NVivo, which I then

engaged to assist with labeling and sorting the data. Similar experiences that interviewees

described emerged in this categorization process of data found in reviewing the transcripts.

Ivankova (2015) defined emergent codes as "codes that developed inductively from the text data

in the study" (p. 239). The interview transcripts illustrated evolving themes, which then produced

key insight into factors that affected the college persistence of these students. Davis (2014) stated

that "emergent codes" are those ideas, concepts, actions, relationships, and meanings that emerge

in the data and are different from the preset codes (p. 1). Preset codes, defined as "codes that

derive from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, problem areas, etc.," also

known as a priori codes, helped organize the data (p. 2). Harper's (2015) antideficit achievement

framework provided a significant source for identifying possible preset codes. Emerging themes

from the interviews and interview transcripts assisted in addressing the research question and in

providing evidence to guide possible future interviews and intervention stemming from this

research study. Once analyzed, I configured the data into vignettes to represent and illustrate

intrinsic and extrinsic support factors that assisted the participating students to achieve (or nearly

achieve, as was the case for several participants who had not yet graduated) degree completion.

Coding

The coding process entailed an inductive analysis of the interview transcripts, which

began with the initial reading of text data. I read the transcripts and individually marked them

when apparent themes emerged, manually identifying specific text segments related to the

objective of answering the research question through open coding. Afterward, using NVivo

software, I labeled the text segments into 28 categories and 16 subcategories that emerged from

the preset codes of Academic Achievement, Precollege Engagement, and Preparation tied to the

theoretical framework of academic, cocurricular, and environmental challenges as identified in

the literature review. Next, condensing overlap and redundancy among the categories resulted in 15 categories. Among the remaining categories, I created a model with the most significant categories (Thomas, 2006), resulting in three final categories or themes—the perceived persistence factors of *Pursuing Achievement*, *Preparation Shift*, and *Engagement Influence* as shown in Figure 2.

What are the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire degree completion in a North Carolina community College?

Pursuing Achievement

Preparation Shift

Engagement Influence

-Enrollment Motivations
-Success Strategies: (Responsibilities)
-Extrinsic Support Measures
-Family Influence
-Intrinsic Support Measures
(Most Influential Factor)

-Change of Focus Regardless of influence, precollege preparation or study habits

-Interactions:
Institutional Support
College Campus/ Environment
Student Services
Activities & Programs
Feeling Accepted

Figure 2. Perceived persistence factors.

Ethical Considerations

I applied for and received approval from ACU's IRB and the participating college before data collection began. Such approval is necessary to support appropriate ethical consideration aligned with the mission of the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at ACU. After following the proper protocols and procedures via the IRB, I invited African American male community college students enrolled at SCC to participate in the study to inform

data collection. Since this dissertation project engaged the lived experiences of human subjects, I took direct steps to support confidentiality and anonymity. I asked the participants to assign their own preferred pseudonyms as a step to safeguard their identities. I then informed them of the research and data analysis process and gave them a chance to ask questions about this process before signing an informed consent form to participate.

I considered necessary ethical protocols to ensure the safeguarding of the participants from any abuse (Ivankova, 2015). An IRB, as Ivankova stated, "protects participants from physical, emotional, and mental harm . . . safeguards participants' privacy and confidentiality" (p.111). Safeguarding the research site's anonymity was necessary; I chose to identify it with the pseudonym Southeastern Community College, or SCC. Ivankova (2015) expressed that researchers must have "planned ethical security measures" established for the protection of participants, as with some data sets, participants need to be identified for follow-up (p. 113). In this case, follow-up was not necessary, but I informed participants that they were welcome to do so.

Trustworthiness

An essential focus on honesty and trustworthiness is a principal, foundational component to capture the perceptions and experiences of participants accurately. The use of a trust and utility test assisted me in determining how to gather and present the data. Patton (2015) illustrated the importance of using a variety of ways to display data to support trustworthiness and credibility such as truth tests and utility tests. "Truth," in this context, links specifically to the conducting of interviews and analyzing the data and understanding that qualitative investigation can highlight correct data on different evaluations without having to identify or confirm that a single perspective must be accurate (Patton, 2015). Additionally, utility tests help the researcher to determine where to focus attention, thus identifying which textual occurrences

to include as study-worthy (Barone, as cited by Patton, 2015). The use of trust and utility tests assist the researcher in determining how to gather and present the data. Thus, although the process is often complex due to the researcher's range of choice in methodology, these tests help to undergird trustworthiness and credibility.

Displaying data, findings, and implications illustrate the transparency of the study and support reliability and credibility when the researcher confirms results and correctly captures participants' accounts in a variety of different ways. In addition, the use of visuals, vignettes, and an extensive repertoire of data sources to thoroughly examine the data may lead to interventions and organizational awareness of how to support the participant population overall. Because the use of multiple data sources may strengthen and reinforce the study's implications, I accessed relevant published literature and interviewed 12 participants. Coghlan and Shani (2014) inspired the use of "structures of rigor, reflection, and relevance" (p. 531) around a sound theoretical framework that fuels attention to practical knowledge. These structures use multiple data sources to inform and enhance qualitative research.

The use of member checking between me as the researcher and each participant also supported validity (Ivankova, 2015). Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated "that member checking can be used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 200). Member-checking opportunities supported the validity of the study. These were the member-checking steps:

1. I informed participants that member checking is part of the study and sought their participation consent.

2. During the interview process, I confirmed or clarified participants' responses.

3. After I finalized the interview transcripts, emerging findings, and research report drafts, participants received an e-mail requesting that they review their interview transcript, emerging findings or themes, and the research report drafts to assess the accuracy of their stories and accounts (Thomas, 2017).

4. Step-by-step directions of the review and follow-up process guided the participants' next steps.

5. Participants could request a face-to-face review appointment for member checking.

6. Using a hardcopy or an electronic copy of the transcript, each participant was asked to identify any researcher misinterpretations by highlighting and initialing the areas needing clarification or corrections.

7. After the member checking process was complete, I acknowledged and addressed the participants' change or update requests in the research report.

Potential Research Bias

The positionality statement presents my motivation for the research topic, recognizes that excluding biases is challenging, and offers the reader the opportunity to consider the researcher's stance connected to study conclusions (Clark & Vealé, 2018). I therefore self-identify as an African American female educator and administrator in a community college in the Southeastern United States in proximate location to the institution at which the study took place. Experiences from growing up in a predominately African American neighborhood in a small, rural town in the Southeast and being a mother of African American males fueled my desire to understand and support the well-being of these students. From a professional perspective, African American males surfaced as having the greatest difficulties achieving degree completion at the institution where I am employed, and I have collaborated with other administrators to identify effective avenues to support African American male students.

Thurairajah (2019) emphasized the value of the researcher's role in considering how one's various identities guide our work through reflexivity. A focus on how my personal, professional, and academic identities, experiences, and perspectives influenced the study is relevant and necessary to support the study's effectiveness (Derry, 2017). Personal, societal, and global legacies inspired a desire to examine systems of supports for African American male community college students. My focus on successful outcomes of African American males in particular represents a diversion from a primary focus on the dysfunction of men of color or academic limitations as documentation in other studies (Harper, 2012).

My position is that a study on factors that influence African American male degree completion remains vital and essential for informing successful practices in the community college and society. Through the research process, I realized that the resiliency of some African American male community college students was not deterred even though they may have met with challenges or encountered a sense of feeling unsupported or of not belonging to the school community overall. My realization during research changed my positionality as I had thought that the African American males would be more vocal about the faculty and staff that did not support them. However, instead, the participants stressed repeatedly the impact of the positive support they received from faculty and staff, which they said strengthened their ability to continue their education (Derry, 2017).

My positionality acknowledges, honors, and notes intersectional notions of difference that may support and hinder African American male community college students. African American male students are at the center of this study as is the community college as a setting that is likely to enroll such students. I acknowledge and honor the strength and value of these male students as worthy contributors to the educational canvas of higher education and society

and as men who can share valuable insight to inform practice for current and future students. The focus of the study was on influential factors that allow the participants to continue their college success. However, I maintain my position that a focus on the dismal completion rates of African American male community college students remains a problem that must be addressed on the local, state, and national levels. A focus on race and gender in the study can highlight the glaring difference in the overall success rates of these students (Derry, 2017).

Summary and Organization of the Study

A precise research design and methodology is necessary to conduct a reliable study. My purpose in this study was to understand the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. At the beginning stage in the research, I generally defined perceived factors as academic, cocurricular, and environmentally intrinsic and extrinsic support systems or measures. I selected a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences of the students.

Chapter 3 has outlined the research design and methodological steps to employ this particular inquiry. It has provided a rationale and procedures for the use of qualitative research. Considerations in this chapter included specifics on population, sample size incorporating qualitative sampling, materials, and instruments used to conduct a qualitative study. The interviewing process, selection of participants, and interview analysis were included in the chapter. I described qualitative data collection and analysis procedures from the interviews of 12 African American male students in their final semester before graduating from a community college in the Southeast. Procedural discussions outlined the process for semistructured interview question development. Other Chapter 3 considerations included the researcher's role in conducting the research, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the work in implementing research in the community college.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. The study drew on Harper's (2015) invitation to consider the success of these male students through antideficit aspects, which shifts the emphasis from Black men's disadvantage to favorable influences that might be engaged consciously by others. A basic qualitative design using individual interviews captured the perceived academic, cocurricular, and environmental experiences of a small group of African American males enrolled at the target community college, highlighting how intrinsic and extrinsic support measures grounded their persistence to achieve degree achievement. Chapter 4 presents the research data, analysis results, and highlights the emerging themes and categories from this research project. In themes that were slightly different from the originally perceived factors of academic, cocurricular, and environmental intrinsic and extrinsic support system or measures, three new categories—*Pursuing Achievement*, *Preparation Shift*, and *Engagement Influence*—emerged to highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that enabled their own persistence or successful academic outcomes.

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

The demographics of the 12 study participants, arranged in alphabetical order, follows.

Campbell. Campbell, a student moving from his first to the second year in IT-Programming and Software Development, enrolled in SCC as a more affordable option for beginning college before transferring to a four-year college or university. Campbell attended a STEM discipline-focused high school, which he reported had helped prepare him for the rigor of college course work. His obligations outside of school included working part-time at a fast food restaurant to have his own spending money.

David. David, a Digital Effects and Animation Technology student, was enrolled in his last two semesters at SCC at the time of this study. His anticipated graduation date was May 2020. David believed that both SCC's programs and encouragement from his family solidified his enrollment decision. He also worked to earn money while pursuing college degree completion.

Jay. Jay, a major in Broadcasting Communications and Production, was also in his last two semesters before a May 2020 graduation. His high school counselor encouraged his enrollment at the community college to enable him to complete the first two years in a broadcasting major. Jay was interested in film, video, and media. He did not want to leave his family, and he wanted to save money by attending a community college.

Joshua. Joshua, a Digital Effects and Animation student, was working to finalize his program in May 2020 as well. He stated that he enrolled in the community college to make life "easier" and "to have a backup plan." Joshua has had employment while attending SCC. He was asked to reflect on his outside responsibilities, whether they made pursuing his degree more challenging, and, if so, how he has been successfully able to make this adjustment.

Keith. Keith, an Associate in Applied Science, Welding Technology, was enrolled in the second year of his program at the time of this study. He began his SCC journey as a dual enrollment student at age 16. Keith continued his enrollment at the community college since it was cheaper than a traditional four-year college, and he could complete some of the classes before transferring to a four-year program.

Michael. Michael was in the last semester of the Graphic Arts and Imaging Technology Associate program, needing to complete one remaining course before continuing his education beyond the associate degree. His expected graduation date was December 2019. Michael's job

had on-call requirements that he has had to navigate and, in some instances, decide whether to take a call and leave class to return to work.

Pete. Pete was on track to finish his Associate of Arts degree from SCC in December 2019. He expressed plans to continue his education and pursue a degree in Forensics with more general education courses completed at the community college. He also joined the SCC community because it was cheaper than other colleges; he wanted to strengthen his grades beyond those he received in high school. Pete also wanted to avoid partying and be able to stay focus on his educational plans. His mother, coaches, and teachers inspired his enrollment in the community college.

PJ. PJ, an Associate of Arts student who was working on completing his degree with plans to transfer to a four-year institution to major in kinesiology, had moved from the first to the second year of courses. PJ did not wish to attend a community college at first. He communicated a change in perspective after being encouraged by a high-school career coach from the community college, who inspired him to consider the educational pathways through SCC. After enrollment, he experienced learning and leadership opportunities that confirmed that he had made the right choice to start at the community college first.

Shawn. Shawn's major or program of study was Race Car Technology (RCT). This experience was his third time enrolled in the community college. The other two times led to the completion of associate degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machining to support broader job options and his desire to own his own business one day. Shawn was on track to complete his RCT degree in May 2020. He has maintained a full-time job while in college.

