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Jerrel A. Wade

August 2014

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY: A CASE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL
EXPERIENCES AND SUCCESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT A
TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Dissertation Presented to the
Faculty of the Department of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Despite increased numbers of African American male students pursuing higher education, their academic levels of achievement continue to lag behind other ethnic and gender groups (NCES, 2003). The gap is even greater at the community college, where dropout and failure rates double those seen among African American males at the four year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2004/2009). The purpose of this qualitative study was to help better understand the experience of the African American male community college student and assess the academic, psychological, and social factors that contribute to their success. The goal of this study was not to simply evaluate factors that lead to student success, but to more carefully understand how students make sense of their successes and failures.

Using Mason's (1998) model of African American male urban community college persistence as a conceptual framework, this case study observed the interactions of a group of approximately 21 African American male students during their meetings as part of minority-male initiative program over the course of an entire semester. To gain further insight on the topics and challenges addressed in these group meetings, three students in the program were interviewed at multiple points throughout the semester to provide more detailed accounts of their educational experiences. By following these students closely for an entire academic semester, a holistic view of all factors that aided or handicapped these students' success was recorded. Results from the study found that factors the

students' cited as most relevant to their success were participation in a mentoring program, peer support, and faculty and academic advisors. Participants cited class completion, pre-college preparation and guidance, and a lack of confidence in their own academic abilities as the major hindrances to their success. The data also revealed that stereotype threat and family involvement could exert either a positive or negative impact on their college experience.

Based on these findings, several of the key recommendations for community colleges focus on increasing African American males' utilization of campus resources and services earlier in their college career. Most students in this study reported that the support services provided by the college were sufficient and helpful. However, students failed to utilize many of these services until after being enrolled for several semesters, which appeared to have a negative impact on their academic success. Findings from this study also suggest the structure of retention programs for African American males should include more one-on-one mentoring sessions. Several students were uncomfortable expressing their individual struggles in a group environment, so it is important for these programs to put efforts in place to create a strong mentor-mentee relationship that encourages individual attention. Collectively, these efforts could help increase the number of African American males that earn a credential or successfully transfer from the community college.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Community colleges are the gateway to postsecondary education for many minority, low income, and first-generation students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). Formed with the intention of helping organize and train the workforce, the community college today has become a means to save money for earning academic transfer credit, as well as offering vocational education and training (Cohen & Brawer, 2009). In addition, the role of the community college system in serving a greater number of academically gifted students has made the institution an even more influential factor in American higher education.

In the state of Texas, the community college system is arguably the most important aspect of higher education due to its diversity by serving a broad range of educational goals. In an effort to serve the state's mission of providing academic and vocational programs, continuing adult education, developmental coursework for disadvantaged students, workforce development programs, and adult literacy programs, the community college is charged with a multi-faceted aim to provide higher education to any and all individuals (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2008). With that in mind it is no surprise that community colleges make up 57% of all higher education enrollments in the state of Texas, and 78% of all minority enrollments (Kever, 2010). Besides their open admission policies, the affordability of Texas community colleges makes the option more attractive to many Texas residents seeking higher education. In the 2011-2012 academic year, the average annual cost of in-state tuition for

a Texas community college was \$2,743. In comparison, the average annual cost of in-state tuition for a Texas public school was \$7,204 and \$21,780 for an independent institution (THECB, 2012). A study conducted by the National Student Clearinghouse found that 78% of all bachelor degree completers in the state of Texas in 2011 had previously enrolled at a community college, which ranked as the highest total in the nation and further solidifies the value of the community college system in the state (Lederman, 2012).

Because community colleges are all-serving, the multi-faceted scope provides challenges in regards to retention and graduation (Craig & Ward, 2008). The challenges are increased among African Americans. In their 2011 report, College Complete America found that nationally only 15% of African American students completed a one-year certificate in less than two years. Furthermore, only 7.5% completed a two-year associate degree within three years. In the state of Texas, the numbers lag well behind the national averages. Only 3.8% of African American students complete a certificate within two years, and 5.9% complete an associate's degree within three years (College Complete America, 2011). These dismal completion numbers are further compounded by the lack of access to college for many African American students and the remediation cycle many find themselves in. In the fall 2011 cohort, African American students only made up 13.7% of enrollments at public Texas community colleges (THECB, 2013). This lagged behind White students (38.1%) and Hispanic students (35.6%). Sixty-seven percent of African American students that enter the two year college need remedial coursework, and of that percentage only 14.4% completed the remediation cycle within

two years (Complete College America, 2012). Being stuck in the remediation cycle can lead to extra expenses and frustrations for students, due to taking and re-taking classes that do not count towards transfer credit. This in turn contributes to students leaving the institution. Considering the open access mission of public community colleges in Texas, the low rate of African American students accessing higher education combined with the high rate of failure once they get there, is alarming.

In regards to the troubling numbers for African American students as a whole, the specific picture for African American males is even bleaker. African American males have the highest dropout rate among every racial and gender subgroup (Wood, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2004, 2009) notes that 11.5% of African American males drop out of college in their first year. Specific to the community college, over 25% leave in their first year. Data from the Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS, 2003/2009) found that 57.8% of Black males will drop out within 3 years of entering the community college. In contrast, 53.2 % of Latino males, 55.6 % of White males, and 76.7 % of Asian American males will persist or attain a degree within the same time frame.

In the state of Texas, African American males comprised 4% of associate degrees, 3.1% of bachelor's degrees, 2.5% of master's degrees, and two percent of doctoral degrees. In comparison, White males comprised 28.3% of associate degrees, 31.9% of bachelor's degrees, 26% of master's degrees, and 29.3% of doctoral degrees (THECB, 2003). African American males graduated with a college degree at only 36.1% rate, the lowest among the 2007 cohort (NCES, 2012). African American males also lag behind

African American females in college going rates and persistence. African American female graduates of Texas public high schools in FY 2012 went directly into public and independent higher education at a 55.5 percent rate, versus 44.5 percent of African American male graduates (THECB, 2013).

The data for African American males is not all troubling, however. Over the past 30 years, African American male student enrollment in higher education has increased (NCES, 2010). In 1980, 19.7% of African American males aged 18-24 were enrolled in a college or university. That number increased to 29.7% in 2008. While this growth in enrollment could be dependent on several factors, an ongoing effort to increase African American male achievement levels has been an increased focus in higher education and contributing factor to the this success (Foster, 2004). Unfortunately, the increase enrollment has not equated to proportional gains in persistence and completion.

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of this study is to help better understand the experience of the African American male community college student, by closely following and observing a group of African American male community college students over the course of an entire semester. The goal of this study is not to simply evaluate factors that lead to student success, but understand how and why students deal with their successes or failures. How are African American male students able to deal with the stresses associated with their entire community college experience? What are the psychological ramifications associated with their academic, social, and goal attainment?

The study will attempt to take into account the whole experience an African American community college student goes through, not just specific factors or programs. While many studies have addressed the issue of African American male persistence, most have examined a specific factor or time of reference during the student experience to base their research on. By observing and monitoring students through various reference points, a holistic view of all factors that aided or handicapped a student's success can be recorded. This in turn can help one better understand the richness of the African American male experience at a community college, and in turn help understand why this group has so many issues with persistence and potentially highlight models for success. The guiding research question for this study was:

1. What do African American males identify as the primary facilitators and barriers to their success at the community college?

In evaluating this question, this study will look to examine the impact caused by such factors as socioeconomic status, psychological obstacles, social interactions, academic support, and other elements as cited in the literature and exposed in the study.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

The following literature review will examine factors shaping the experiences of African American males at community colleges. The review will begin by examining the barriers African American males face, and evaluate the challenges and societal shortcomings that impact this population's chances of success and persistence prior to entering the community college. The review will then examine the characteristics of African American males at the community college, and the challenges as well as causes of success associated with their experience. A brief review of minority male initiatives and factors effecting successful implementation of these campus-based initiatives will follow. Finally, the theoretical framework section highlights foundational retention and persistence theories and the importance of cultural capital in shaping the college experience of African American male students. The review will also describe the specific retention model that guided this study, as well as critically examine the model to ensure a complete picture of persistence and success within this population is addressed in the research.

Pre-college Factors Impacting the College Success of African American Males

To better understand the shortcomings of African American male students at the community college, it is important to examine trends that start at the K-12 level and highlight African American male struggles. In many instances, the reasons so many African American males struggle in higher education can be traced directly to failures in their K-12 experience. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES,

2003) more African American students have completed high school and gone to college, have increased levels of parental education, and have seen decreases in individuals living below the poverty line. Despite these gains progress has been uneven, and African American students still lag behind other ethnic groups. While 2010 was the first year African American males graduated high school at a rate above fifty percent (52%), they still trailed Hispanic males (60%) and White males (78%) (Schott Report, 2012). In Texas, African American males graduate at 53% but trail Hispanics by 2% and Whites by 22%.