Steve. Steve, an Associate in Arts SCC student, was in his last two semesters at the time of this study and was set to graduate in May 2020. He explained that he planned to pursue a degree in communications after leaving community college. Steve has enrolled in the community college twice; this time was his second experience. He began at a two-year institution as he thought that his K–12 academic experience only prepared him for the community college. Steve followed an Individualized Education Program while in school to address his particular learning needs. He shared that his teachers and parents did not educate him about options for pursuing a degree at a four-year university.

Tron. Tron completed an 18-hour certificate in Welding Technology in the summer of 2019. He enrolled in SCC's welding program because he wanted to build an electromagnet shield and needed to learn welding to achieve this goal. Tron continued his education in the fall semester of 2019 in the RCT associate degree program. Everyone in his family inspired his enrollment in SCC, and he reported that they have continuously encouraged him as a student.

Tom. Tom was a second student who expressed that his family had not been especially supportive of him. He was an Air Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Technology (HVAC) student who had completed three diplomas at SCC in carpentry, plumbing, and electric. He was in his last semester before potentially earning an HVAC certificate in December 2019. He owned his own business and had 25 years' experience in the construction field. Tom enrolled in the community college because his education, certifications, and experience had led him to believe that the power of education would change his life and afford him countless opportunities.

Presentation of Data and Results

This study involved one primary research question: What are the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion in North Carolina? The data yielded varying perspectives among the African

American male community college male students. After data collection via interviews, I transcribed the interviews and then I undertook multiple data analyses and passes through coding, updated field notes, and a process of constant comparison among participants' responses occurred to inform each step of defining and refining codes. I used NVivo software to highlight emergent codes and preset codes that surfaced among the responses.

The antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012) inspired the study and informed the interview questions centered on academic achievement and precollege engagement and preparation. These questions reflected Harper's focus to reverse the reliance on existing theories and conceptual models that readily examine deficits among students of color to a deliberate effort to uncover how these students were able to succeed. African American males' perceptions materialized through specific examples and experiences centered on ways they were able to continue their college degree pursuits. In this study, the examination of the perceived experiences of African American male students at SCC, a predominantly White Southeastern community college, provided a better awareness of the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that may lead to successful academic outcomes for these students. All of the participants reported intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that had assisted them in continuing to pursue their degree goals.

The cyclic review of interview findings led to 28 categories and 16 subcategories, which emerged from preset codes of academic achievement and precollege engagement/preparation tied to the theoretical framework; these then informed select categories or themes through reviewing the transcripts (see Appendix D). The original categories were comprised of broad areas resulting from participants having mentioned the topic. Examples included college success, organization support, faculty support, college campus/environment, student services activity, interactions,

family influence/encouragement, the importance of peer connections, dedication, challenges/obligations, and so on. Some subcategories also emerged. During a review to reduce overlap among the categories, I combined categories or removed topics that participants had referenced in a limited way, which helped narrow the broader categories to 15. Of these, three categories or themes emerged as the most frequently referenced topics among participants— Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence—highlighting the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that enabled their own persistence or successful academic outcomes. I then created a model with the most significant categories (Thomas, 2006), resulting in three above-named categories or themes (see Figure 1).

After analyzing and synthesizing the collected data, these three categories appeared to answer the research question regarding the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion. The category of Pursuing Achievement captures the factors that undergirded the Black male students' ability to persist toward degree completion; these factors included reasons for enrolling in the community college, success strategies, organizational support including faculty and staff, family influence, and their most influential factor fueling continuous enrollment or degree effort. The category of Preparation Shift highlighted their change of focus as college students, college pursuit influences, differences in study habits, and family influence to succeed and persist. Most of the participants expressed a shift in focus related to a desire to pursue college and a distinctive difference in their study habits since enrolling in the community college. The category of Engagement Influence encompassed feeling accepted, interactions with peers, members of the organization and student services activities and programs, college campus and environment, recommendations for engagement, and motivation to achieve goals.

Pursuing Achievement

Pursuing Achievement is a theme that surfaced as an intrinsic and extrinsic support measure that influenced the success of African American male students. In this category, the participants shared examples of what encouraged them to keep pursuing degree attainment including their enrollment motivations, strategies for academic success, organizational support, and family influence. All 12 of the participants shared examples of how intrinsic and extrinsic support measures inspired their persistence to realize college achievement. They demonstrated an ability to navigate challenges or work schedules to ensure that they achieved academic success in their coursework through employing success strategies highlighting a key intrinsic support measure. For example, when asked about obligations outside of being a student, all of the participants shared at least one or more personal or professional obligations that involved their time and effort. The students in the study shared insightful information about outside responsibilities, the impact these responsibilities had on academic success, and the ability to navigate obligational challenges while pursuing their degrees. For example, participants Campbell, David, Jay, Shawn, and Steve provided examples of how they balance or adjust their lives to stay focused on their college achievement, which they expressed has helped them to persist.

Responsibilities. Campbell described being able to continue his academic success despite working in a job: "There will be times where I work a little later than I planned to be. It leaves less time for doing homework. But, I kind of just countered that by just staying up a little later to make sure that I get it done." Campbell's account highlighted his willingness to make needed adjustments to support his academic success.

David explained how he could balance work and schoolwork obligations by sharing the following:

But I will say really the thing that I do mostly is just prioritizing certain things and I manage my time more wisely and also, I know that I have a plan. I don't usually write a schedule out which I should do more, but I plan out my schedule in my head and I try to stick to it. So, I'll be like, "Oh, I work this day, so I will try to stay later on this day" or if I don't work that day I'll come here, but if I do work, I know I'll have to leave. So, I try to plan ahead and think about which times I'm going to do certain assignments.

David also communicated his ability and willingness to making needed adjustments in his workday and study time to maintain academic success.

When asked about outside obligations, Jay noted how they make pursuing his degree more challenging and how he balances them while going to college:

My responsibilities? I mean, I have a job, my internship and personal family stuff, just being there for my family. A little bit. Time management or figuring it out because people and my job need me, the family needs, the school needs me and it's hard to juggle it all. At first, I have tried to take a little time off work and just making more room for the most important thing at the time, that's kind of how I did it.

Campbell, David, and Jay all made schedule alterations and sacrifices to prioritize responsibilities, enabling them to continue their college coursework to support degree completion goals. Each of their examples demonstrated that the pursuit of a college degree required sacrifices. An awareness of how these male students combated and balanced competing obligations can prove helpful when seeking to understand factors that hinder academic progression for Black male students.

Joshua, on the other hand, shared this: "Yes, I mean kind of, but in the end of the day, you have to decide which ones will be more important. And you know that there are sacrifices. But you know what you want, then you go for it." He appeared to be referring to sacrificing for a goal, but also to the prioritizing that happens when people create goals themselves.

Campbell, David, Jay, and Joshua illustrated the necessary ability to prioritize needs and obligations to maintain academic focus. Each depicted their ability to make needed adjustments, including prioritizing duties and managing their daily schedules to undergird study time and

assignment completion. They each demonstrated a keen awareness of the required commitment to duties tied to college responsibilities. Researchers have noted that African American male students need to balance school rigor with work responsibilities, which can obstruct their academic realization when forced to select between contending responsibilities (Bergman et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Wood, Harrison, & Jones, 2016). These students exemplify this ability to balance such responsibilities.

Shawn explained that although his outside responsibilities made pursuing a degree more challenging, he was able to keep making progress toward his degree completion goals: "Yes, it impacts my degree because I work overnight and I go straight to class. So, that's very hard to do, but I would say it really makes it harder . . . Strategies? It's just focus and not wanting to give up. And, not wanting to quit." Shawn expressed a realization that he needed to stay focused on his endeavors to finish his degree. He also noted the importance of not giving up as he had embraced a realization that he was not as young as he once had been and that he felt a need to exhibit more seriousness to fuel degree completion.

Steve contended that his intrinsic support measures fueled his ability to continue his academic achievement at the community college:

> So, when I applied the second time, I was more careful and I was able to really realize, you know, the true gift of education. So, when I came to the community college, I was saying to myself, basically like, you know, I know what happened in the past, but now is the time for you to do things your way. So, that's kind of what I did, and I pretty much prepared myself.

Steve also seemed to operate out of intentionality around taking advantage of educational opportunities tied to using his time strategically and showcasing self-leadership around a new determination and individually inspired academic success. Both Shawn and Steve approached balancing work and school responsibility from another angle. Specifically, each student appeared

to demonstrate a realization that they must embrace this educational opportunity vigorously to benefit educationally from their present situations. This way of thinking was different from their past experiences.

Extrinsic support measures. Examples of extrinsic support measures surfaced within the category of Pursuing Achievement and proved influential in the students' ability to persist toward degree completion. Organizational support linked to faculty and staff emerged as a specific extrinsic support measure. Faculty and staff's support reflected acts of encouragement, recognition, motivation, and challenges to growth. Jay, Michael, PJ, Pete, Steve, and Tron illustrated the benefit of organizational support, which helped to make a difference as they worked to achieve degree completion. For example, Jay stated:

> I'd say student-wise; my class kind of motivated me to push myself. I push myself because, uh, they do good, and I kind of don't want to be on the side that doesn't do well. So, I kind of try to work hard as I can. As far as my teachers, they kind of push me by challenging me with some of the stuff that we do, and that just kind of keeps me on my toes.

Peers and faculty played a role in Jay's motivation. According to Jay, pressure surfaced as a positive accelerant in his ability to continue to pursue college achievement. Jay's instructors also seemed to challenge him educationally as well.

Michael shared how organizational support through his instructors proved helpful and encouraging:

> I was applying to a college in New York, and I needed a reference or recommendation. I was sort of concerned initially about how I might get someone to do a recommendation for me. One of my instructors shared that they were delighted to complete this for me, and when I narrowed my options to ask, I discovered that people were like "I would have been more than happy to do that for you." That was a motivating factor for me because the recommendation was a very good recommendation.

Michael found that if he was willing to ask, his instructors were willing to assist and support him by writing recommendations and identifying examples of his exhibited strengths or skills. His

words also demonstrated that Michael had not been aware of how willing his instructors would be about completing a recommendation. It seems that students like Michael might benefit from knowing that instructors are supportive of them as they pursue their degrees even before they ask for recommendation letters or other assistance. Michael declared that, "The Graphic Arts and Imaging Technology faculty are very supportive." Supportive faculty engagement for students like Michael can fuel enhanced learning (Wood & Newman, 2014) and may have led to Michael feeling more supported as he navigated work and school obligations.

PJ shared the following regarding organizational support in this example: "Oh, it's been amazing. I was able to connect by meeting and like talking to different faculty, was able to connect, get engaged with more faculty so they could help my student success." Pete, on the other hand, gave an example of how he experienced organizational support: "Everyone's been supportive of me even when I meet strangers and tell them what I'm doing with my life they're pretty supportive." After a follow-up question about how the support manifested through words of encouragement, Pete shared these encouraging words that had made a difference to him: "Yeah, you're making a good choice. You're following a good plan." PJ and Pete both seemed to find college organizational support to be relevant and inspirational. Both students expressed the importance of being supported by members of the organization as an impactful element to their student success. PJ and Pete shared specific ways that members of the organization communicated or demonstrated support.

Steve experienced organizational support via instructors who helped inspire a shift in his thinking about his capabilities:

> So, everything that I've thought of . . . everything that I had known before, like as far as when I would test, you know, I would be taken out of the room and given extra time and stuff like that. When I came to the community college because I did have certain teachers that be like, you know, there's really no reason that you should be in here, like this is

> kind of a system, like you really don't . . . you don't . . . you really don't need all of this stuff. So, when I got to community college, I made up my mind like I'm just gonna put my foot forward and just see what it's like without all of that extra stuff even though they offer it.

Steve's example illustrates how the positive influence of instructors and other members of the organization can make a lasting impression and can stimulate motivation for students even when it is indirectly supportive.

Tron expressed extrinsic support measures in the form of organizational support in this way:

> Yes. Before one of our teachers left. Mr._____, he was an African American, and he was the only African American, well, welding teacher in this . . . in this welding shop. And, so I get this all the time by teachers, "Your mom told me to watch over you." And, so all my teachers have been watching over me for years. He retired, I think, about a year ago now and he would always be on me. He'll always say, "Mr. Tron, you gotta do this. You got to do it." And, we had this little love-hate relationship, but he knew that I could do it. I knew that I could do it. I just wasn't putting in the effort.

Tron not only spoke about the support he received from all his instructors, but he specifically noted the power of having an African American faculty member who encouraged and motivated him to do more. Mentorship can make a difference for African American male students, such as Tron.