The struggles of many African American males at the K-12 level, according to Ogbu (1978) can be attributed to cultural differences from the majority population. To a large extent, African American students' cultural backgrounds differ in significant ways than the students that make up U.S. secondary and postsecondary education (Tierney, 1999). In his research, Ogbu examined African American males in K-12 to determine how culture affected their educational experiences. His study analyzed academic experiences among different racial and economic groups compared to African American males, and he asserts that the status of African Americans and other low achieving minorities and their attendant perceptions of differential rewards for equal effort result in lower task involvement and low achievement. In essence, in his work African American students did not feel they fit in or received equal treatment as their peers. Because of this, it should not be assumed or expected for African American students to sever their communal ties nor be easily able to transition to the dominant culture.

To help better explain how to address this transition, Bordieu (1986) introduced the term cultural capital. By his definition, Bordieu explains this as “the set of linguistic and cultural competencies individuals usually inherit and sometimes learn (p. 246).”

Bordieu adds that by understanding and investing in cultural capital, policymakers and analysts are forced to communicate about what students need if they are to gain access to and graduate from postsecondary institutions (Tierney, 1999). Rather than view the academic world as a place into which students need to fit and assimilate or face departure, investing in cultural capital views education as ripe for reinterpretation and restructuring. Not only must students fit into the academic culture, but educational organizations must also accommodate for and honor students' cultural differences.

Understanding race and its role in the overall societal shortcomings that African American males face is a vital piece in understanding the challenges this population faces in regards to educational attainment. One must further examine why not only academic challenges arise, but how issues socially integration can make it more difficult for minorities to achieve. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is derived from racial formation theory which presumes a process involving the creation, inhabitation, transformation, and destruction of racial categories (Omi & Winant, 1994). According to Omi & Winant race is a consequence of social structure and cultural representation. The dominant group then proceeds to establish a society in which they are privileged and those who are subjugated have little or no privilege at all. The society is structured in such a way as to convince all or almost all to believe that this dominant/subordinate relationship is the natural order of things. CRT helps explain the cause and impact of the majority to minority relationship,

and further delves into how this relationship impacts the educational framework. This theory will be more deeply examined in the theoretical framework section of the review.

Social and Economic Factors

The struggle for many African Americans is rooted in social and economic inequities, and this in turn impacts their role in higher education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Senior Program Associate for Access and Inclusion, the two-year college often represents African American male's first experience with post-secondary education due to the lack of admission standards and low price of tuition (Lee, 2008). However, African American male retention is more difficult at community colleges because African American men who enroll at two-year institutions tend to be more economically disadvantaged and come from K-12 backgrounds that do not sufficiently prepare them for college (Lee, 2008). More African Americans attend low performing schools than Whites, and African Americans tend to drop out of high school in disproportionate numbers (Lee, 2008). Furthermore, for many African American males the community college serves as their last opportunity for obtaining a degree beyond a high school diploma (Bush & Bush, 2005).

However, other socioeconomic inequalities play a role in the struggle for African American males and their success in higher education. One such being the high proportion of African Americans that are first generation college students. A 2010 study by the Department of Education found that 50% of the African American college population is made up of first-generation students. The National Center for Education Statistics released numbers in 2010 that broke down the educational levels of parents of

current college attendees. Minority groups made up the largest demographics of students with parents that had a high school education or less, with 45% being parents of African-American students.

In the community college, roughly 44% of students that enter are first-generation college students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010).

Approximately 36% of first-generation community college students are minorities, with 41% of this population being African American (Kennamer, et al., 2010; Nomi, 2005).

First-generation community college students tend to face greater financial problems, have family responsibilities, face greater social and economic challenges, are less likely to receive any financial support from parents for college related expenses, and are likely to be a minority. Studies have shown for many decades that low income and minority students are strongly influenced by the availability of financial aid and those who cannot afford college are very likely to drop out (Nomi, 2005). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Position Statement on Remedial Education (2000), the majority of this population represents students with inadequate basic skills, limited classroom experiences, insufficient study skills, and potential language barriers. In regards to first generation students, they may be less prepared than similar students whose parents are highly educated and can make the kinds of informed choices that potentially maximize educational progression and benefits (Lynch, 2013). In essence, many African American community college students come from backgrounds lacking informed choices about higher education, academic fundamentals, and would be considered at-risk students.

Another societal shortcoming that plagues the African American community, and impacts education, is the overall lack of family involvement; particularly the lack of African American males in the family structure (Lee, 2008). Only 16% of African American households were married couples with children, the lowest of all racial groups in America, while over 50% of African American children lived in mother only households in 2004, the highest of all racial groups (Coles & Green, 2009). The out-of-wedlock birth rate among African Americans today is 73%, three times higher than it was in the 1960's (Horowitz & Perazzo, 2012). While it is unfair to assume involvement may be lacking simply because a household lacks a male presence, research has suggested the lack of a male presence does have negative impact on children in the household. Children who live with only one parent, usually their mother, are six times as likely to be poor as children who live with both parents (Horn, 2002). As of 2010, 11.5 million African Americans in the U.S. (27.4% of the African American population) were living in poverty (Horowitz & Perazzo, 2012).

In addition, research has found that children raised in fatherless homes are more likely to suffer more emotional, behavioral, and intellectual problems resulting in a higher risk of dropping out of school (Barber, 2000; Biller, 1971, 1974, 1982, 1993; Biller & Solomon, 1986 as cited by Eastin, 2003). Children raised in fatherless homes are far more likely to eventually engage in criminal behavior, than their peers who are raised in two-parent homes. These trends, connected to a lack of parental and male involvement, impact African American households at an alarmingly disproportionate rate. Although African Americans only make up 13% of the entire U.S. population, they

accounted for 48.7% of all arrests for homicide, 31.8% of arrests for forcible rape, 33.5% of arrests for aggravated assault, and 55% of arrests for robbery in 2010 (Horowitz & Perazzo, 2012).

These statistics are relevant to the education setting because research has found that family involvement is a key component in helping students prepare for college (National PTA Legislative Conference, 2006). Adolescents whose parents are involved in their academic and social activities have lower rates of delinquency and higher rates of social competence and academic growth. Youth whose parents are familiar with college preparation requirements and are engaged in the college going process are most likely to graduate high school and attend college. Furthermore, youth whose parents have high academic expectations and who offer consistent encouragement for college have positive student outcomes (National PTA Legislative session, 2006). Relevant to higher education, students with higher grades tended to view their parent/family interactions as beneficial (Appel-Silbaugh et al., n.d.). In addition, data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007) found that students are more successful when their parents and family members are involved in their higher education experience.

African American Males in Community Colleges

The lack of cultural connection, social, psychological, and economic issues that are experienced at the K-12 level tends to follow African American students to higher education and impacts their experience. A study conducted by Museus & Quaye (2009), highlighted the experience of low SES minorities at a predominately white institution (PWI). The study investigated the struggles these students have to deal with in regards to

cultural assimilation, and having to buy in to new cultural environments to achieve success. Departure from the institution is the end result if one cannot assimilate to the dominant campus culture. The study found minority students do face challenges with assimilation at PWI's, particularly the struggle of cultural dissonance versus assimilating. While Museus & Quaye's study focuses on the four-year population, similar issues of integration at the two-year level are addressed in a study by Flowers (2006). Flowers' study argues that community colleges do not do enough to enhance the academic and social culture for African-American males. Because of this, African American males at two-year colleges "were more likely than other students to report feelings of isolation, experiences of insensitivity, and inadequate and inappropriate student-faculty interaction experiences on campus (p. 283)."

While studies such as Flowers' are in place to address persistence at the community college, literature on African American male community college success is limited with a majority of it written as unpublished doctoral dissertations (Wood, 2010). Furthermore, the experience of African American males in higher education is rarely distinguished between community college and four year universities (Wood, 2012). It is assumed the experiences and what leads to student success for these students is consistent across institutional context. However, further examination to specify the differences between African American male experiences at community colleges versus four year universities is needed in order to dispel the notion that the experiences are the same. Understanding the community college population's characteristics is also needed in order to better create student success initiatives. The reality is students with certain

characteristics are less likely to be retained, graduate, or transfer (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

A study conducted by Wood (2010), examined the characteristics of African American males at community colleges, and data from the study brought to light the differences between the two-year and four-year college population. Using data from the 2004 BPS, Wood identified that African American males at community colleges were older, were 555% more likely to have dependents, more likely to be married, and were 46% less likely to have a high school GPA above 3.0 or have taken advanced coursework in high school, than their four-year counterparts. Parents of two-year students were 31% less likely to have earned a post-baccalaureate degree, and two-year students were 73.5% less likely to earn a bachelor's degree. African American males at community colleges were also more likely to delay their enrollment. An examination of African American males by institutional type found key differences related to student social integration (Flowers, 2006). Specifically, African American males in the community college had lower social integration than their four-year university counterparts, and were less likely to engage in campus activities and extracurricular programming.

In further research addressing African American community college students, Wood and Turner (2010) interviewed 28 student subjects and found faculty demeanor is important to how an African American male will interact. Characteristics highlighted were a friendly demeanor, checking in on student progress, listening to student concerns, and encouraging student success. It is fair to note such interactive tactics are not exclusive to aiding in African American male success, but important to note these areas

were highlighted as important for this cohort. Wood and Palmer (2013) investigated the personal goals of African American males in community colleges. In their study, they found African American males were more concerned with extrinsic goals (such as financial prosperity) as opposed to intrinsic goals. They viewed college as an ends to a means, and not necessarily as an opportunity for personal growth. This study provided context for how community college officials can use these goals to facilitate academic and psychosocial development. Further research by Wood (2012) investigated the effect of academic variables on six year persistence and attainment among black male students in community colleges. In this study, Wood found students' grade point average, receiving an incomplete, repeating courses for higher grades, withdrawing from courses after the add or drop deadline, and informal meetings with faculty, are variables that serve as significant predictors of African American male persistence and attainment in the community college.

A study by Talbert (2012) found that African American males at community colleges felt interactions with faculty, staff, and other students affirmed and supported their academic endeavors. In his study, Talbert found that family support and support from the institution were particularly important to the academic success of African American male students in community college. This support was particularly needed due to the challenges students dealt with in regards to social integration and the stereotype threat that came with it. Stereotype threat is defined by Fischer (2010) as the extra pressure minority students face to outperform the typically negative connotations about their academic prowess. That burden causes pressures that lead to higher dropout rate

among minorities. In Talbert's study however, stereotype threat was actually found as an ally to persistence. African American male community college students used negative societal stereotyping as a motivation for success, as opposed to a hindrance, and credited that with helping with their motivation to succeed.

Taking all of these factors into account, differences in social status and academic preparation are clear and help explain why many African American males struggle at the community college. As previously mentioned, this population tends to have characteristics that generally are not conducive to college success. Further exploration into these and other factors that impact African American male students' success will be further examined throughout the review.

Minority Male Initiatives (MMI)

In response to the many complex issues surrounding African American male persistence and success, many postsecondary institutions have implemented Minority Males Initiatives (MMI). MMI's serve as preventive and intervening measures, implemented by institutional practitioners, to enhance the success of minority males (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Institutions implementing mentoring programs can help African American students with self-identity and understand their roles as college students (Kingsbury, 2007).

Measures to address the achievement gap between African American students compared to other students have been ongoing, and increased through the 1990's. However, such measures were not always in place. Wood (2012) found in his research that dating back to the late 1960's and 1970's, many community colleges did not have

intervention techniques to identify struggling students and thus provide them with proper academic assistance. Because these techniques were not in place, the role of faculty was to help identify troubled students and be the bridge to help keep students engaged and transition to success. Wood maintains in his present research that faculty interactions are a “common sense” approach and the key to helping African American males maintain an environment of success.

According to the AACC’s (2014) Minority Male Student Success Program database, 82 institutions have some sort of MMI program in place with 80 if these being community colleges (see Appendix B). These initiatives are typically created to provide mentoring programs, service and community opportunities, leadership and professional development activities, policies, and conferences related to improving postsecondary success for minority males (AACC, 2014). Harper and Quaye (2007) explain mentoring programs help foster students’ attitudes toward their campus and reduce social barriers students may face. Under-represented students may lack efficacy and awareness as to what is expected of a successful college student. Therefore, a professional mentor could prevent dropout and hence create a greater number of available career options (Davis, 2007).

Kuh (2005) offers a framework for the development of mentoring programs that can create a supportive campus environment. The four-pronged approach includes an institutional emphasis on providing students the support they need for academics and social success; positive working and social relationships among different groups; help for students in coping with their non-academic responsibilities; and high-quality student

relationships with other students, faculty, and the institution's administrative personnel.

The criteria set by Kuh contains the essential elements that will assist a mentoring African American males by enhancing the mentoring relationships between students, faculty, staff, and/or administrators who provide academic, social, and personal support for students (Ray, Jr. et al., 2009).

Studies on mentorship programs have yielded varying results that can help shape the direction of successful MMI's. A study by Brittian et al. (2009) compared students in a mentorship program versus students who were not in a program. While students in the mentorship program did report the program provided opportunities for personal growth, motivation for success, and social and emotional support, it was noted that non-mentorship students had higher GPA's than the mentorship group and felt their support and well-being on campus was satisfactory. The study noted, however, that African American students may put off seeking help until it is necessary if they believe mentorship programs are only for those who are suffering academically. Furthermore, although the average GPA for mentorship students was lower those students initiated more campus involvement through clubs, organizations and leadership opportunities. Involvement in the program helped students build networking opportunities and become more connected with the institution.

A study conducted by Lee (1999) addressed the issue of mentor-race compatibility. Several authors point to the importance of matching mentor-mentee characteristics when structuring mentoring programs (Leon et al., 1997; Sloan, 1996; Williams, 1997). These similarities serve as a foundation for developing effective

communication and trust so that the relationship can be sustained over time (Lee, 1999). However in his study, Lee found that of these matching characteristics, that African American students in his focus group felt having a mentor in their career field was more important than having an African American mentor. Students also felt face-to-face interactions and mentors with a “hands on” approach were most beneficial, regardless of race. In examining several MMI’s, Lavant et al. (1997) found strong ties to faculty interaction as a consistent theme to African American male success. Other recommendations they list to help form a successful mentorship program are buy-in from executive leadership, identify potential mentees upon admission, track progress of program participants, and conduct ongoing, unbiased evaluations of all phases of the program in order to help maintain program quality.

In the state of Texas, the commitment to minority student success is a priority driven by the THECB. The African American Male Initiative (AAMI) was created in 2009 to help higher education institutions in Texas provide success programming for African American Males (THECB, 2014). The goal of this programming is to help improve the dismal participation and success rates of African American males. As part of the state’s accelerated plan for closing the achievement gap by 2015, the THECB has distributed \$28 million in state and federal funding to institutions in the state with larger numbers of African American and Hispanic students. The THECB encourages programs throughout the state that receive funding from the AAMI to include pre-college academic outreach, financial aid assistance, academic support programs, admissions and financial aid application assistance, pre-college and college academic advising, partnerships with

public schools serving underrepresented students, partnerships between community colleges and universities, and early warning data tracking systems for data driven interventions, as part of their success initiatives (THECB, 2014). While these initiatives are in place, and grounded in a theoretical framework, relatively little research has been conducted on the impact of MMI's in community colleges (Wood, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

As cited throughout the paper, departure from the institution is an issue that plagues African American males in higher education at a higher proportion than any other ethnic or gender group, and is an issue many scholars are attempting to find answers as to how to effectively address the problem. Attempting to gain a theoretical understanding of student departure at the institutional level, as well as an understanding of theory in regards to how environment can impact educational attainment, is needed in order to gain a foundation to help address such a complex issue. In regards to departure from the institution, several theories of student retention serve as foundational research in this area. Tinto's (1987) theory of college student departure concludes students who do not sever ties with their community of origin and integrate to campus culture will have trouble persisting. Another retention expert, Bean (1990), is known for his student attrition model, which argues that background variables influence the way a student interacts with the college or university. Bean's theory adds environmental variables and student intention as factors that predict student retention (Fike & Fike, 2008). In Bean's model, a student that has a positive interaction within the college environment will be retained, while those with negative experiences will not.

Astin (1991) is well known for his input environment outcome model. According to Astin, outputs (degrees earned, number of graduates, etc.) must always be evaluated in terms of inputs (student ability, gender, age, major, etc.). Even so, input and output data are of limited usefulness without taking the learning environment into account (Fike & Fike, 2008). The environment (courses, programs, facilities, faculty, peer groups, etc.) completes the model. Assessing student outcomes most accurately requires input, output, and environmental data.

Each of these foundational retention models attempts to describe the ways in which the student and the institution interact with one another. The theoretical principles convey the importance of having knowledge of student attributes that influence retention. However, the aforementioned theories raise theoretical and practical concerns when dealing with students of color (Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon et al 2000; Tierney, 1999; Hurtado, 1997; Moore & Upcraft, 1990). Phinney's (1990) ethnic identity model provides a framework for institutions of higher education to draw from in helping them understand the importance of accommodating diverse cultures across campus. Derived from a combination of Erickson's stages of psychosocial development and Marcia's identity status theory, Phinney's model emphasizes a need to maintain a positive sense of self as identity develops well beyond childhood (Phinney et al., 1992).

In relation to higher education, Phinney and Alipuria (1990) found that minority college students viewed ethnicity as a greater aspect to identity than political or religious affiliation. A strong relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem was found in their research as well, particularly among African American students. In their study,

minority students held a strong need to find out about their ethnic background and its role in their lives, regardless of sex or socioeconomic status. Understanding the relationship between identity and students of color is important because ethnic identity has been linked with positive self-evaluation and self-esteem, happiness and decreased anxiety, improved mental health, decreased self-destructive behaviors, and greater academic achievement (Phinney, 1990/1992). It is vital for institutions of higher education to be aware of these issues and relevant frameworks to better understand what impacts minority student achievement.

The aforementioned theories are based on research regarding student retention in university settings (Fike & Fike, 2008; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Though these retention theories may be relevant for all postsecondary students, it is important to distinguish that the community college student possesses different goals and characteristics than the traditional university student that these theories are based on. Furthermore institutional differences, and the varied reasons for enrolling in a community college, need to be understood before retention efforts in the community college environment can be more effective (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Many theoretical models for retention of community college students struggle to address student outcomes and are more focused on institutional outcomes that can help lead to student success. Zwerling (1980) states, “To reduce significantly the staggering attrition at the average community college, it appears necessary to shift the focus from what is wrong with the student to what is wrong with the institution” (p. 56). He further states that the institutional factors that impact student retention in community colleges are emphasizing college work awards, providing

adequate advising, offering financial aid, sponsoring orientation, and providing counseling at times convenient for non-traditional students.