Organizational support emerged as important for these male students perhaps because it signaled the institution's investment in them. The influence of organizational members, whether peers or faculty, illustrated that support via encouragement, motivation, or mentorship proved beneficially relevant and necessary among these students. The benefit of interactions emerged in another category (Engagement Influence) in the study and highlighted that the faculty and staff support reflected acts of encouragement, recognition, motivation, and challenges to growth.

Family influence. Family influence emerged as a significant extrinsic support measure within the primary category of Pursuing Achievement, and it appeared to undergird these

students' ability to persist toward degree completion. David, Keith, Jay, Michael, and Tron

provided examples of how familial influence inspired their college achievement and continual

pursuit of degree completion.

David, for example, acknowledged his family as a primary supporter in pursuing a degree

at the community college. According to David:

> I'd say yes, my mother, she doesn't stay in the same state as me, but she lives in Atlanta.
> She and also my father, my stepmother, they are all super supportive of me. They help
> me out whenever they can. I don't think I'll be here without them at all. So, I thank them
> for all that.

Keith expressed how influential his family was in his pursuit of a college degree: "Mostly my

family. They've always been pushing us as my family that we should all go to college and

complete a degree and become someone important in life. So, we all plan to go to college." Like

Keith, Jay also noted how his family played an influential role in his ability to pursue his college

goals: "Oh they're very supportive. They are proud of me. I have an internship at _____ in _____

and they're happy about that because they see me making moves and trying to get better at stuff.

Yeah."

Similarly, Michael spoke to the support of family as an extrinsic support measure. He

shared: "My whole family is always encouraging me. They are always pushing me, and they tell

me not to shy away from away from things and that's been very motivating." Tron described an

example of his family support as:

> Well, let me start off by saying this. Everybody in my family, stopping at one of my aunts
> is a teacher. So, everybody is constantly encouraging me. "Tron, finish your degree.
> Tron, finish your diploma. You're almost there. Congratulations, you've passed all your
> tests with flying colors."

David, Keith, Jay, Michael, and Tron's accounts underscored the value and power of

family influence and support as these male students continue their education. All of these

participants acknowledged family influence in their accounts. Family influence appears to be a valuable component of these students' ability to continue working toward degree completion.

Not all participants experienced the support of family in this way. Two participants expressed little or no family support or motivation to continue or pursue college when asked about how supportive his family (i.e., spouse, children, parents) was of his pursuit of a degree at the community college. Steve and Tom conveyed different occurrences relating to familial support. For example, Steve's experience did not include encouragement from his family or others:

> No, not really. I think like with most students, college is a thing that sounds good especially like in the African American community depending on where you come from. It's just one of those things where you say, "Oh, I'm going to college," and it just sounds good, but you don't really put any thought into it. So, family, from a family standpoint, no not really.

Steve also noted that:

> Well, now that has completely changed because I've basically taken it into my own hands, and they see that I'm excelling and that, you know, with the GPA and joining the honor society and different things like that and now they kind of see so they kind of push me more like, "Ok, this is, this is a great thing."

Steve's experiences around family support reflected that not all students receive family support to pursue college achievement in the same way. Steve actually used the lack of family support to compel his self-motivation, and he received sufficient organizational support to help him do so.

Tom provided the following response upon being asked how supportive his family was of him pursuing a degree at the community college:

> Well, I'm single . . . so as far as my brothers and sisters, everyone has their own dreams. I don't ask permission. I'm too old for that. I don't need permission. I don't ask anyone will you support me. I don't need any pats on the back. Once I put my sails up, I'm all right.

Tom, as an older student, did not seem to seek or need family support to continue his college pursuits. Some students are self-motivated and have an established drive and determination to succeed regardless of family influence.

Family influence played a vital role as illustrated with five participants in the study. Yet, two students spoke of contrasting experiences without the direct support of family. The lack of familial support in some ways either fueled their motivation to achieve or, at the least, did not alter their determination.

Outside peers as an extrinsic motivation. Eight of the 12 participants spoke of the support that they received from peers outside the organization. Jay, Michael, and Shawn, for example, noted that peer support proved helpful in charging their motivation. Jay said, "Some of my friends, they already had their careers thought out and everything. They are already done with school and it's just seeing what they have just makes me want it. So, I just kind of try and get on that path that they went on and try to follow in their shoes." Michael reported: My best friend since middle school and high school and I share common goals to pursue the arts regardless. That was like emotional support for me. It was a constant goal and we just decided that we were going to do it." Shawn's peers outside the organization were a motivating factor:

> My peers, I mean, I have some peers that have their own business. So that's part of why I'm going because I eventually want to have my own business. But, I have some peers as far as class; they give me ideas of what they want to do and why they are actually going to school. So, that's actually a little bit more motivation.

Peer encouragement and support made a difference to more than half the participants in the study, pointing to a valuable extrinsic motivation for African American male community college students.

Intrinsic support measures. Within the overarching category of Pursuing Achievement, this final category of intrinsic support measures appeared to be the most influential factor fueling

continuous enrollment or degree efforts of the students in the study. All of the participants shared how intrinsic support measures helped define their chief motivation for achieving their goals. Intrinsic measures or vitality might be defined as internal self-determination and drive to continue toward one's goals. Internal reasons for completing college included being inspired to not be in the same unpromotable position as coworkers were at the same age, a personal drive to succeed, family, and seeking skill development to fuel one's quest for learning. Jay, Joshua, Keith, Michael, Steve, and Tom provided examples.

Jay shared his motivation: "It was a personal drive because uh I have two brothers, and they tried college, but they didn't stay, and I'm trying to break the cycle." Jay's words suggest a desire to break a generational pattern that he witnessed within his family. His motivation was specifically linked to his primary reason for enrolling in college. Students have multifaceted sources that fueled pursuing college completion.

Joshua acknowledged that it is difficult going to school while working. He also shared his most important reason for working toward his academic goals despite balancing obligations in this way: "Yes, I mean kind of but in the end of the day you have to decide which ones will be more important. And you know that there are sacrifices. But you know what you want then you go for it. I just focus on the big picture." Joshua's most influential factor promoting his continuous degree work was himself. He embraced a realization that his success ultimately resided with his willingness to put in the effort and work to achieve his educational goals.

Keith acknowledged his family as the main motivation: "Uh um . . . mostly parents and family. They're most, like, my biggest motivation. That's why I stay focused and do well and you know just pretty much do my best in every class. And, that's my biggest push." Keith's words also reflected a student whose chief motivation was family. He noted the importance of

not letting them down. Thus, he continued to focus as a result of his family's encouragement. An awareness of the impact of family support can provide a lens to view examples of the motivation of college students to keep persisting to reach degree completion.

Michael stressed self-reliance as a motivating factor: "I realize that I have to be my own support sometimes and be my own motivation after my parents went through a divorce. A stable mind is important. You have to know what you want out of education." Michael reflected a student with family support, but he unexpectedly experienced a change in his family structure. Through the change in his family dynamics, he recognized that there would be times when he had to depend on himself solely to keep making progress toward his educational goals.

Interestingly, PJ used negative feedback from others to fuel his success as he reported that "I'd say the people . . . the people that didn't expect me to be here in this situation right now, so I say the haters are my motivators." PJ appeared to have turned difficult situations into a fueling agent as he dealt with negative experiences. He seemed to be motived to achieve set outcomes as result of negative or altering support from others.

Steve described an individual determination as the following:

It's really a personal thing. My drive; my purpose. Knowing that, you know, there is something on the inside of me, even though, I really don't know what it is yet. There is something in there and it's just my duty and my obligation to figure out. You know, what that is, and I just decided to do that through education. You know, and it's really those, who I was talking about earlier…those stories, meeting people, those, you know, activities or clubs, you know, all it takes is, you know, that one conversation or that one piece of information that can, that will cause you to have that aha moment. And, then it's like a domino effect. It leads to other things but of uh um, yes.

Personal drive and inspiration proved most important in Steve's educational quest displaying his reasons for maintaining degree pursuits. His example also highlighted the influential aspects of hearing other students' stories, which is a form of engagement on campus.

Tron shared what fueled his desire to pursue college: "My passion for building. Everybody has passion. If you don't, please find one. It's not hard to find a passion if you see something that might interest you." Tom, on the other hand, spoke of how seeing an older neighbor build a house motived him to obtain an education to be equipped and marketable to future workforce needs in the community. He expressed his most influential motivation to continue pursuing his degree in this in-depth example:

> I still had this dream from an old man name Mr. _____. I grew up in over in____ and across the street, he took a burned house and pushed it down. He built that house out of the ground. He used to work at the lumberyard. I watched that man build that house out of the ground and I saw then that's what I want to be. I saw that man take nothing and turn it into something beautiful. Listen, the most beautiful house in the entire neighborhood. And he did it with only one or two guys helping him. I just forced myself to do it cause I have to do it.

> But after you been out there working for a while, you learn your skills and ability. Plumbing is here to stay. Heating and air is here to stay. The electrical installation is here to stay. The roofing and carpentry work is here to stay. Pouring concrete is here to stay. But. Here's the thing. You can determine how much you get paid. You can be the helper, or you can be the boss. You can have a license and be the professional man and own the company or you can go work for a company. You can learn how to figure out how much concrete you need. Or you can ask how much concrete you're going to need. You can order the concrete, or you go pick it up. You'll be the one to choose. You gonna go pick it up. Or you going to order and tell them how much you need.

Tron and Tom's experiences portrayed how a passion for gaining necessary skills inspired college enrollment and academic success. Tron's realization that he needed specific welding skills in order to make a product was an energizing source of motivation. Tom equally comprehended a need that cultivated a motivation to gain the necessary tools to achieve his goals. Specifically, Tom demonstrated a keen determination tied to becoming a skilled person who would become an entrepreneur.

Preparation Shift

Preparation Shift is a second major category that illuminated perceived influencing factors for the study's African American male students' persistence to obtain college

accomplishment. This category highlighted their change of focus as a college student regardless of college pursuit influences, precollege preparation, or prior study habits. The participants assessed whether prior educational experiences prepared them for success in completing their coursework at the community college.

Precollege preparation. All the participants noted a shift in focus through a distinctive difference in their study habits since enrolling in the community college to ensure continual progress and success. Campbell, David, PJ, and Shawn provided some examples of the precollege preparation or experiences that inspired or supported their work as a college student. For example, Campbell expressed a connection between his STEM experience and being prepared for the increased workload of college academics: "My high school. It was a STEM school, so we got more math, science, engineering and all of that. And, they kind of instilled a bigger workload on us than other high schools so we would be used to college."

David's response noted how his high school experience was impactful: "I would say mainly the high school experience. Like, the other years like elementary and middle, they were good, but I feel like high school really prepared me mostly for college-level work." PJ shared an experience with a college access program in high school that inspired and supported his academic success and college pursuits: "I would say working with _____ _____. _____ _____ helped to prepare me with like preparing me to take test like the ACT, SAT, and all of that and they prepared me for the testing skills that I need for me in college." Shawn also spoke of impactful high school experiences with the following: "Yes, uh um, when I was in high school; actually, I was in a partnership for a while. So, that was a metals apprenticeship so that actually prepared me for the blueprints of the mechanical engineering side and versus the hands on was actually the machining."

Among Campbell, David, PJ, and Shawn, precollege preparation or experiences were a helpful undertaking to support their work at the community college. Their examples can help provide a picture of the kinds of support received in addition to the importance of such support and preparation for these students prior to enrollment at the community college. Their words illustrated how precollege preparation or experiences inspired or supported their ability to achieve as a college student. With all of the participants, the high school accounted for where they received their great preparation experiences. Thus, it can raise the question of whether more intentional efforts should occur specifically in the middle and elementary grades.

Study habits. All the participants stressed a shift in focus as a college student, especially relating to their study habits since enrolling in the community college, to ensure continual progress and success. Campbell, Joshua, Pete, Shawn, and Tom provided examples of a shift in study habits. Campbell explained:

> Well, in high school I wasn't that big of a studier. I'll be honest. But I've learned in college that you have to be more involved with your learning and just not waiting to learn the facts. You have to go home and look at your notes and textbooks and all that and just make sure that you're always keeping on top of your work if you are to succeed.

David also described his experience regarding study habits:

> I would say mostly that my study habits were already pretty decent in high school. I would study, you know, in high school. But, I feel I could have done more and when I came here, I definitely felt like this is college, I need to take this a lot more serious than high school. So, it is really the thought of college that really boosted my study habits and that really helped me out in all my classes.

Joshua noted that his study habits increased as he had a goal to complete college when asked what his study habits were since enrolling at SCC: "Very well, because I have to graduate. In high school, I just went straight home and played the video game."

Keith described a change over time in his efforts around studying: "Honestly, how I am now is more like a transitioning period. Through high school like not studying as much earlier on

but as I progressed . . . becoming a more studious person." When asked a clarifying question

whether the actual time spent on studying was different in college as opposed to high school,

Keith said, "Definitely, it's been increased more." Michael explained the process of developing a

new way of studying: "I had to read more and relearn study habits altogether. I had to pick up

new ones and unlearn those habits that weren't beneficial that I had picked up along the way." PJ

also shared an example of his discovery that a real focus on studying was necessary: "Um really.