In a retention program developed by Wild & Ebbers (2002), community colleges are charged with developing specific checkpoints and benchmarks for student progress and success, creating learning communities, provide retention services targeted for specific groups (i.e. support groups, peer advising), and developing tutoring or other supplemental instruction programs. Wild & Ebbers go on to add that in order for these functions to be in put in place and manned effectively, institutions need to be committed to a philosophy on student retention. To shape this philosophy the institution must address a uniform definition of retention, which data elements need to be tracked to assess checkpoints, attend regional and national conferences to confirm best practices, and most importantly determine the college's retention goals. Once the philosophy is established, then the institution can determine which polices and procedures to implement to support the philosophy.

To help explain the societal ramifications that impacts African Americans in education, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman initiated Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the 1970s (Talbert, 2012). Three propositions are offered as the basis for CRT, based upon racial formation theory. The first proposition is that race continues as a significant factor relative to inequality in the United States. Evidence of social inequity can be seen in school dropout rates, characteristics of the poor, incarceration statistics, and failure of males in racial minority groups (Talbert, 2012). The second proposition of CRT states that the issue of property rights is foundational in U. S. society (Ladson-Billings & Tate

IV, 1995). In short, the laws of this nation favor those who own something, and always have slanted in that direction (Talbert, 2012). This is particularly damning among African Americans, who have the lowest home ownership rate in this country compared to other racial groups (US Census, 2009). While the economy continues to rebound from the housing crash of 2007, a large gap on its impact on certain racial groups remains. Net worth among whites is only down 16%, as opposed to 50% among African Americans (Brown, 2012). A Brookings Institute study in 2001 found that even when situations of similar income levels, black owned homes were valued at 18% lower than white owned homes even when researchers controlled for age, social class, household structure, and geography (Brown, 2012). While it is not the point of this dissertation to investigate economics and race, it is vital to cite real life examples to better understand the shortcomings that CRT explains.

The second proposition directly ties to the third proposition, in that property and education relate explicitly and implicitly. This suggests that those with more valuable property should have better schools (Talbert 2012). This concept is fully outlined in Kozol's (1991) book *Savage Inequalities*. In his book, Kozol cites the inequities in expenditures per student in New York State. The average expenditure per student in New York City at that time was \$5,500. However, in the wealthy suburbs of New York expenditure per student reached as high as \$11,000. Kozol stated that the quality and quantity of education are manifestations of inequity and property. The curriculum in the schools of the wealthy offers much more variety and quality based upon the resources allocated. CRT illustrates the environmental, and in many cases psychological, barriers

that impact the academic success for many African American males. Highlighting these barriers is important because the experience of African American male students goes beyond the institutional setting.

Mohammadi (1996) offers insight on the impact of environment specific to the community college. Mohammadi (1996) notes the two primary reasons that the traditional theories developed in the university context are not well suited for retention studies in community colleges are demographic and socioeconomic factors related to community college students are somewhat different from those related to students attending four-year colleges, and the environment of the community college being bound by a specific service area. In regards to the latter, Mohammadi is referencing that students tend to go to community colleges close to their home; they don't have a chance to "get away" like a student attending a four-year institution may. Thus, if the student is already of low socioeconomic status they are still stuck in the same cycle and environment. Being in college alone doesn't change a complete mindset or environment, particularly if you are still bound to that environment. So it is the responsibility of the college to be aware of this and put resources in place institutionally to help break that mold.

Specific to the population of interest in the present study, Mason (1998) created a persistence model for African American male community college students. Using Bean and Metzger's (1985) model for college student persistence as his foundation, Mason examined how traditional academic, student background, and environmental decisions that lead to departure are further impacted due to issues of social integration African American male community college students face to help create (see Figure 1). Mason

examined persistence and success factors among African American males at Kennedy-King College in Chicago, Illinois, in an environment he describes as a “non-residential, two-year community college located in a neighborhood of Chicago that is predominantly African American (97%), low income (70% below the poverty level), with a comparatively high crime rate and a public school system that has been described as “somewhat ineffective. More than 30% of the students are residents of this community (p.751). The problem that prompted his study was the low level of persistence among African American males over the previous 20 years, and examined variables that had previously been identified as having a possible relationship to the persistence behavior of university students. These variables were as follows:

- Background variables: age, enrollment status, educational goals, and high school performance;
- Academic variables: study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability; and
- Environmental variables: finances, employment, outside encouragement, family responsibility, and opportunity to transfer. (p.752)

Mason highlights in his study that these variable have to be taken into context with the broader set of issues that impact African American males in this study and on a national level. Problems related to economics, prior education (poor elementary and secondary school achievement), drugs and alcohol use, criminal activity, family, and individual stress are all highlighted by Mason as having substantial adverse effects on the

African American male and are a major part of what these students bring with them upon entering college.

In his research, Mason found among the African American males in his study the variables that had the most significant influence on persistence were educational goals, outside encouragement, utility, and what he defines as the helplessness/hopelessness factor. In examining educational goals, it was found the clearer the students felt about what they wanted to be or achieve positively impacted retention. Outside encouragement from family and friends was found to be beneficial, as well as if the student felt the program would benefit their future. The helplessness/hopelessness factor summarized the belief of many students in the study that no matter what they did or achieved they would not get a job or be successful.

The main discriminating factor to persistence and success that Mason highlights is how each student perceives his environment. Students that have clearly articulated educational goals have a positive approach to their environment (both community and college) and a low level of helplessness/hopelessness. This leads to a high level of satisfaction, lower stress, greater goal commitment, and a higher persistence level. Students that were unaware of their goals tended to perceive themselves negatively, have higher levels of helplessness/hopelessness, and have an increased desire to leave. To combat this, Mason suggested making staff aware of this factor and appropriate counseling and mentorship could be put in place to increase the students' desire to persist. Introducing research in regards to faculty/student interactions, motivation, and

persistence variables provides a general survey of challenges African American males at community colleges look to address.

While the Mason model does provide a general framework for addressing challenges that impact the African American male community college population, there are limitations in his work that need to be addressed. Although the Mason model examines variables that can lead to persistence, the research does not actually examine how these variables influence why students do or do not persist. In his own research, Mason states the need for retention research and “attempts to discover why students do or do not persist can add clarity to both institutional effectiveness and mission” (p. 759). The research presented in this study will attempt to expand on the Mason model, and examine specific factors that African American males in community college credit toward their success and ultimate persistence.

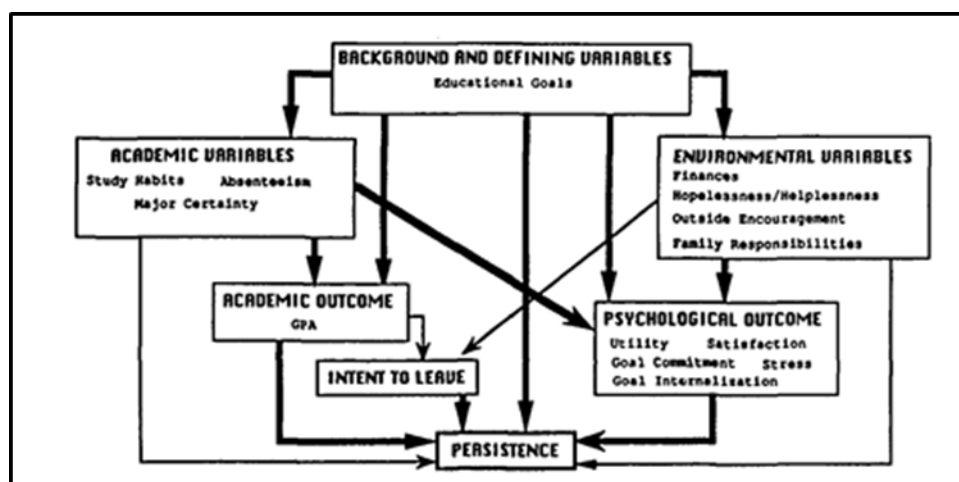


Figure 1. Mason (1998) conceptual model African American male urban community college student persistence.

Chapter III

Methodology

Qualitative methods encourage researchers to immerse themselves in the setting, so events can be understood adequately and observed in the proper context (Hughes, 2006). Qualitative research allowed the opportunity for those being studied to speak for themselves and provide their perspectives in words and other actions. Therefore, qualitative research provided an interactive process in which the persons studied were able to teach the researcher about their lives.

The design of this case study can be considered short-term ethnographic (Mullooly, 2012). It was ethnographic because the phenomena of a cultural group were being explored (Phillipsen, 1992; Geertz, 1973). In this instance, the group being studied was African American males at a Texas community college and factors contributing to their success were the phenomenon being examined. The value of using an ethnographic approach to study this group was because ethnographic research involves the collection and analysis of data that allows an understanding of social, cultural, and environmental context of a group of people and such data is needed to help understand the topic at hand (Agar, 1980).

The approach was considered short-term because traditional ethnographic studies can often last more than two years, and this study lasts four months. However, the short term approach provided a valuable and efficient means to help understand a specific aspect of culture (Mullooly, 2012). Because this research is specifically aimed at addressing one specific phenomenon among a focused population, the short-term method

was highly suitable in helping provide a holistic assessment of all the factors that impact, positively or negatively, the success of African American males at community colleges. More specifically, this study employed the critical qualitative method of Carspecken (1996) in collecting and analyzing data.

One of the data sources used in this study was field observation. Field observations allowed recording observations of the group being studied while being as unobtrusive as possible (“CSU Writing Studio”, n.d.). The rationale for incorporating this method into the study was to observe participants addressing everyday concerns in a natural, unscripted state (Trochim, 2006). This method was used in the study to record interesting facts, and other telling details that aided in the identification of thematic findings from this study. The notes taken from the field observation were used to create a thick description of observed activities. Thick descriptions are journals of all recorded activity that serve as a “data anchor” (p. 45) of all observations, which were subsequently be coded and analyzed to examine and compare themes both new and found in the literature (Carspecken, 1996).

Based on prior research reviewed about this population, this study explored the academic, social, psychological, and environmental variables that impact student success and persistence for African American males at a community college. The study identified themes that address African American males’ enrollment behaviors, patterns that lead to or impede their success, the role social interactions play in success, and the goals and meaning they find in their community college experience. Ultimately, the study reflected the culture, knowledge, and system of meanings for African American

males at a community college. When studying the culture of African American males in community colleges, it is important to gain knowledge of the relationship between their persistence and the factors that aid in their success. It is also vital to understand how these circumstances can provide the necessary framework to these students' success, in spite of the academic, social, and economic challenges they may face.

Study Site

To help answer the questions of the study, African American male students attending a community college located in an urban, metropolitan city in Texas and participating in an MMI were used. For the purposes of this study, the pseudonym Big State Community College (BSCC) was used to protect the identity of the college. BSCC is part of a three school community college system. It is the smallest campus of the three school system, enrolling 7,198 students in the fall 2013 semester. Of the total enrollment, 1,212 students are African American, making up 16.8% of the total student population and giving BSCC the highest African American student population in the college's district. The overall racial demographics of BSCC for fall 2013 were as follows: 54.5% Hispanic, 20.0% Caucasian, 2.5% Asian, 1.5% International, 0.7% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 3.8% Unknown or Not Reported.

BSCC specifically serves the Northeast portion of the city in which it is located. The service area of the college encompasses three independent school districts in the area, and a portion of a fourth district and is approximately 19% African American (City-Data, 2008). This area is also one of the most economically disadvantaged areas of the city. Over 35% of households in the area have an annual income of less than \$25,000

(Economic Alliance Houston Port Region, 2005), and the median income is \$41,020 in an average household of 3.3 people (City-Data, 2008). In one of the community's BSCC serves, over 25% of the population and 21.5% of families live below the poverty line (US Census, 2010). Of the three ISD's in BSCC's service area, 72%, 78.1% and 77% of students in public schools are reported as economically disadvantaged. All three of these districts are above the state of Texas average (59%) for economically disadvantaged students. Considering the aforementioned data, it is not surprising that educational attainment in the BSCC service area is lacking as well. All three school districts report that fewer than half of their graduating students are prepared for college in both English/Language Arts and Math (The Texas Tribune, 2010). Nearly 47% of people in the area have no high school degree, 8.1% have an associate degree, and only 5.3% have attained a bachelor's degree (City-Data, 2008).

Understanding the demographics of the area is important because a majority of this area's students make up the student population at BSCC. For the fall 2013 semester, 56.6% of students enrolled at BSCC were in-district students. Thus, they went to high school in one of the aforementioned school districts, are native to the Northeast area of the city, and are products of the environment. The importance of understanding the environment where these students come from is vital in understanding the impact it has on community college students' success and development. As noted, the BSCC service area is of low educational and socioeconomic class. The challenges students grow up with are brought to the institution, and shape the student body. How the institution

understands and addresses the challenges of their surrounding environment are vital to student success.

Participants

Participants for the study were observed in large group meetings and individual one-on-one interviews throughout the spring 2014 semester. Participants in the larger group meetings were observed as part of their involvement in the bi-weekly meetings with the MMI at BSCC, known as the Men of Nobility (MON) program. Although 71 students are listed on the program's roster at BSCC, based on the spring 2014 semester attendance records, the average MON meeting had 21 students in attendance. These meetings were observed and student interactions in the large group setting were recorded in the thick description.

While the majority of students that consistently attend meetings are of traditional college age, the students in the MON program range from the ages of 18 to 42, with the average age being just below 21. The majority of students in the program went to a high school in the BSCC service area, so it can be assumed they are impacted by at least some of the aforementioned academic and socioeconomic challenges associated with the area. Demographically, the program changed slightly in 2013. An effort to expand the program to Hispanic males was instituted over the summer of 2013, and starting in the fall semester recruitment efforts to reach out to that demographic began. Of the 71 students listed on the MON roster for the spring 2014 semester, 12 are Hispanic. The average GPA of MON participants was not made available. However, further academic data that suggests the program is helping participants overcome some of their academic

hurdles. Compared to the campus as a whole, MON participants had a higher success rate in their coursework since the fall 2010 semester. At BSCC, obtaining a “C” or better in a course is considered successful. Between the 2011 academic year and 2013 academic year, MON participants had a success rate 7.3% higher than the campus as a whole. In the fall 2013 semester, participants were 8.4% higher than the campus.

In order to gain further clarification on actions and topics observed in the larger group setting, three participants were selected for one-on-one interviews that occurred at multiple points throughout the semester. The requirements for student participation in the one-on-one interviews for the study was the student be an African American male at BSCC, be enrolled for the spring 2014 semester, and attended at least 75% of the MON meetings in the previous semester. The reason 75% of the meetings was selected as the cut off point for participation is consistent attendance is a good gauge that students are seeking guidance in certain areas of their community college experience, and therefore can provide particular insight to their challenges and experiences at BSCC.

The three participants that were selected for face-to-face interviews were specifically selected by the investigator by means of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allowed focus on a limited number of selected respondents because their in-depth information provided good insight into the specific issues of this study (“Open Learn”, 2014). It should be noted that the investigator had no specific knowledge of any selected participants background or current academic standing at the institution. Selection was based solely on MON meeting attendance. The reason for using this method to select interview participants is because students who regularly attend MON

meetings are vital to the study. These students meet particular criteria of interest, and have particular knowledge or expertise on the subject at hand. In sum, there were a total of 11 individual, follow-up interviews. The time points of these interviews are further detailed in the data collections and analysis section of the paper. One interview with a BSCC educational planner was also conducted in order to add further clarification on challenges within the district in regards to K-12 to college preparation. This person was chosen due to their relationship with counselors at the high schools, and served as an expert on the college going process for students in the BSCC service area and the relationship between BSCC and the local high schools.

Among the participants observed in groups, three students participated in the individual interviews and each differed slightly in their experiences (see Table 1). Anthony was a 20 year old student in his first year at BSCC with an intended major of Business Management. He was a first-generation student, who lived with both parents until they divorced when he was 12. He lived with his mother after the divorce but does credit his father for staying in his life. He attended high school within the BSCC service area, so in many ways he is a product of the environment as previously discussed. He did however attend elementary school and middle schools in other districts, and provided some telling insight on the differences in his K-12 experience between districts. He participated in four interviews.

Ryan was a 20 year old student in his second year at BSCC majoring in computer science and working on an HVAC occupational certificate. He is not a first generation student, as his mother recently earned her associates degree. That is however, the only

college graduate in his family. He grew up in a two parent home and is not a native of the BSCC service area, or even the state of Texas for that matter. He was a native of the state of California, who was home schooled from third to tenth grade, thus his K-12 experiences differed from the general student population in this study and provided a different set of perspective.

Quincy was 22 years old, in his third year at BSCC, and majoring in General Studies. His intention was to earn his general education requirements, or “basics”, and transfer to a university. He was a first generation college student, whose mother did not complete high school and father completed some community college. He grew up in a two parent home in the BSCC service area. He participated in three interviews. Further explanation of the process behind these observations and interviews are discussed in the data collection and analysis section.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Subject	Major	First generation	Years at BSCC	Attendance Status	Intent to transfer	Highest degree expected
Anthony	Business Mgt.	Yes	First year	Full-time	Yes	Bachelor
Ryan	Computer Science	No	2	Full-time	Yes	Master
Quincy	Not declared	Yes	3	Full-time	Yes	Bachelor

Men of Nobility Program at BSCC. The Big State Community College Men of Nobility Program is an MMI created by the district to address the college’s retention

shortcomings among African American males. The program was created in 2008 in response to the dismal success numbers for African American males at BSCC. Within the BSCC district in 2006, 33,039 students were enrolled with only 927 (6.4%) being African American males. This population ranked highest in attrition and lowest in enrollment, transfer, and graduation rates. BSCC awarded 1,590 certificates and degrees in 2006, but only 37 (2.3%) went to African American males (“BSCC” Fact Book, 2006-2007). Today program currently has over 100 members district wide with 71 being at BSCC. The program has received a \$150,000 a year budget used to create programming, workshops, conference participation, and other development activities for African American males.