I was not a big study person in high school but now I know I need to take some time out of my

day and read over chapters and stuff because really when you try to wing it, you think . . . you

think you are doing good, but when you click finish, it's a whole another story."

Steve's response regarding the difference in his study habits now versus high school

included the following:

> Absolutely. Yeah. Because in high school you're taught this is how you need to do this. This is how you need to study. And, then when you come into the college sector or atmosphere, you realize that. Well, they kind of start to teach you like you have to figure out what works best for you. And, that's when you start to excel when you realize you know, well maybe, I need to prioritize, drop these, come back to these, you know. I'm strong in this area, so, I really don't have to focus too much. Maybe, I should take time and really focus on this for a majority of the time.

Tom similarly offered personal accounts of a variation in focus that inspire a pursuit of college

degree attainment. Relating to a change in study habits and college pursuit, he shared a

realization that proved life altering:

> That's totally different because, see, I was doing what I had to do. I did poorly in high school. I barely graduated because I just wanted to get my diploma. I had no intention of going to school. I had no desire to go to school. I just wanted to graduate. So, there was no push, no personal drive for higher education. But after I got out of school that's when the drive and the zeal and working in that cotton mill forced me to think different! (Laughter). Working in that cotton mill, boy, I said "can't do this" (laughter).

Pete, on the other hand, expressed that he had more focus in college than high school: "I feel like I have studied better here in college than in high school because in high school I really wasn't focused."

To maintain academic success, all twelve of the participants employed a change in actions and understanding as a college student as depicted in their accounts. It was evident that these students acknowledged the benefit of having increased study discipline as opposed to high school. A change in focus and study habits was critical to ensure achievement for Campbell, Joshua, Pete, Shawn, and Tom, as they reported in these examples. The shift from high school to college student status expedited an apparent awareness for study habits changes that could match one's role as a successful college student.

Engagement Influence

The last emerging category from the study was Engagement Influence. This category, which can be defined as associations, collaborations, and exchanges, helped answer the research question regarding the perceived factors that influenced these students' persistence. Tinto (1988) highlighted the power that student interaction within the college environment has on a student's decision to stay or leave college. The Engagement Influence category illustrated extrinsic support measures as interactions with peers and members of the institution and college campus environment, student services activities and programs, and feeling accepted. A key component of the college experience is engagement among peers and organizational members as part of the college experience. Engagement fuels interactions in and out of class, which impact students' academic success (Tinto, 2002).

Peer interactions. Peer interaction is a primary focus of the Engagement Influence category. Such interactions can boost engagement and participants in an organization for Black males (Brooms & Davis, 2017). In this section, participants described how friendships and peer

connections developed in the educational organization that proved beneficial to the participants. Goings (2016) discovered that nurturing campus environments and the support of peers and faculty contributed to Black males' ability and motivation to embrace educational opportunities in conjunction with a natural desire to gain better avenues to support themselves and their families. Participants shared examples of how peer interactions proved helpful in their quest to continue on their education path.

Jay, Joshua, Keith, and Shawn reported the importance of peer connections and interactions as students. Jay shared the following when asked whether his college peers and peers outside college motivated or supported his pursuit to achieve his degree: "I'd say student-wise, my class, kind of motivated me to push myself." Joshua conveyed that interactions in class with students and faculty contributed to his ability to continue pursuing a degree: "Oh, yeah, because they believe in me." He also noted in a follow-up question about a specific way his peers motivated and supported him: "I want to say, it's like a challenge, you know. And, it's like they boost me over and so I have to improve even more, met that high expectation." Shawn expressed that the influence of peer interactions was a routine collaboration that proved helpful: "The interactions like . . . it's pretty much a team-orientated thing and pretty much every. . . Well, my other degrees . . . you have engineering teams, race teams, so pretty much my degree and program of study is working with a team." These examples illustrated the power of peer interactions from fellow-students as a motivating source for these African American male community college students.

Institutional support interactions. This section highlighted more examples of how interactions in the institution support persistence. Campbell, David, Pete, Steve, and Tron illustrated the benefit of institutional support through interactions. These interactions reflected

participants' willingness to engage with members of the organization to undergird their educational pursuits to achieve degree completion. The examples highlighted why the interactions provided essential support and offered insights, constructive feedback, growth opportunities, and self-reflection. Campbell shared a beneficial reason for his willingness to interact with faculty: "I have always found that it's best to interact with the instructor because they are the one's grading your projects. So, it's best to get their idea of what they want for any given assignment and project rather than just going off what you think." This example stressed the importance of seeking clear faculty expectations as a tool for effective community college students. Campbell used this knowledge to help him secure coursework success.

> David conveyed his thoughts about interactions in general with faculty and staff:
>
> I say really helpful because like everyone here is really nice and supportive. And, whenever there is a criticism it is never like insulting or anything. It is more constructive criticism that really helps me in the long run. It's nothing negative but really just things helping me become a better person and helping me to become better at what I'm trying to do.

In David's example of interaction, he captures the value of feedback as a vital aspect of his success. Such interaction was witnessed through constructive analysis of his actions in ways that he could relate to. It seemed that since David felt supported by all his instructors, he was open to their feedback and instructor, thus processing it as helpful criticism to make him a better student.

Pete highlighted the result of interactions at the college as helpful with this illustration: "Just building more character. You know, meeting new people and just . . . just being able to work with other people around my age." Pete expressed that he viewed these college community engagement opportunities as necessary and essential for helping him to develop important collaboration skills.

Steve used his interactions as motivation:

Really . . . I'll tell you exactly what it is . . . . It's really just hearing people's stories. When I realized that I had a classmate last semester that has been at this college since the 90s. And, she's been, you know, pursuing her degree and it's just taken her awhile for her, so I mean that's her course. That's her journey. So, for me that inspires me and motivates me. So, I really just like to hear people's stories and that kind of contributes toward me wanting to pursue my degree because it helps me to realize that I'm not the only one dealing with things. And, so yeah, that's one of the main things.

For Pete and Steve, interactions offered a return in regard to what they learned from other students. Pete was able to develop while meeting other college students and grow socially. Likewise, fellow students motivated Steve as a result of his interactions on campus. The power of storytelling among students fueled Steve's awareness that others were also overcoming obstacles to achieve their goals as well.

Tron emphasized the power of interactions as a fueling agent in his efforts to achieve degree completion in this manner:

And, so all of my teachers that I've had in the past and also now, I think of them as a support team. They help me with my welding if I need help. Granted, I've been here since 2016, so I should know mostly everything by now. But sometimes I struggle with one thing maybe two things and they're like this is what you have to do. This is what you need. This is how you need to set up gas tanks, everything.

Tron embraced faculty support, especially when in need. This indicated that Tron may have sensed and experienced a supportive environment through beneficial interactions with organizational members at SCC.

College campus and environment. College campus and the environment is a component of the category Engagement Influence that encapsulated one reason for these students' endurance in securing their college degrees. When asked to consider what aspects of the college campus proved helpful in their ability to continue their education, most of the participants identified specific elements that contributed to their degree progression. David, Keith, PJ, and Tron

specified how the campus/environment made a beneficial difference as a college student. David, for example, shared the following:

> I would say the campus is proven helpful because it's a pretty good and safe-feeling environment. Everyone is welcoming, and when I walk around the campus, I never feel like I'm not accepted. I'm never feeling uncomfortable and like I don't belong. Actually, I used to I just walk around the campus to explore and see the whole campus. I just don't have much time anymore. At the beginning of my program, whenever, I had free time, I would walk around the campus just so I could explore and see the whole campus and I really enjoyed just doing that as well. Getting to meet people and talking to everyone here let me learn about everyone.

Keith also pointed out why he found the campus environment helpful:

> The openness in the campus specifically allows . . . . There are so many different environments if you need to either study or just need some time to yourself. There's so many different areas that you can go and do that. Like, there's the learning center here that you can do your studies and there's a library full of information and there's so many people you can talk to. Tutors provide so much information and help. There's also areas where people grouped together. You can talk to other people in general there.

Tron underlined particular campus environments features that proved valuable as:

> Everything is really in one place. Granted you have to walk from place to place all the time . . . campus life, we have a tutoring program. We have computers that you can use. It's like as much as you need to. We have a library with nice books. Well, some of them are pretty old books but most of them are up to date. So, if you need something it's here. If you don't have a printer at home or anything like that, we have printers here. So, finding resources here at SCC. It's, not hard. You can ask your teacher. You can ask a new peer that you just met.

David, Keith, and Tron's illustrations highlighted the value of the academic setting for students. The college campus and environment proved essential to the student success of African American males. Space provided on the college campus to promote interactions, studying, and access to resources made a vital difference for the study participants' motivation and support. Attention to the formation of the college campus and environment is a necessary focus to support students seeking to maintain enrollment and academic achievement through a focus on what impacts engagement among these male students.

Feeling accepted. Feeling accepted appeared relevant as a feature of the Engagement Influence category among the participants and also proved meaningful in sustaining degree persistence. Relating to college, Strayhorn (2019) stated:

> A sense of belonging refers to social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the campus, community or others on the campus such as faculty, staff, and students. (p. 326).

In addition to seeking academic progression at SCC, feeling connected, and a part of the college was an important consideration that fueled the persistence of these students. The lack of a sense of belonging can account for why Black men leave college (Strayhorn, 2008, 2019). Students' apparent disconnections in their college experiences add unfavorably to the learning setting as the student tries to acquire an education, and these could hamper growth, directly opposing encouraging interactions at the institution (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Michael, Pete, and PJ provided examples of feeling accepted at SCC.

> Michael reported that
>
> I feel highly accepted here. SCC is way more diverse than my high school. This is something that I experienced when I came to SCC. I was one out of four Black kids in my school and no Black instructors. If any, it would have been one. Here my peers and instructors are diverse. This is something that I welcomed.

Diversity signaled a necessary aspect of feeling accepted for students like Michael. At a primarily White institution, an emphasis on celebrating culture difference can inspire feelings of support and belonging. It was important for Michael to see others who looked like him as well as others from other cultures.

Pete expressed this thought: "Oh, I feel very supported like they want me to succeed. I feel like they want me to be something and achieve my goals." Similarly, PJ shared why he felt a part of SCC: "I feel very accepted here because they're always willing to help you with open

arms anytime I need to do or get something done . . . They were right here with me." In their words, Pete and PJ illustrated the value of experiencing support and acceptance in their college experience.

Engagement influences are impacted by connections in and out of class. In what ways the students see themselves fitting into the academic setting is a worthy consideration in identifying engagement opportunities. In addition to seeking academic progression at SCC, feeling connected and a part of the college was an important consideration that fueled the persistence of the Michael, Pete, and PJ. A willingness to help these students must be obvious and ongoing to communicate a commitment to inviting engagement.

Student services activities participation. Another subcategory of Engagement Influence was the benefit of participating in student services activities outside of class time. Multiple relationship factors like aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital impacted success rates and highlighted that students' relationships and interactions with friends, family, faculty members, student affairs staff, and college support services appear to influence the successful college outcomes of African American and Latina/o community college students (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). While four of 12 participants did not participate in student services activities outside of class time due to their schedules, all participants but one found the opportunity to engage in student services activity as a meaningful use of time or supplemental support. Even though not all the study participants joined in activities, most expressed an awareness of the value of such opportunities.

For example, Keith explained why he did not participate in student services activities outside of class:

> I personally don't participate in too many programs mostly because of the way my
> schedule works, but I believe for some people it would be helpful to them, as you know,

they'd be able to. I feel like it's more for me, a personal decision of not, you know, involving myself in such groups. I mean, I mean I feel like I could, but at the same time it's just me, I suppose.

Keith presented himself as a student who did not participate in offered activities due to his schedule but also for personal reasons. During the follow-up questions about his decision not to participate, he expressed that he did not think members of the organization could do anything differently to get him to engage or join in the events. Some students do not wish to engage but continuing to reach out is a necessary step that could help such students to engage at a different time or in the future.

Tom explained his reasons for not joining student services activities outside of class time:

I feel like it's more for me a personal decision of not, you know, involving myself in such groups. I mean, I mean I feel like I could, but at the same time it's just me, I suppose. I got to go pay my light bill. I got to go buy groceries. I got to go get grocery money. I don't have time for all of that. Look, that's young folks' stuff.

Similarly, Michael explained the reason for his lack of involvement as: "I feel that it is very important; however, I have not been able to do that because of work." Michael acknowledged and realized the benefit of participating in on campus activities as a student. But, his on-call work duties made it difficult to take advantage of these opportunities.