To achieve its goal of increasing African American male retention, the program’s operations are guided by the following five initiatives:

1. **Recruitment:** MON committee will actively recruit potential African American male students from high schools within the BSCC service region and will assist students in completing a BSCC application for admission and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
2. **Service Learning Community:** The MON learning community consists of a specially designed Human Development course. The course provides an overview of key aspects, knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college. It will also incorporate issues and concerns especially pressing for contemporary African American men. An African American speaker series will be included in the class, which will offer the students an opportunity to interact and network with successful African American professionals from the community.

3. **Counseling and Advising:** Each MON member will be assigned to a mentor who will assist students in developing their educational plan, as well as assisting them explore their career aspirations.
4. **Peer Coaches:** MON members who successfully complete a full term semester with a grade point average of 2.50 or higher will be invited to serve as Peer Coaches in the subsequent semester.
5. **Connections:** MON staff will develop a bi-monthly electronic newsletter on program happenings and the accomplishments of individual Men of Nobility. It will provide networking and outreach information to the MON members, currently enrolled African American males attending BSCC, and community members at large. To facilitate further connectedness and engagement, MON committee will create a Facebook site for student interaction and peer support. Students will be introduced to the site during their first semester and will be encouraged to invite other African American male students to utilize the system to communicate, engage, and support each other throughout their academic careers.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to gain understanding of this population, African American males participating in an MMI were observed over the course of four months (i.e. the Spring 2014 semester). The group's interactions were observed during the scheduled times that the program met. The MON meetings were typically held on Tuesday, with only a few exceptions due to scheduling conflicts. For example, the meeting the week of March 23rd

was held on a Monday due to the director of the program, several mentors, and several student mentees participated in an out of town conference. The regular group meetings started at noon and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Students were also served lunch at the meetings as an incentive to attract more participants to attend. The topics ranged from items very specific to the students campus experiences, to topics that can help students transition to life after college. For example, workshops in regards to financial literacy and planning, and professional interview and work attire, were held at MON meetings. The meetings were held on campus, in the same location each week. For this study, a total of seven MON group meetings were observed.

Observations from these meetings were recorded as field notes to create a thick description of the observed events. The field notes were hand written, then read over and transcribed within a week of observation. The culmination of notes created the thick description that was used in order to generate a detailed record of interactions among the group, as they discussed the challenges and successes they face as African American male community college students (Carspecken, 1996). The direct, prolonged contact that served as the foundation for this study is considered essential in ethnographic research in order to learn the complex patterns of people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Zaharlick, 1992).

Although participants were aware observations of the meetings were taking place, the observations of the MON meetings were passive in nature. During observations no direct questions, comments, encouragement, or participation were contributed by the researcher. The goal was to strictly observe and record participant interactions, without

any interference. This passive observation approach was used to avoid any unwanted biases and help ensure the participant interactions were not influenced in anyway by any perceived expectations the researcher may have had (Carspecken, 1996). Through the topics discussed during these meetings, and observing students' natural responses to said topics, a general understanding of themes that African American males attributed to making up their community college experience was achieved. Below is sample of field notes from the January 21, 2014 MON meeting in regards to financial literacy. After the presentation on financial literacy, a discussion about stereotypes and how to deal with negative perceptions took place.

12:19 pm: Guest speaker takes the stage. At this point 14 students and five advisors are present. The speaker is a female, mid 20s, financial advisor. She is a graduate of a high school in the EHCCC service area, so she can relate to some of the social and economic challenges of the area. Her talk stresses the importance of loan debt. [OC: *Some key topics include understanding types of loans, the impacts of debt, and credit card usage*]:

Guest speaker asks: "Who here knows what the FAFSA is"? About five hands raise but no student addresses the question. One student finally answers.

Jack: It's for financial aid [OC: *But had no specific details of what all it entails; Jack is 18-20 years old*].

Speaker: What about financial aid does it mean or how does it benefit you?

Jeff: It's basically how we get money for school and other things [OC: *Jeff is approximately same age as Jack*].

Speaker: So how do you handle the money that is received?

Jeff: [OC: *Student looks bewildered by the question*]. I don't know. I just use it.

[OC: General view is students view financial aid as money they get for school but have no real idea of the ramifications of managing it, particularly if it is a loan.]

Within the above example, the observer comments were noted and separated within the transcript in order to distinguish recognized situations or actions of the participants, which help form truth claims. A truth claim is an assertion that something is right or wrong, good or bad, correct or incorrect (Carpsecken, 1996). Truth claims fall into three categories: subjective, objective, and normative-evaluative. Subjective truth claims are claims about existing subjective states. For example, highlighting what a person is feeling or thinking would be a subjective claim. An objective claim is a claim that certain objects exist and can be noticed by any observer. A normative-evaluative claim is based on existing agreements of the appropriateness of an activity, and “consists of truth claims of what is proper, appropriate, and conventional” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 83). These assertions are needed to establish criteria for determining the validity of a truth claim. Due to the highly critical nature of social research, it is important for validity claims to be established to help enforce that the data or field notes are true to what occurred, the analysis on the data was performed correctly, and the conceptual basis of the analytical techniques used are sound (p. 57).

To obtain further data on these field experiences, three students were tracked after these sessions for follow-up interviews. The purpose of the individual interviews was to get a more personal and deeper understanding of how students were being impacted by the topics being addressed in the larger group meetings. This was needed because by using the passive approach during the group meetings, there was no way to gain

additional meaning as to what participants meant with some of their comments, actions, or tone displayed in the group meetings. By being so closely immersed in the observations of the MON program as the investigator, and taking notes on the challenges addressed in the group meetings, a general gauge of challenges that African American students at BSCC face was thoroughly examined. The additional data points that come from the individual interviews provided further clarity and understanding of said challenges.

The additions to the primary record of field notes gained from the individual interviews were used to articulate possible meanings, or meaning fields (Carspecken, 1996). Meaning fields helped gain a better understanding of what a participant intended with their act and what impressions or meanings, either overtly or tacitly, a participant may have from the greater group. Participants interacting in one setting may respond or act in a certain way, but through addressing meaning fields, clarity of intention is discovered. The one-on-one interviews helped serve this purpose, and offered a more in-depth perspective of the challenges participants had to address throughout the semester. Further examination of meaning fields observed in the research will be explained in the discussion and findings sections.

These interviews were conducted face-to-face and ranged from a minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of 45 minutes in length. The cause for the range of the interview times depended on what challenges the student may have delved into between interviews. In some cases, the participants may have had very specific challenges and frustrations to

address, whereas other follow ups may not have been as substantive. Each interview took place in a private locale on the BSCC campus.

The additional data provided from the one-on-one interviews combined with the greater group observations, allowed there to be 18 contact points with students in the study. Observations began January 21, 2014 and ran through April 22, 2014, for a total of 13 weeks of data collection. Between group meetings and individual interviews, this averaged out to a little over one contact per week during the study. The reason there were no further observations and interviews after April 22, 2014 is because the following week (April 28 - May 2) was the last week of class at BSCC, and then finals week followed. Furthermore, since there were no MON meetings after April 22nd, the decision was made to coincide with that date and end data collection at that point.

While the interview questions were modified throughout the semester in order to address follow up from previous interviews or specific topics of interest, a general interview protocol is cited in Appendix A. This interview protocol was used with all individual interviewees in their first interview. Based on their answers in the initial interview, areas for possible follow-up on particular topics or challenges were identified and kept tabs on throughout the semester. It was important to understand how students handled certain stresses identified, and how that impacted persistence and success. The interview protocol was guided by the literature cited in the review, with specific emphasis on the categories Mason (1998) found to be variables for African American male persistence at the community college. The purpose of the interview protocol was to gain insights from students in order to help expand on the Mason model and find the specific

factors students attributed to their persistence and success, or the challenges that students felt hindered their persistence and success.

These individual interviews were audiotaped for validation of the notes taken, and any important key elements were transcribed for the final analysis. Transcriptions of field notes and individual interview data were organized using thematic data analysis in order to find common themes among interviewees (Creswell, 2005; Carspecken, 1996). Mapping any shared patterns, behaviors, and ways of thinking drew on the understanding of the experiences for African American males at BSCC. Raw coding was used as a means to simply list all codes and themes in a data set, in order to find redundancies and intersections within the data in regards to the African American community college experience at BSCC were presented (Carspecken, 1996). Once all codes were listed, they were sorted as low-level and high-level codes. The high-level codes were used to summarize the larger segments of data, and proved the basis for low-level coding where fine distinctions among themes were made within and between cases (Cassell & Symon, 2004). By gathering all these perspectives (themes) and finding where consistencies existed, areas of student successes or failures were able to be charted in the research.

Chapter IV

Findings

Findings for this study were based on the observations noted during the MON meetings and the individual interviews. Once all data from the group observations and individual interviews were coded, the themes participants cited as most relevant to their persistence and success were noted. These are highlighted in the first section of this chapter as participation in the MON program, peer support, and faculty and academic advisors. Participants also cited several hindrances to their success and persistence. These are highlighted in the second section of this chapter and included class completion, and several pre-college factors that impacted their preparation. Participants cited several themes that fell in both categories based on the respondents. These themes are highlighted in the third section of the chapter and included family obligations/involvement and stereotype threat.