Keith, Pete, Steve, Tom, and Michael each noted the limited time and scheduling conflicts as reasons for not participating in student services activities outside of class time. Their examples showcased a need for these students to make a choice between engagement outside class and other obligations or time restraints. Schedule considerations for events and other alternative participation options could possibly contribute to increased engagement among students in evening programs or those students who cannot participate due to work schedules.

Some of the study participants shared the benefit of participating in events and activities sponsored by student services departments despite having work and other obligations. David expressed these specific reasons:

> I would say that's important just because it can help you to grow a community as well and not just in class. You can talk in class too, but everyone's mostly focused on doing work. When you have that community, you can talk to someone about yourself whether we have problems, or we are helping out with just the classwork or just talking. Having a good time that can always help out in the long run. And, it helps to just grow bonds and attachment to others. They usually have events or something that can bring everyone together from different programs and you get to meet people from different programs as well to learn about them. So, really this school emphasized ways to helps us branch out and to meet everyone even if you're in different buildings and from different programs.

PJ shared how participating in campus activities and programs proved beneficial for him:

> It's very beneficial. Well, when I didn't . . . and I felt like I was in high school all over again. So, if you can be able to get involved and get connected then you can make your college experience better because you were able to do more than you did in high school and you'll be able to get out of your shell.

David and PJ's words highlighted that some students were able to find the time to participate in student services activities. From David's perspective, he was able to grow in community with other students from other programs. PJ expressed how attending such activities outside of class helped him to transform his college experience beyond that of high school interactions. The benefit of offering and promoting engagement at the community college is a necessary engagement tool that must meet the needs of all students, especially those who experience difficulties maintaining enrollment and academic achievement.

Pete also was a study participant who was able to engage with such activities, and he reported such involvement as beneficial:

> It is very beneficial. But it all depends on . . . like if you have the time and can fit it in to your schedule so . . . . But, it is very beneficial . . . gives you opportunities to make your college resume look good. And, it just makes you look good overall.

Likewise, Steve expressed his views relating to participating in outside class events and activities:

> The initiative is about the only thing I have . . . I'm also a member of PTK, Phi Theta Kappa, which is the honor society. I think it's very, very important. But like I've said being . . . working full time and then coming in the afternoons . . . by the time you get here all of the activity all of this stuff is shut down. And, so you don't really have an opportunity to really . . . to meet, you know, your peers or do anything like that. But, I have realized that like for the PTK membership meeting, she kind of pushed it back to about four o'clock so I was able to make that, but I think it's definitely important, you know, it helps you build relationships, you get to connect with people and, you know, you're motivated by stories and resources, you know, so.

Organizational support, college campus, and environment and feeling accepted at the college surfaced is an essential component for the participants. Such support emerged as engagement influences like peer and faculty association connections in and out of class. Also, elements that created and evoked a welcoming college campus atmosphere and feelings of acceptance for these students inspired the continued pursuit of academic success

Students' Recommendations for Engagement

Upon being asked about what they would share if they were allowed to speak to a national audience regarding how to best support African American male community college students, all the participants shared recommendations that can support engagement in the community college. A review of the recommendations underscored emerging similarities among the participants' recommendations. Such similarities included getting to know students on an individual level, providing fair treatment, support, and opportunities to thrive and belong.

Seeing individuals. Campbell, Tron Jay, and Michael suggested learning about students on an individual level. Campbell shared this specific example: "Just get to know them. Interview them; get to know them, rather than just viewing them as just a group of people. Just get to know them on an individual level. Then you can see how they operate on day-to-day basis."

Tron outlined other actions that could promote engagement:

Talk with them. Don't automatically put them in this field group or don't put them in this genre of people. If you see them, and they look like, oh this dude, has on headphones all the time, he must not care. No, that is not the case. I have headphones and most of the time I'm listening to music because I like dancing. Most of them don't put African American males or females anybody in general African American Hispanic Latino. Anybody, don't put them in a field group or genre because that might not be their thing. You can see somebody's like, oh, he wears black all the time. He must be in a gang. No, he might just like the color black or that's all he has at the moment. Just because we look like we are not in your field, your group, or genre that is not the case. We can and most of us have shown our abilities. So, don't automatically jump to conclusions.

Jay also shared an example as: "Just treat us like everyone else. Just give us opportunities. And, just treat us like everybody else." Michael offered the following recommendation for getting to know African American students:

Give us a chance! In a recent class, I did experience where the instructor made an automatic judgment off the bat and I felt like that was directed to me and one other African American. I just want people to be mindful or give us a chance to show our academic ability or prowess. Let us come in with a blank slate without passive-aggressive remarks. Give everyone a blank slate and let him or her show you what he or she is able to do without making judgments.

Campbell, Jay, Michael, and Tron all illustrated the value of seeing students as individuals. One similarity among the participants' responses is a desire to be treated fairly as members of the college organization. An important element of engagement entails demonstrating that all members of the organization are welcomed and valued. Students in the study noted this as relevant in encouraging engagement.

Support and belonging. David, Jay, Pete, PJ, Shawn, Steve, and Tom stressed the need for support and opportunities to thrive and belong. PJ, Pete, and Shawn specifically asserted the benefit of support. PJ recommended the following:

Just always be supportive because a lot of African American students, they don't have no support system so they . . . . They get down easy or they don't want to finish. They don't have nobody picking them up because everybody has those moments where they need only somebody in their corner. So I say . . . a good support system for African American students.

Pete also stressed the need for support in this example: "Better support . . . I guess if we have the visual and seeing successful African Americans, I guess it'll motivate others to see that you can do this and you don't have to be a certain type of person to do this, anyone could do it." Shawn noted support as a necessary component of pursuing education goals for these students: "Uh um, just support them and encourage them. I said, my main thing . . . I have friends who are doing different things. I'll say mainly words of encouragement to say believe that if I can do it you can do it. I mean, you just got to do it (laughter)."

A call for support of African American male community college students in their work to maintain their academic resilience was issued by three of the participants. Support examples ranged from encouragement to keep moving forward to displaying visual of successful Africans as a reminder that you can also achieve your dreams.

Jay and Tom spoke to the need for financial support using these statements. Jay reported:

> I mean off the top of my head, I'd just say support us. Like, if we need help as far as like financial-wise, just try to help as best they can. Money is a big part of college and not everybody has the money to go through it. But just giving that opportunity to people that don't have money, it goes a long way.

On the other hand, Tom stated:

> Finances is the most important thing that they need. Because, here's the thing. I don't mean to sound negative. But Black men have a hard time financially . . . getting there: The ability to pay for college and to live outside of college. Because it is one thing to pay tuition and buy a couple of books, but you still got to have a roof over a head, you still got a light bill to pay. You have a car note or you'll catch the bus. He's gotta get groceries . . . most Black men got a kid or two. And that's just the truth of the matter. Okay. . . Well. Actually, you got a good format. But I think the biggest hiccup for Black men is the finances. Because it's hard to juggle being a full-time student, a full-time home life with a family.

Financial assistance or support emerged as a specific way to support African American males at the community college. Jay highlighted reasons to consider providing funding sources for these students seeking degree attainment. Likewise, Tom shared in length how he came to a decision

that could not adequately support a family, maintain his finances, and go to school. He knew

something would suffer, so he chose not to have a family. Because he did not think he could do

both financially.

David and Steve point the need for support via creating a sense of belonging.

Specifically, David expressed a need for belonging in the community college as the following:

> I would say like, you coming here you won't have to worry about feeling judged and you
> won't have to feel like you're being prosecuted just from the color of your skin or
> something. You don't feel like an outsider or someone who is always being looked at
> because everyone here feels like they're trying. They want the best for you. They try to
> help you out at every turn. And it's very like . . . for instance, like there's tutors and all
> that stuff that can help you. All you have to do is just ask. Yeah. They're more than
> happy to help you out. And, I myself always feel like I've never felt uncomfortable here
> or feel like I'm an outsider here.

Steve noted that

> you have to create a space for them, really. That's really it. You have to create a space for
> them. You have to create . . . in creating a space, you kind of. Just, you know, do things
> that motivate them that inspire them. So, that's it. You just want to be seen and you want
> a space created for you. And, then, when you realize, because everybody needs that
> space, when you realize that you have and not just space, but a safe space. When you
> realize, you have that space, you have the instructors, you have the machine behind you,
> not really people holding your hand, but when you have that space where you can
> flourish and you have the resources in that opportunity to do so and you take it and then
> you just flourish. But, it doesn't start in a community college. It starts from as soon as the
> African American male; the little boy hits the ground. Kindergarten. It starts there. You
> know, a lot of what we see, I know I can only speak for me, as far as, like I don't know if
> you will use this, but as far as like my behavior issues, no one really, I don't feel, like no
> one really took the time to figure out what was going on. You know what I'm saying?

The data strongly suggest that a sense of belonging can contribute to the persistence of

African American male community college students. Through David and Steve's illustration, the

power of belonging is evident through welcoming spaces and engagement opportunities where

these students are recognized as a valuable member of the organization surfaced as essential for

these men's continued success at the community college. When Black males experience a sense

of belonging as a college student, they feel welcomed and connected to their learning setting (Wood & Palmer, 2014).

Participants offered recommendations to support engagement in the community college for these students. If allowed to speak to a national audience, the participants shared their perceived support avenues for Black male community college students. Recommendation similarities emerged as the need to connect with students individually while dealing with them fairly, offering them support to flourish and to belong.

Summary

The 12 men who were interviewed for this study expressed that they realized academic success at the community college despite multifaceted obstacles. This qualitative research study was undertaken to shed light on the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to reach college completion. The study drew on Harper's (2015) invitation to ponder the success of these male students through antideficit aspects to shift the emphasis from Black men's disadvantage. Individual interviews highlighted intrinsic and extrinsic support measures around the perceived academic, cocurricular, and environmental experiences African American males enrolled at a select community college seeking degree completion.

This chapter presented the research data, results, and evolving themes or categories. All of the participants revealed that certain intrinsic and extrinsic support measures made a difference in their ability to persist toward degree completion at the community college. Three categories or themes of Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence emerged, highlighting the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that enabled their own persistence or successful academic outcomes. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the project, theoretical and practical recommendations emerging from the study, its limitations, and recommendations for future possible research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative research study's purpose was to understand the perceived factors that influenced African American male students' persistence to acquire community college completion. An antideficit achievement lens to increase awareness around the benefit of an antideficit examination and focus for African American males informed the study. The method of the study entailed conducting interviews at a time and location that was convenient for each participant. Purposeful sampling of African American males at the SCC, a community college in the U.S. Southeast, captured helpful perceptions of the challenges and support systems for the male students who were interviewed. A nonrandom approach of purposeful sampling from 12 African American males who had progressed from the first to the second year of a program defined the sample size. Transcription of the recorded interviews occurred for accuracy and coding to identify emerging themes or categories. The limitations of the study included features of the purposeful sampling and the sole use of interviews as the primary data source for the study. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of findings with past literature, limitations, recommendations, and a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the study's findings linked to the literature offered in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 provided literature that illustrated the impact of barriers to academic success for African American males, including past educational experiences, disconnection in the learning environment, and the competing responsibilities of work that may deter their efforts to finish or persist in college. To lay a strong foundation for the study, Chapter 2 presented a more in-depth understanding of this problem through published literature regarding studies of African American males' ability to endure and progress in the community college setting where they historically have had low degree attainment. The reviewed literature addressed both

intrinsic and extrinsic support measures for persistence, as well as individual and organizational strategies to develop supportive structures for African American male students. Harper's (2015) anti-deficient framework offered a tool to consider how African American male students at the community college navigate success persistence in their educational pursuits, shifting the emphasis from Black male disadvantage to approaches that fuel advantage.

While multifaceted hurdles impact African American male students who reflect the lowest degree attainment at the community college, many of these men have overcome significant obstacles to achieve college success. The findings of this study supported this fact, indicating the value of examining the lived experiences of African American male students at a predominantly White community college for improving awareness of the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that lead to their successful academic outcomes. The research has identified organizational strategies that can support these students' ability to persist to achieve degree attainment in the community college. The 12 participants disclosed intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that had proven significant in their ability to continue toward degree completion at the community college. Thus, three categories or themes—Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence—emerged from analyzed data, highlighting specific intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that enabled their persistence or successful academic outcomes. This chapter examines how these findings confirm or supersede existing literature and reveal examples of the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that proved meaningful for the study's participants.

The interview questions centered on the study's conceptual foundation of the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012), which inspired a focus on elements of two of the three pipeline points and the associated essential dimensions as precollege socialization, readiness, and

college achievement. The questions reflected the categories of Academic Achievement and Precollege Engagement/Preparation, which emerged from Harper's research and that he developed to reverse the reliance on existing theories and conceptual models that examine deficits among students of color, moving to a systematic effort to unearth how these students were able to flourish. African American males' perception's materialized through specific examples and experiences centered on ways they were able to continue their college degree pursuits.