By following students for a full 13 weeks, factors that aided in students' persistence throughout the semester, as well as factors that impacted their ability to be successful, were observed. The most interesting observation from the researcher's perspective was how participants (particularly in the individual interviews) developed and grew in certain areas. While the academic success was the focus of the study, there were situations inside and outside the classroom that students went through that appeared to impact their personal maturation. Over the course of the semester observations, subjects appeared to grow in some ways, even if their performance may not have

necessarily reflected academic growth, and appeared to take lessons from their successes and failures throughout the semester.

This chapter of the study will address the themes that participants found most relevant to their college experience, be it positive or negative. The chapter will also address the areas of personal maturation and development that was observed by the researcher.

Aids to Success and Persistence

Mentorship. Student interactions observed in the meetings, as well as individual interview data, suggest participation in the MON program has been a factor in student persistence and success. During student group meeting observations, students always greeted each other and seemed genuinely happy to see each other. While some students in the meeting hung out together outside of the MON meetings, it showed clearly that some of them had not seen each other since the last meeting. It was evident there was a sense of pride among the men; that they were proud to be a part of something positive in their lives. For several of them, it may have been the most positive thing in their life. Anthony specifically said, “I’m glad I found [the MON program] when I did because if I hadn’t run into Mr. Johnson I would have flunked out by now.” The “Mr. Johnson” mentioned by the student is the director of the program. Quincy added, “The Men of [Nobility] showed me different prospective of school and life and how you look at things. I’m just now realizing what is going on and...it just puts you on the right path and change who you are a little bit but in a positive way.”

A direct result of participating in the program was the relationships that students get by meeting regularly with faculty and administrators, as every mentor in the program is a BSCC administrator or faculty member. This is beneficial for the program participants because the mentor/mentee relationship allowed for students to have a face to connect to campus departments and resources. Within the meeting, a positive connection between mentors and mentees appears evident. Students seemed very comfortable speaking with mentees, and mentors reciprocated dialogue. Mentees also appeared very respectful of mentors, responding to questions with “yes, sir” and “no, sir” as well as consistently following meeting protocol. For example, mentees would remove their hats when they entered a MON meeting and always filled the front row seating as sitting in the back was discouraged. Outside of MON meetings or mentor/mentee meetings, instances of students going to the gym with mentors or other non-college specific, social experiences were not uncommon. Mentees seemed genuinely interested and invested in helping program participants, and in many cases during meetings shared their personal experiences as related to the topics at hand. Based on research presented by Feldman et al. (2013), these characteristics suggest there was a positive mentoring relationship within the program. In their study reciprocity, mutual respect, personal connection, and shared values are cited as major characteristics of successful mentoring relationships. A specific example that showcased the value of personal connection was the mentors’ willingness to openly share they had made some of the same mistakes these students made, or faced similar challenges growing up, but they were able to succeed. This was particularly relevant to one student who said in the February 17, 2014 meeting, “I appreciate what

you [mentors] share with us. It's good to see people that came from where we did, and have made it. Too many times people come across as perfect...but it's good to get real talk from real people." It was noted, however, that participants did not cite faculty interactions outside of the program as impacting their success.

Participants credited the program with helping them learn new ways to stay organized with their class work. They also cited the program helped increase their campus involvement by encouraging them to be aware of campus happenings, and placing them in a positive environment that promoted their success. To encourage students to make sure they were doing the aforementioned, Mr. Johnson created a point system to help track and reward student participation and achievement in the program. Mentees earned points for participating in MON meetings, activities outside of MON, representing the college in an official capacity (such as conference attendance), and academic achievement. The value of the point system was observed during the January 21, 2014 meeting. Prior to getting into the presentation for that day, Mr. Johnson announced which students had earned MON shirts and other rewards based on their participation and success during the previous semester. Students that earned a 2.75 or above GPA received a MON sweatshirt, students that participated in enough activities to earn seven points (the value varied by activity) earned MON T-Shirts, and students that represented the college in any official capacity received a MON polo.

While observing the student recognition, it was noticed that students who did not receive anything felt as if they had missed out. It was apparent the rewards for participation truly meant something to the students and made them feel good about

themselves and their accomplishments. Students that received recognition were excited when their name was called. Students would have smiles on their faces, or in some cases have a look of awe, as if they were pleasantly surprised they had been recognized. The entire group would applaud each recipient for their efforts, and in many cases students would take time to personally congratulate their peers for their accomplishment. It was sensed that earning the shirt truly made one feel they were a part of the MON program. The students had accomplished the program goals, had been rewarded for said accomplishment, and now had an outward sign of their success to showcase. Having said that, nothing was observed that suggested students who had earned rewards treated students differently from those that had not. Also noted from group meetings and other observations and interactions throughout the semester, mentees and mentors wore their shirts at every meeting and at any activity the group participated in outside of the MON meetings.

By establishing this point system, the opportunity to be involved in campus experiences was encouraged and proved valuable to the students. This was confirmed by Anthony, who in an individual interview spoke of his opportunity to represent the college at a statewide conference for African American higher education professionals. The conference had student sessions that mentees could attend, and Anthony and other mentees also participated in the presentation that MON gave at the conference. In regards to this experience, his first professional conference, Anthony said, "The conference...I think it was kind of cool. It was kind of eye-opening, I guess." He specifically referenced a session in regards to African American males in higher

education. “So many black males go to school and (don’t) actually finish. I can’t remember the numbers; it was kind of shocking. I know there is stuff I’ve probably seen a lot of times, but it just really hadn’t set in yet to me. Over the weekend, it was kind of ... it kind of hit me. After that, I guess it kind of made me a little more serious about what I’m doing (in college). It made me more serious about it. It made me more focused about it. Yeah, I thought it was a good deal that I went.”

Incorporating the point system into the mentoring efforts offered extrinsic motivation for students, and it appeared to be successful. This strategy directly correlated with the aforementioned research stating that African American males in community colleges had a tendency to be more concerned with extrinsic goals (Wood and Palmer, 2013). Perhaps tapping into this research was not an intention of the program, but incorporating activities that allowed students to earn rewards the MON program was able to facilitate academic and psychosocial development. In essence, the point system could be seen as a form of mentoring itself as it proved to be a critical piece of helping the program meet its goals.

Peer Support. Peer support was a major initiative Mr. Johnson enacted into the theme of the MON program during the spring semester. At the March 4, 2014 meeting, Mr. Johnson introduced the MON mantra and the idea of being your brother’s keeper (Appendix C). The MON mantra was practiced during this meeting, and students at the meetings performed the mantra in unison as a show of solidarity. Throughout the semester, every MON meeting going forward was opened with this mantra. Outside of their meetings, the students would also begin any event the group may be hosting with

the mantra. This was observed at the April 8, 2014 event when the MON hosted a film in honor of Veterans. Prior to the film beginning, Mr. Johnson stepped up to a podium on the stage and took the microphone and simply said, “I am Ronald Johnson”. Immediately after Quincy rose from his seat and stated, “I am Quincy Walker”. Then the next MON student in attendance stepped up and did the same thing, until all nine MON students in attendance completed their name. Then in unison, with Mr. Johnson, they all said “And we are Men of Nobility!” The audience was a bit surprised by this, but also impressed at the show of unity among the mentees. On this particular day, they did not do the entire mantra, and Mr. Johnson went on to explain that to the crowd why this had been incorporated into the program.

This idea of incorporating a mantra that showed solidarity and unison among the group was made in response to President Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. The action was created by the President to help African American youth due to the disproportionate challenges and obstacles to their success (“White House,” 2014). In his February 27, 2014 speech when he signed off on the initiative, President Obama noted his own personal experiences of growing up without a father in the home and not taking school seriously as a youth (Shear, 2014). In an effort to capitalize on this major political moment specific to minority males, Mr. Johnson introduced the President’s initiatives and comments in the meeting to help the mentees understand that even the President of the United States went through the same things some of the students are going through. This was eye opening to many students and helped them understand the reality of being able to succeed despite various social obstacles. The goal Mr. Johnson encouraged each

mentee to do is be each other's keeper, and hold each other accountable to help ensure success in and out of the classroom. In individual interviews, Quincy would go on to cite the relationships made with other mentees in the MON program as his main source of peer support, and credited these relationships for helping him feel connected to the college.

Outside of the accountability and support among the mentees the MON program provides, participants in individual interviews credited support from peers as an aid to their persistence and success. Anthony credits a friend that he's known since 8th grade, who is attending a university in Texas, as vital to his success. He stated,

“My junior year in high school, I was going through a lot of tough times...I wanted to drop out of high school. Every time I'm going through something, she calls me to check on me, make sure I'm doing all right, tells me...gives me a few words of encouragement.”

He added since he got to college that, “She checks on me about once a week, just to make sure I'm still pushing, still doing my homework and stuff.”