Inspired by Harper (2012), I used questions to solicit responses depicting participants' accounts of precollege socialization, readiness, and college achievement that surfaced as a benefit or a hindrance. This theoretical framework offered a vehicle for learning more about the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that may have helped these college graduates achieve their degrees. All of the participants expressed that intrinsic and extrinsic support measures had been influential in their college success, making a difference in their perseverance in pursuing their degrees. Three categories, or themes, emerged from the data, demonstrating the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that encouraged or inspired their persistence or successful academic outcomes: Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence. Each participant shared recommendations that can be used to support other African American male community college students. These recommendations centered on supporting, belonging, and being seen as individuals as the participants pursued achievement, endured a preparation shift, and embraced engagement influence. The examples provided in this chapter highlighted clear connections of support, belonging, and the importance of being seen as individuals.

Academic achievement was part of the participants' reported focus and desire to complete their degrees; it appeared to be fueled by intrinsic and extrinsic support measures under

the category of Pursuing Achievement. These support measures included the participants'

motivation for community college enrollment, occupying success strategies to navigate working

while in college, and embracing organizational support and family influence; they underscored

elements of Harper's (2012) college achievement pipeline that consists of the dimensions of

classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences.

      All 12 of the participants showed a commitment to pursue achievement despite

challenges. Researchers have highlighted environmental factors impeding or presenting

challenges for African American men as they seek educational pursuits. Wood, Harrison, and

Jones (2016), for example, revealed that students felt that working impacted their academic

success due to competing demands. Their empirical study illustrated that Black male students

navigated perceived barriers to balance school and work by adjusting to the work and school

schedules, coping with exhaustion, and possibly poor supervisor and employee relationships. All

but one of the 12 participants disclosed that he worked outside school while pursuing their

degree. Each, including the one not formerly employed, had significant responsibilities outside

of college coursework. Five participants' examples were selected to highlight their ability to

successfully balance their work schedules through a personal drive and commitment, indicating

that the ability to find a balance and maintain it is one of the strategies of successful Black male

college students.

      This dissertation study can support both students and faculty in an organization. All 12

participants engaged their reasons for enrollment in the community college as a continuing

motivating factor and as a key component for chasing academic and degree attainment. While

specific examples were used to showcase accounts of how five of the participants were able to

balance or retain commitment to their college degree pursuits, each of the African American men

in the study exhibited psychosocial variables and personal and conceptual enablers as causes for

why they sought success and well-being, which reflected their desire to thrive. Brown et al.

(2017) focused on a critical understanding of issues linked to thriving, which is a phase

indicating growth beyond mere survival. Multifaceted influential factors like psychosocial

variables, personal, and conceptual enablers surfaced as causes of human thriving. Peer and

faculty appear to influence the overall success of these students' college growth, persistence, and

achievement, and these should be additional considerations in the antideficit achievement

framework (Harper, 2012).

Organizational support linked to faculty and staff emerged as a specific extrinsic support

measure linked to Pursuing Achievement. Six of the participants provided examples of how

organization support assisted them. Jay, Michael, PJ, Pete, Steve, and Tron explained the

advantage of organizational support that supplemented their efforts to achieve degree

completion. Their examples, especially that of Tron, appear to support Brooms and Davis's

(2017) work about peer relations, faculty connections, and mentoring, which underscored the

power of academic, cocurricular, and environmental support opportunities for African American

male students to build connection while in college. Brooms and Davis's study revealed that

connections and associations with other Black male students and mentorships from Black faculty

members shaped the persistence of these students. The Pursuing Achievement (organizational

support) category also connected to Goings's (2016) study findings, which linked to the other

categories; for example, Preparation Shift (family influence) and Engagement Influence

(organizational interactions) revealed key influential factors as nurturing campus environments,

the support of peers, faculty and family, and a natural desire for better avenues to support

themselves and their families—each of which contributed to Black male undergraduates' ability and motivation to embrace educational opportunities.

Family influence. Family influence is an element of the category Pursuing Achievement, which emerged as a meaningful extrinsic support measure undergirding African American male students' capacity to keep moving forward toward degree completion. Environmental factors outside of the academic setting can support or hinder a student's ability to persist in college. Five participants, David, Keith, Jay, Michael, and Tron, shared how family influence positively impacted their college realization to achieve degree completion. Bergman et al. (2014) pointed out that critical environmental factors included financial resources, family encouragement, employer support, and substantial life occurrences, including family difficulties, not having adequate childcare, and job stresses. The participants identified environmental factors, such as family support, encouragement, and finances, as forms of assistance that they found helpful. However, all the participants, except for one, worked for income while in college. At least nine expressed they experienced certain pressures of working while in school.

Preparation shift. Literature connections tied to the research findings emerged in the Preparation Shift category. This category highlighted their change of focus as a college student regardless of college pursuit influences, precollege preparation, or prior study habits. One barrier to degree completion is the impact of prior educational experiences (Anumba, 2015; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Only four participants spoke specifically of precollege preparation or experiences that helped support their work at the community college. The 12 participants more generally disclosed that their study habits had changed to include more dedicated times since their community college enrollment.

Precollege preparation. All the participants noted a shift in focus through a distinctive difference in their study habits since enrolling in the community college; such a shift was necessary to ensure continual progress and success. Campbell, David, PJ, and Shawn provided some examples of the precollege preparation or experiences that inspired or supported their work as a college student. Strayhorn (2015) contended that all students desire to be successful when they enroll in college, but a lack of academic preparedness or an inability to navigate the environment to identify resources that can undergird their success proves to be a barrier to success. Martin et al. (2014) focused on a primary hindrance to community college students' academic success based on the student's characteristics when entering college, which this dissertation study validates. Academic preparation, or the lack thereof, surfaced as relevant.

Engagement influence. The Engagement Influence category noted interactions with members of the organization as extrinsic support measures for the participants. Engagement promotes interactions in and out of class, which influences students' educational success (Tinto, 2002). Organizational support in the form of interactions aligned with the literature in highlighting the power of interactions in the community college for these students. Five of the participants explained how interactions with people in the organization made a difference as they worked to complete their degree. Thus, the participants experienced feelings of being supported by such members, helping to encourage them. Other connections to published literature included the assertion that faculty and student interactions inside and outside the classroom around academic support promote academic integration of student success goals and organization standards (Schuh et al., 2017).

College campus and environment. A component of the Engagement Influence category is the college campus and its environment. The study's participants shared how SCC's campus

and environment contributed to their ability to maintain college enrollment. Tinto (1988), a leader in persistence awareness theory and practice, highlighted how students' interactions with the college environment may influence whether a student leaves or stays in college. Four participants noted how the campus environment made a significant difference to each of them as they worked to maintain persistence at the community college.

Feeling accepted. The Engagement Influence category also included whether African American male students felt accepted as a consideration for continuing their studies at SCC. While 11 of the 12 participants spoke of being supported at the community college, only three provide specific examples of acceptance at the college. Students' apparent disconnections in their college experiences may add unfavorably to the learning setting as the student tries to acquire an education, and these could encumber growth, directly opposing encouraging interactions at the institution (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Thus, it seems significant that the three who expressed feeling accepted at SCC were succeeding, indicating that encouraging such feelings of acceptance—in other words, actually accepting Black male students as college students—is critical to success. However, it is worth noting that Newman, Wood, and Harris, (2015) reported "that students who place greater levels of focus or effort on their studies are more likely to perceive a sense of belonging with faculty members" (p. 570).

All the participants in the study exhibited that they had taken positive steps and actions to ensure they could continue pursuing their degrees at the community college. The following are examples of such actions:

- Acted on a personal drive to succeed by making necessary and relevant use of time/choices.
- Elected to be proactive in meeting with faculty and staff.

- Chose to emphasize the positive even in difficult situations.

- Embraced the supports that were available to them at SCC.

- Realized the need to balance and prioritize obligations to leave time for their college coursework.

- Realized the advantage of peer support and supporting others.

- Acknowledged the role family played in their pursuit of college enrollment and success.

- Spoke with teachers as allies in their education.

The results of the study were not surprising given the literature. Kim (2014) conducted a case study on Black community college male students' retention and graduation rates. Like Kim (2014), this study's finding of the perceived factors that impact the continual persistence efforts of Black male students at SCC highlighted the importance their ability to balance multiple roles or obligations, including a work commitment outside of college. Wood, Harrison and Jones (2016) noted this as a result of their study titled *Black Males' Perceptions of the Work–College Balance*. Other similarities in this study's findings aligned with Kim's (2014) discovery that college supportive strategies and a positive social environment proved relevant to her participants as well. In Moss's (2019) study to examine success for African American male retention in a two-year college*,* Moss showed that Black men's desire to be successful was tied to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation fueling their ability to persist at the community college. This dissertation study also found that the participants had the personal drive and determination to succeed in achieving their goal. In contrast to the other studies, and in particular in comparisons with Moss's (2019) findings, the majority of participants noted a significant change in their study habits after becoming a college student. Additionally, this study of African American male

community college students at SCC compared to other studies stressing a continual need to undergird the success of these students through increased awareness.

Implications and Recommendations for the Field

This dissertation study implies that although African American male students are identified as having the lowest degree attainment at the community college due to complex barriers contending with the pursuit of academic success (Horton, 2015; Kotok, 2017; Lewis, 2001; Riegert, 2012; Wood & Palmer, 2015), many do successfully navigate obstacles to realize degree completion. The implications seem to be that while degree achievement is possible, it may require that Black male students have some or all of the support measures enumerated in Chapters 4 and 5, and that they may need to have some of these supportive measures offered in purposeful ways by their families, friends, faculty, college support staff, administrators. Specifically focusing on the community college setting, this study illustrated the benefit of providing support to male students in this setting as they work toward degree attainment. This study suggests implications that lead to specific recommendations outlining particular measures to be taken that other community college leaders and I can implement at our institutions (Editage Insights, 2019).

All the participants in this dissertation study provided recommendations for how to best support other African American male community college students. Prevailing participants' thoughts highlighted the need for administrators, faculty, and staff to get to know these students on an individual level, accept them fully as students, and to provide fair treatment, support, and opportunities to thrive and belong. Thus, the study's recommendations center on ways to fuel African American academic success and can contribute to specific strategies for supporting African American male students. Many of these Black men are successfully navigating obstacles to realize degree completion at the community college. However, prescriptive actions to drive

results must center on the educational organization's actions designed to keep all African American male students on their path to degree completion. Therefore, this section offers practical and forward-thinking recommendations that can be applied both at my own community college and at others despite the nongeneralizability of the study.

The participants inspired this study's recommendations for fueling African American academic success. These recommendations can contribute to the understanding of how to support African American male community college students in five critical ways:

- Build and maintain a community of belonging and awareness through student services activities and targeted professional development opportunities.

- Dispel educators' biases hindering a sense of belonging among African American male community college students through a series of student services activities and ongoing professional development opportunities.

- Expanding student, faculty, and staff mentorships as facilitated by targeted professional development opportunities.

- Foster a birth through 12th-grade belonging and awareness through collaborative, community outreach partnerships and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Providing on-going organizational support must entail providing, leading, and embracing collaborative professional development, targeted student supports and activities, and community partnerships to strengthen systems to undergird African American male success at the community college. Policies and systems should be implemented that promote and welcome greater diversity, equality, and equity throughout the organization. The following recommendations are shared to encourage collaborative and growth opportunities within the organization as well as to promote systems thinking among students, faculty and staff.

Build and maintain a community of belonging. The benefit of support emerged as one that assisted the students in this study, suggesting its importance and signaling the institution's investment in them. The recommendation to build and maintain a community of belonging connects to the finding tied to the Engagement Influence category and participants' recommendations for engagement. This category emerged among participants as a result of their feeling accepted, as well as interactions in the organization that lead to engagement as a student in that college. The Engagement Influence category undergirded a need to construct and sustain environments that support African American male community college students through a focus on how to establish and maintain a welcoming and inviting community that will supplement these students' persistence efforts as they work to achieve their educational goals.

The influence of organizational members, whether peers or faculty, illustrated that support via encouragement, motivation, or mentorship proved beneficial, relevant, and necessary among these students. Faculty, staff, and peers may hold stigmatized views of Black men that unintentionally communicate that they are not welcome or do not belong on a college campus (Harper & Wood, 2016). Therefore, program offerings, on-campus exchanges, and interactions must reflect practices that consistently communicate the value and welcoming status for these students. Baber (2018) emphasized the power of internal aspirations for postsecondary students in addition to accomplishment and well-defined pathways for organizational opportunities that birth progress through difficulties and the magnification of success. Thus, instructors should both learn about and be attentive to their students' true needs, potentially leading to interpersonal communications and educational interactions that can support success.

Administrators must promote and lead initiatives that drive and inspire the inclusiveness of African American males before and after enrollment. To offer needed support for African

American male students' calls for intentional, administratively led initiatives as a part of

institutional supports as factors that may influence the overall success of these students at the

community college (Bush & Bush, 2018). Both student services activities and professional

development options centered on building and maintaining a community of belonging and

awareness should be established or expanded in the organization. Student services activities must

be what Harper (2012) noted as "value-added engagement opportunities on campus" (p 11). This

need for engagement would also be true of the professional development offerings for faculty

and staff, and they should be focused on providing opportunities to share effective practices

already in use, discuss challenges, learn of new strategies of support, and create collaborative

solutions that inspire a community of belonging. Instructor interaction with students is another

worthy focus to support these students. Gilken and Johnson (2019) asserted that instructors have

the essential responsibility to design classrooms for the betterment of all through creating a space

of belongingness; however, community college instructors may not be accustomed to planning

classroom activities and engagement that take into full consideration the academic, noncognitive,

and social student needs as integrated aspects of learning.

Dispel educators' biases hindering a sense of belonging. African American male

students seek acceptance and open invitations to connect with members of the educational

organization. The recommendation to dispel educators' biases that hinder a sense of belonging

emerges from the value of Engagement Influence, which is a finding of this study. Participants

strongly stated recommendations for engagement. This category undergirds a need to embrace

professional development opportunities and events that can dispel an educator's biases, hindering

a sense of belonging. This focus should tie purposefully to the first recommendation to support

building a community of belonging. A specific focus of such work would be to construct and

sustain environments that support African American male students through a welcoming and inviting community that will supplement their efforts as they work to achieve degree completion.

African American males must experience the becomingness within the community college setting. One way to achieve this desired outcome is by providing what African American men need instead of what is thought to be what they need. Thus, it is necessary to identify what resources and services these men need through measures beyond interviews and surveys but also through avenues of communication like focus groups, informal conversations, and classroom visits. Interaction must be genuine to be effective. As exchanges and interactions from faculty play such an important role in the total course and college success, the consideration of Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Garcia, and Johnson's (2018) finding is necessary: The thoughtfulness of instructors to their students' actual needs facilitated supportive interactions for students.

Another category that inspired the recommendation to dispel educators' biases hindering a sense of belonging is Pursuing Achievement. The study's findings in this category linked to participants' quest for academic achievement at the community college and highlighted the importance of success strategies and organizational support as impactful intrinsic and extrinsic support measures. As these male students work to achieve academic success, considerations for eliminating factors which hinder progress is a beneficial component of nurturing belonging, which entails that faculty and staff create an atmosphere of support, confirmation, and apparent value in the organization (Keflezighi, Sebahari, & Wood, 2016). Faculty are key contenders in supporting students. Thus, faculty inspired advocacy and respect for diversity, and diverse viewpoints surfaced as positively relevant to students' willingness to engage in diversity activity and diversity challenges (Ryder et al., 2016).

Organizational culture influences interactions in an organization (Brettel et al., 2015). Having a keen awareness of influential factors that hinder or develop an educational organization remains a timely endeavor for administrative leaders. The organization must be a place where strong leadership can flourish rather than be stagnant or positional, disseminated instead of centralized, and responsive versus unyielding (Hickman, 2016, p. xi). Leaders must inspire needed change by building an awareness of current systems requiring replacement. This study's findings supported Harper's (2012) notion that members of an educational organization need to attempt to comprehend men of color's points of view to increase a sense of belonging and academic improvement. Institutional leaders must design and change, if necessary, their organizations to center on student success and achievement (McClenney, 2014). Prescriptive actions to drive results must focus on organizational efforts to identify and remove barriers to college completion for the group who struggles the most in the community college setting (Harper, 2012; Ryder, Reason, Mitchell, Gillon, Hemer, 2016).

A goal to remove barriers and strengthen supports for African American male students' links to Parks's (2005) distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Parks (2005) described problems that "can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in hand as technical" problems (p. 10). Technical problems are easier to address and can be accomplished through changes in routine. However, Parks noted that adaptive challenges are not solved as easily because they "require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behavior" (p. 10). Ultimately, expert knowledge and routine management alone cannot resolve adaptive challenges. Park (2005) stated that "adaptive challenges often appear as swamp issues—tangled, complex problems composed of multiple systems that resist technical analysis . . ." (p. 10).

Adaptive challenges warrant adaptive change. Adaptive change requires that people question their beliefs and examine the underlining reason for their actions.

An educational organization's members can acknowledge and share growth needs in settings where they are encouraged to embrace systems around transformation and transparency in efforts to support African American male students (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Furthermore, they can inspire and invite transformative leaders throughout the organization to help shift the culture for these students. Transformative leaders are suited to create fair and equable environments for all students (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). African American males would benefit particularly from such a practice. Transformative leaders support diverse populations, inspire individual and organizational change that challenge the status quo, and assist as a partner to people confronting oppression, subjugation, and discrimination (Graham & Nevarez, 2017).

Expand mentorships among students, faculty, and staff. Leaders inspire and help to develop new leaders. Based on the study's findings, one recommendation is to develop or advance mentorship opportunities for other African American male students as a position with a stipend or as a work-study assignment in the organization, which may help them particularly given that many African American males must work for pay while attending college. The benefit of expanding mentorship among students, faculty, and staff surfaced as a result of the emerging categories of Engagement Influence and Pursuing Achievement. Encouraging and empowering leaders in support of African American male students also might include energizing student leaders among this group around clearly established shared goals (Harper, 2012; Wassenaar & Pearce, 2016). Tolliver and Miller (2018) discovered the instrumental benefit of four prevailing themes, "mentorship, socialization, on-campus supports, and family and community expectations" (p. 305), which surfaced as significant in African American men's ability to

graduate from college. Mentorship can be a supplemental component of the community college's effort to provide flexible, beneficial educational options for equipping all students for advancements in education and the employment arena.

As African-America males emerged as the group reflecting the lowest student graduation rate, using a diffusion of innovation via collaborative male mentor networks may support these men—as well as other male students—in achieving degree completion. Such action can aid in removing barriers to raise academic success and degree completion. Thus, eliminating barriers to college completion through collaborative innovation via the creation and use of male mentor networks could support African American male students and aid their academic success and program or degree completion. Male mentor networks consist of minority male mentoring activities coordinated and employed also at the off-campus location during times most accessible. A key focus to influence academic success of African-America males should center on inclusive leadership to inspire effective and innovative strategies like male mentor networks.

Collaboratively exploring and addressing the problem of program completion can benefit these students. An effort to create and support male mentor networks aligns with a mutual obligation approach that calls for steps toward increased awareness of the racial divide. This approach requires accepting cultural differences and a greater understanding of how the majority and minority groups in an organized approach change and issues around race (Emerson & Yancey, 2010). Mor Barak (2017) stated that "cultural awareness and competence are essential for effective leadership in the context of diversity" (p. 224). Leaders must create spaces and encourage collaboration around these efforts.

Faculty also are essential in the process of creating conducive learning environments and fueling support of African American male students. Research shows that faculty play a critical

role in students' decisions to persist to obtain college completion. Male mentor networks would afford opportunities for African American males to connect with other men who look like them and who may have had similar life experiences while overcoming obstacles to education and economic advancement. These networks could be a component of Black male initiatives, actions, and programming that undergird African American male community college success. Brooms's (2018) study found that Black male initiatives have empowered cultural wealth, positive experiences, and student college success while reinforcing a sense of belonging through an encouraging atmosphere and a focus on Black male uniqueness, encouraging their college persistence.

Male mentor networks can cultivate the advancement of a scholarly identity among African American male students. Such an endeavor can strengthen their awareness of how future success ties specifically to their academic success (Goings, 2016). Goings (2016) stated that "Black males with a scholar identity are more willing to seek mentorship and other education opportunities to ensure their future success" (p. 59). Thus, it is likely that African American male community college students will seek out or be receptive to mentors and other opportunities to support their academic and career success. Efforts to recruit minority faculty must continue as a priority (Harris et al., 2017). Connecting African American males with others like themselves is one way to promote understanding and awareness of the challenges these students encounter in pursuit of college completion (Simmons, 2013).

An analysis of the overall positive and negative effects of male mentor networks and the projected consequences of such an adoption, which include anticipated and unanticipated, desirable and undesirable, and direct and indirect effects, is a necessary focus to strengthen the innovation. Positive and negative effects of male mentor networks include connection

opportunities for African American males with mentors in their field of interest. Interesting

current and former African American students could provide another level of support for these

students, which might be a direct consequence of developing such a network. These students

have first-hand knowledge of ways to navigate barriers to achieve course completion by sharing

success stories and experiences of coping and encouragement (Jones, 2014). Another potential

positive consequence of male mentor networks is the anticipated and desired consequence of the

collaborative networking among faculty and staff in the joint-effect to enact meaningful change

for student success. Establishing male mentor networks would offer a student organization

connection and support as well. The organization's support might also be realized through the

financial support of new organizations and clubs at the organization. Harper (2006)

recommended clubs for Black and minority students, as this is a primary vein for leadership

development and academic triumph. This effort is still necessary as organizations and clubs

provide valuable networking and leadership building for these students.

Community connection and networking avenues can be strengthened and increased as a

result of the mentor pools and male mentor opportunities (Druery & Brooms, 2019). Minority

male-centered events hosted at off-campus locations will expand outreach efforts. Creating

successful male mentor networks requires interconnectedness to foster a collaborative effort to

inspire and encourage African American males toward college completion.

Foster early childhood to 12th-grade support of African American males tied to

belonging and awareness. The participants' acknowledged limited emphasis on study habits

before entering the SCC inspired my recommendation to focus on precollege preparation tied to

study habits and linked to the theme of Preparation Shift. There is a direct link between these

students' academic success and their prior educational experiences and mindsets (Harper, 2015;

Goings, 2016). Again, research on academic barriers before postsecondary settings informs a potential path for assessing best practices for African American male students in the community college. These students' educational experiences prior to postsecondary school can underscore the academic incongruences and disconnection in the learning arenas that incorporate implicit and explicit bias; this bias is witnessed when Black children are expelled (rather than encouraged and engaged) from early childhood classrooms (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). As a result, these children miss developmental learning opportunities, which impact their current and future educational progress (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

State and national efforts have identified the value of supporting children from early childhood to establish a firm foundation for healthy development that will facilitate the embracing of current and future learning opportunities for all children. Thus, moving from conversations to action around maintaining resources and collaboration action for African American males remains essential. Bowden and Russo (2017) noted that an organization's climate dictates what members in the organization experience, thus reflecting the organizationally shared principles and beliefs that engender and strengthen behaviors generative of a positive climate and preferable organizational consequences. Therefore, to realize improvement to systems needing attention, identifying core behavioral patterns, which directly or indirectly nurture overt behaviors that could alter the success of members of an organization, is a necessary time-consuming commitment to change (Bowden & Russo, 2017).

Harper and Wood (2016) challenged educators to consider how power and privilege and stakeholder relationships inform practice, policies, and overall support that can either benefit or limit Black boys in educational settings. The challenge is how to balance all the needs equitably. While literature illustrated the importance of the learning environment, Harper and Wood (2016)

stressed the need to consider all stakeholders in understanding Black boys' lack of academic preparation before entering postsecondary education. Stakeholders must include the collaboration of family, the community, school members, and leaders to understand and address educational preparation needs (Harper & Wood, 2016). It is crucial to establish or strengthen community outreach via community engagement days to help to avert Black boys' educational failure in all academic settings.

The implementation of systems thinking is one way to support the recommendations in this study. To realize change, Cheney and Terry (2018) promoted the use of systems thinking inside an institution as a way to tackle complex challenges connected to educational advancement and to encourage systems-level change. Leaders can inspire change as the models who assess systems exhibit a commitment to realizing worthwhile change through understanding one's influences, whether conscious or subconscious (Stroh, 2015). A key component of systems thinking is the motivation of change leadership that comes as a result of more self-reflection of thought processes, objectives, and actions as well as the consciousness of one's influences on the difficulties one seeks to resolve (Stroh, 2015).

One way to promote early childhood to 12th-grade support of male African Americans and their particular needs for belonging and awareness is through intentional learning opportunities that emphasize their individuality. Early support of these students must include professional development for the educators who work with them to strengthen awareness and understanding. Allen & White-Smith (2014) highlighted the benefit and need for five key roles of a teacher education program to equip future teachers with cultural competencies and characters to transform schools and community settings. The researchers noted the need to build on existing research and current educational practices to strengthen and understand the avenues

to re-envision teacher and community education. They emphasize the interconnectedness of support systems for Black males to fuel effective educational changes. In addition to teacher education programs incorporating developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive mindfulness and practices that meet the needs of all students, a specific focus on Black male initiatives should start in early childhood and include specific curricula, which highlight the value of belonging and support of young African American boys (Wright & Ford, 2016). The shielding elements that can help most boys of color acquire foundational learning skills include initial family functioning experience, quality out-of-home care, and environmental connections, including the kindergarten classroom (Development of Boys and Young Men of Color, 2016). Thus, identifying supports both in and out of school for African American boys through collaborative efforts can prove significant (Wright & Ford, 2016).

Mentorship could benefit boys of color by inspiring empowerment. Wright and Ford (2016) argued that "African American boys can and do benefit from a variety of African American male mentors who offer exposure to a broad range of possibilities (p. 13). During the 17th Annual International Males of Color Empowerment and Retention Conference, the continual comprehensive support of men of color surfaced as vital. It encompassed the need to provide such support at an early age. Begangacha, a man of color from Shaw University, emphasized the need to promote self-healing among Black males in particular through raising awareness in school and the community using a self-love, K–12 curriculum linked to empowerment (personal communication, October 8, 2019). Begangacha stressed focusing on ways to strengthen and encourage "self-love to young people of color across different cultures and institutions" (personal communication, October 8, 2019) to promote collaborative solutions

for supporting males of color and inspire good choices, beneficial interactions, and overall high self-esteem as a way to enrich the environments around them.

Systems thinking can be used to inspire total system efficacy as leaders are invited to develop other leaders from their strengths and to nurture self-interests to ensure the total system effectiveness (Stroh, 2015). This type of thinking can be beneficial in inspiring and assisting the growth of both mentors and young African American male leaders. Following Stroh's (2015) discussion, through reflection and collaboration, organization leaders can support both the analysis and seek avoidance of possible negative longer-term consequences of well-intentioned yet insufficient or inappropriate solutions (Stroh, 2015). Implementation of change and continual support of African American males calls for an ongoing assessment of systems and a commitment to revisit the goal of the desired change through reflecting on where individuals' espoused purpose and one's current practices align in the organization (Stroh, 2015).

Future Research

African American male community college students will benefit from a continual focus on their academic success and overall well-being through expanding or continuing research on this topic. Future research can examine how new interventions, such as colleges that have become Achieving the Dream institutions, are impacting the populations that experience the greatest challenge reaching college degree completion. Achieving the Dream began in 2004 as a national enterprise funded by the Lumina Foundation with higher education leaders focused on student-centered evidence-based outcomes have built equity and excellence values (Achieving the Dream, 2019). Achieving the Dream is a non-profit organization that offers a seven-factor institutional capacity framework for wide-ranging methods for tackling the emergent needs of the field to increase successful outcomes for all students, particularly low-income students and students of color. The seven capacity or core areas are leadership and vision, data and

technology, equity, teaching and learning, engagement and communication, strategy and planning, and policies and practices (Achieving the Dream, 2019). Such recommended research would engage a comparative study of male students of various races to determine the potential benefits for those who are most at risk.

Additional research can focus on administrators, faculty, and staff to investigate how they are approaching, embracing, and supporting African American male community college students as well as to determine their perceived needs as vital education partners for these students. Administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders can use the current and extended research to continue efforts of support, acceptance, and collaboration for African American men enrolling in the community college.

Furthermore, research could be expanded to include faculty studies, such as a case study on faculty perception in their quest to support these students in the community college. With a focus on mentorship, additional studies could examine the perceptions of minority faculty in the community college and, specifically, of African American male faculty. In consideration of this study's findings and my recommendations highlighting the benefit that these college students may reap from mentors, further studies could explore mentoring by African American male faculty or other minorities. Given the higher number of African American males enrolled in North Carolina community colleges versus a lower number of African American male faculty, identifying such faculty willing to serve as mentors could present a challenge. Thus, an examination of the advantages and challenges associated with mentorship for African American male faculty or other minority mentors could capture their voices. Such a study might document whether mentorship emerges as a burden for this faculty population, how these mentors balance such service, and whether mentorship impacts their faculty duties negatively.

Other studies could yield additional information and recommendations of support for African American male community college students. For example, a comparable study to the one completed for this dissertation research might examine other Southeastern community colleges or community colleges in other regions of the United States. Such a study could determine whether similar findings would arise in such institutions, making possible more generalizable findings and research implications. Certainly, such a study could include larger, smaller, or rural institutions, as well as four-year organizations.

Conclusions

While many African American males come to the community college, a significant number of them never complete a degree program. Nonetheless, despite dire statistics, the research on this topic is limited. This dissertation study provides a deeper understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that have proven influential in helping African American males maintain and continue their academic progress once enrolled to achieve an educational credential at the SCC. The complex challenges African American male community college students face can quickly derail their dreams and goals. Recognizing intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that assist these students in the community college setting can propel them to educational success, decrease the achievement gap, increase their employability, and support their educational and career goals (Davis, 2014; Wood, Newman & Harris, 2015).

Harper's (2012) anti-deficient framework was a tool for identifying the persistence influences of African American male students in their educational pursuits at the SCC. The focus shifted from Black male disadvantage to approaches that fuel their ultimate success. All of the participants identified intrinsic and extrinsic support measures, leading to three thematic categories of Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence. They

reported that these self-identified support measures made a difference in aiding them to persist toward degree completion.

Taking the time to hear the lived experiences from African American male community college students is the first necessary step in identifying what may supplement and sustain their efforts. It is critically essential to align resources and supports that are relevant and meaningful to avoid merely going through the motions for students who have historically struggled to realize their academic goals consistently. Community college administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders, including community members and policymakers, must move beyond single programs to comprehensive nationwide undergirding support, beginning from early childhood through secondary education for these students. All of the participants expressed that intrinsic and extrinsic support measures had been influential in their college success, making a difference in their perseverance in pursuing their degrees. Three categories, or themes, emerged from the data, demonstrating the intrinsic and extrinsic support measures that encouraged or inspired the African American males' persistence or successful academic outcomes: Pursuing Achievement, Preparation Shift, and Engagement Influence. The recommendations of 12 African American male community college students provide insight into support avenues for other such students. The organization' commitment to service for these students can be observed through the following efforts:

1. Building and maintaining a community of belonging and awareness for African American male community college students using value-added student services activities and targeted professional development options.

2. Dispelling educators' biases hindering a sense of belonging among African American male community college students through a series of student services activities and ongoing professional development opportunities.

3. Expanding mentorships among students, faculty, and staff as facilitated by targeted professional development opportunities.

4. Fostering a birth to12th-grade belonging and awareness through collaboration/community outreach/partnerships and ongoing professional development opportunities.

These recommendations stress the importance of offering these students support, belonging, visibility, and respect as individuals who are pursuing achievement, enduring a preparation shift, and embracing engagement influences. Clear connections among support, belonging, and the importance of African American community college males being seen as individuals reveal the continual need to establish collaborative actions and solutions to compliment the resiliency of these students.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

Dear Phygenia,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 19-052   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

From: Alexa Edwards
Sent: Tuesday, June 25, 2019 9:05 AM
To: Phygenia Young
Cc: Kevin Osborne
Subject: IRB Approval Notice 2019-03

Phygenia,

Thank you for your email on June 11th, 2019, notifying our office of your plans to conduct research on the campus of [Southeastern Community College (SCC)]. As described in your IRB application, you are conducting a qualitative study on the perceived factors that influence African American male students' persistence to acquire college completion focusing on the academic, cocurricular, and environmental intrinsic and extrinsic support systems or measures. As part of your study you intend to conduct interviews.

Following a review of the submitted Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, your study has been approved. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal. Also, the Provost, [redacted], has approved your request to conduct the study at SCC. For your records, attached is the signed IRB application.

Please note, all research must be conducted in accordance with the approved IRB application. You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented.

We wish you the best in your educational pursuits.

"Education is all a matter of building bridges."
-Ralph Ellison

Alexa Edwards, Ph.D.
Learning, Assessment, and Planning Coordinator
Office of Strategic Innovation and Effectiveness

Appendix B: Participant Email Solicitation

Dear [Southeastern Community College (SCC)] Students,

My name is Phygenia Young, and I am the Department Chair of Human Services and Teacher Education and the Senior Administrator of the XYZ Center at SCC; I have been a part of the SCC family for almost 20 years. I am collecting information about African American male community college experiences as part of my Doctorate of Education requirements.

This project was developed to support my goals of supporting student success. As such, I seek volunteers to participate in a research study. One primary goal of the study is learn from successful students how best to promote the educational success of more African American males. Another primary goal is to inform community college practices that strengthen support systems based. Participant information will be used to benefit other students, faculty, and staff in the community college.

African American males often experience unique challenges while pursuing degree completion, yet many have been successful in meeting their educational goals to reach graduation. Using interviews, I want to understand what factors influenced African American male students' ability to remain in the community college to complete their degree. Would you be interested in participating in the study? To participant, you need to be:

- 18 years old or older
- In the final two semesters of your degree work or
- Enrolled in your second year toward degree completion

Please remember that participation in this study is optional, it has no effect on your enrollment or degree completion at the community college, and you can discontinue your involvement at any time with no negative effects for you. There are minimal risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

- A breach of confidentiality and privacy is a potential risk for participants of this study. Steps to prevent violation of confidentiality and privacy will include labeling data under the participant's self-selected pseudonym, storing written data in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Digital and/or electronic data will be stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer.
- Interviews will be conducted in a private meeting location on campus. There is minimal risk with this study as you are asked to reflect on past experiences. However, there is the potential to experience some discomfort if you share concerning or troubling memories.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

The study's interview questions seek to highlight two of Harper's three pipeline points and the associated essential dimensions as precollege social engagement and preparation and college achievement. The six out of eight researchable dimensions of achievement [familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences (Harper, 2012, p. 7).] inspired the interview questions.

1. What is your major or program of study?
2. How old were you when you started college? How old will you be when you graduate?
3. How many times have you enrolled in the community college, or is this degree work the only time?
4. Why did you decide to enroll in the community college?
   a. Who, if anyone, was influential in helping you pursue college (family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc.?) **(Precollege Social Engagement and Preparation)**
   b. How supportive is your family (spouse, children, parents, etc.) of you pursuing a degree at the community college? **(Precollege Social Engagement/ Preparation/College Achievement)**
   c. What prior educational experiences prepared you for success in completing your coursework at the community college? **(Precollege Social Preparation)**
   d. How have your study habits impacted your ability to continue your educational success at the community college? **(Precollege Social Engagement/ Preparation/College Achievement)**
   5. Do you have obligations outside being a student?
   a. [If so] What are some of them? **(College Achievement)**
   b. (If applicable) Reflecting on your outside responsibilities, do they in any way make pursing your degree more challenging? If so, how have you been successfully able to make this adjustment? **(College Achievement)**
6. Are people supportive of you, as an African American male community college student, completing a college degree? If not how were you able to navigate this challenge? **(Precollege Social Engagement/ Preparation/College Achievement**
   a. How do your interactions in class with students and faculty contribute to your ability to continue pursuing your degree? **(College Achievement)**
   b. Do you find it beneficial to meet with your instructor outside of class time? Why or why not? **(College Achievement)**
   c. How have your college peers and your peers outside college motivated or supported your pursuit to achieve your degree? **(College Achievement)**
   d. How accepted do you feel by your college instructors, staff, and administrators? What about the college campus has proved helpful in your ability to continue your education? **(College Achievement)**
   e. How beneficial is it to attend or participate in campus activities and programs? Why? **(College Achievement)**
7. What has been the most influential factor that has helped you to continue attending classes to achieve your degree at the community college? **(College Achievement)**

8. If you were able to speak to a national audience, what would you tell them about how to best support African American male community college students?

The interview consists of eight primary and a series of open-ended sub-questions. Prior to the study's actual interviews, a field test provided information for revising the final questions.

Appendix D: Emerging Categories of Academic Achievement and Precollege

Engagement/Preparation

1. College Achievement
2. Being Supportive as AAM Community College Students
3. Importance of Peer Connections
4. Most influential factors
5. Organizational Support:
    • Faculty
    • Outside of Classes
6. Feeling Accepted
7. Interactions/Support of Others
    • Importance of Peer Connections
    • College Peers
    • Outside Peers
    • Influence of friends
    • No or limited college peers
8. Interactions w/Faculty
    • Outside of class support or assistance
9. Support of Staff
10. Success Strategies
11. College Campus Environment
12. Diversity
13. Competing Demands/Outside Responsibilities
    • Need to balance
14. Challenges
15. Resiliency of AAM in CC
16. Dedication & Commitment
17. Motivation
18. Enrollment
19. Overall Success Factors
    • Preparation
20. Achievement/Student Services Activities
    • Hindering involvement
21. Preparation
22. Social Engagement
23. Precollege Social Engagement
24. Influenced Decision to Purposed College
    • Family Support
    • Family Influences: Father, Grandparents, Mother, Siblings, Stepparents
    • Lack of family support
25. Teachers Prior to College
26. Reasons for Selecting the Community College
    • Influence/Power of Education(Benefits of Education)

27.   Lack or Limited Preparation
28.   Major Change in Study Habit