Ryan, who by his own admission is a shy person that tends to keep to himself, credited the relationships he has made through his on campus job as important to making him feel connected and apart of the college. Ryan explained he generally is not a very social person. This is something he felt may have been a result of his years of home schooling in California and experiences once he entered high school in Texas. He said,

“I don't feel like as socially connected than most people are. I'm more of the anti-social I guess you would say.” He went on to add,

“I think it plays in two areas, selfish and fearful at the same time. I mean, I'm kind of afraid that people won't acknowledge what I have to say, and listen to me and actually take what I have to say and dissect and analyze it for what it is. Whereas on the other side, I feel like certain people don't deserve what I have to say. Certain people going to take what I have, and flip around or use it against me. I guess a lot of that just comes from ... I guess you could say security because I learned a lot when I moved from California to Texas that a lot of people aren't going to always be in your life.”

However through his on campus job as a game room attendant in the student life office, he admitted he had found a comfort zone that has allowed him to be more open and find social peers that have helped him make college more enjoyable. To elaborate on that he added,

“I took it upon myself to be the more socially active person in that area. Especially seeing how video games, and pool, ping pong, and air hockey is my kind of stuff. Being an active person, and playing video games, is something I personally do. If I can find a certain group of people I can share that part of my life with, it kind of breaks me out of my shell. If I can share that with you, and we can enjoy ourselves then I'll invite you.”

Faculty and Academic Advisors. The influence of faculty and academic advisors on all participants' success outside of their relationships with mentors was further detailed in individual interviews. As previously noted, all participants in group observations and individual interviews credited the resources offered through the MON program as beneficial. However within the program, Mr. Johnson always made it a point that students need to take the time to connect with other areas and other people on the campus. To help further enhance students' views on the value of relationship building with faculty and administrators, the April 1, 2014 MON meeting was a lunch meeting with BSCC administrators throughout the district. While observing the meeting, it was noted that students were surprised to see college officials outside of the usual mentors at the meeting. Their reaction suggested they did not understand the importance of the college's investment in their well-being. It was also very likely the first time the students had ever interacted with the campus Provost, or other high ranking college administrators. The meeting in many ways validated the importance of the program to the mentees, and showed the students that the college was truly invested in initiatives to help enhance their success.

Outside of interactions with faculty and staff directly attributed to MON, individual interview participants highlighted other interactions of note that they felt were beneficial to helping them at BSCC. Quincy specifically referenced the point of contact (POC) advising sessions he received during his first year. These sessions were checkpoints for first year students to ensure they were on track academically, as well as give students an opportunity to ask any of their relevant questions or address any

concerns. Quincy found the POCs helpful and made him feel as if the college cared. He also credited the POC's as helping him get on track academically. He said, "You know, you don't really know how your grades are until you check, so I thought I was doing fine until I (went to a POC). I wasn't doing fine." He credited the POCs as helping him understand what he needed to do to be successful in class help him understand to not "give up or quit." Anthony credited teachers and counselors as helping him feel connected to the college socially, emotionally, and psychologically. He said, "Teachers and counselors, I can see they care. They really do care for your well-being at the college." He went to add that his experiences with his GUST professor, and the class itself, were very beneficial. GUST at BSCC stands for GUided STudies, which is the college preparation course. The goal of the GUST course is to help students examine factors that underlie learning, success, and personal development in higher education (Wells, 2013). In short, GUST is the college's orientation course aimed to introduce students to various skills and techniques to help them be successful in college. In regards to GUST, Anthony felt his instructor was a positive influence and somebody he looked up to. In regards to the course, he said, "My first initial thought of GUST was it was a waste of time, and it was basically teaching us common sense. But I guess, first-year students coming in, GUST is doing something you might really need. It might help you a lot because common sense isn't that common."

In a March 11, 2014 interview Ryan described how his interaction with faculty had a positive influence on him beyond the college experience.

Investigator: Have you ever, have you had any support or I guess interaction, I guess let's go with that with faculty, and if

those had any impact on your persistence?

Ryan: For the most part, I just turn in my work and go on about my day. There's been every now and then that professor sees a little extra something in my paper, and leaves me a note about how great, or how inspirational it was or how I needed to talk more on this subject and elaborate more. They really enjoyed it. Then there's those who sat down and had at a conversation with me, and said that I can see that you're going places, and I can see that you got a good head on your shoulders and keep doing what you're doing.

Investigator: How's that make you feel when you get those notes, and they want to talk to you and give that encouragement?

Ryan: I mean it ... It confuses me in first.

Investigator: Really?

Ryan: I mean you know really, I don't really come expecting stuff like that. I mean for the most part, life is made out to be this thing that it's you against the world basically. When you see other people that are struggling just like you, supporting you, it kind of makes you realize that the world is not that bad of a place. It's like me against the world and I got to get a higher grade than this person and I need to do this. Then to have someone say "Hey, you're doing a good job, and I like what you're doing, and you need to keep doing with that and you keep striving for that". It makes you think that people are okay.

As previously noted, Ryan was the type of individual that kept to himself and as observed in this interaction, is not a particularly trustful person. However it was obvious in his words and his expressions during the interview, this particular experience made him feel good and helped with his overall comfort level in the classroom and dealing with professors and students.

Hindrances to Persistence and Success

Class Attendance. Shortcomings with class attendance and course completion were cited as issues that negatively impacted persistence and success. While it is obvious

that failures in class attendance would be an impediment to success and persistence, the greater issue expressed from study participants were the reasons that they were having difficulty with regularly attending class. In some instances the issues were self-inflicted. Students simply wasted time socializing on campus. Mr. Johnson consistently harped on this throughout the semester in the MON meetings. He constantly reminded students that, “The ones that are here are going to get the help” and always encouraged students to take advantage of their time on campus. Students consistently spent time in the campus student center or in the campus game room, and it was not uncommon to observe students in these areas during peak class times. It was also observed before several meetings that when a meeting began and attendance was low, Mr. Johnson would send a student to game room and the lounge in student center. Usually the student that was sent to gather students came back with several others. This was a trend that went beyond just MON meeting attendance.

Another observation from the group meetings that appeared to have an impact in class attendance was a majority of the students in the program were full-time students and had at least a part time job. This was specifically discussed during the January 21, 2014 meeting in regards to financial literacy. Of the 17 students that were in attendance that day, 12 of them shared that they were working at least 20 hours a week. Of those 12, two of them revealed they had a work study job on the campus. Most of students shared the same sentiment that they had a job to in order to avoid excess debt. One student, however, chose to work despite his family’s ability to pay for his education. He candidly stated, “I decided to help because I’m staying in their house, I’m 18 and they can kick me

out at any time.” He felt contributing to his education was the right thing to do and gave him a sense of ownership with the process.

In the individual interviews, Ryan echoed the larger group theme of work load impacting attendance, but he also discussed other out of class responsibilities that caused him to have class attendance issues. Ryan worked two jobs, one on campus and one off campus, as well as served at a local church every Tuesday and Sunday, and recently got engaged to his girlfriend in California. He spoke of how his out of class commitments can add up.

“I do spend a mass amount of my time on the phone and or texting (with my fiancé), ensuring that we have great communication, but along with that I also have church every Tuesday and Sunday. It becomes a bit much, I guess you could say, with the few little extra things because even today I got to go to work, and when I get off of work, I got to head straight to church. Church probably won't get out until eight or nine tonight.” He added, “Every now and then....I was just tired and not even like I overslept kind of tired. I woke up, and I knew I would probably get in a wreck, falling asleep trying to drive here, kind of tired. I was up, but not alert enough to drive.”

When asked about how missing class impacts him, Ryan explained in the spring 2014 semester he took 8 week schedule courses as opposed to the traditional 16 week schedule. The 8 week courses were for his certificate program and allowed him to complete the HVAC work at a faster track, whereas the 16 week courses were traditional

academic course that counted toward his computer science requirements. He explained how missing class between the two course formats were different, and the challenge of missing a class in the 8 week semesters provided.

“The difference between that and now is when I was in (16 week classes) it was a little more lax knowing that I had a prolonged time to get everything done. Like for example, with math courses, my teacher would open up all of the homework for the whole entire semester, so it wasn't graded until the end of the semester. You had any given point in time from the beginning of class to the end of class to finish all the homework. I could miss a day or miss two days or something like that of homework and still be okay. Whereas if I had an eight week class, if I missed two days of homework, I'd be four weeks behind.”

He went on to add in the 8 week format a student can never “fully catch up the way that you would be caught up, if you were in class” but stated he does his best to catch up and prepare for the weekly exams.

Anthony expressed issues with transportation led to him having too many tardies in a class and as a result he had to withdraw from a course. He said he spoke with his teacher about the potential attendance issue at the beginning of the semester, and while she was willing to work with the student eventually the tardies built up to a point that there was nothing she could do for the student.

Anthony said he felt “frustrated” about the issue because he felt it was out of his control, as he was relying on his mother or other friends to help him get to class on time.

Further adding to the frustration was Anthony was doing well in the class, and it was a class needed to advance toward his major and transfer requirements. He went on to add that financially the situation caused him problems and the stress of the situation impacted his mother as well. He said, “It was hard for me to tell my mom. She felt bad too because she understands where I was coming from; she understands the situation. She knows there's nothing she can do about it either, so she felt bad for herself. I don't like putting type of pressure on her.” He had a similar issue in the previous semester, as well.

To Anthony's credit, he did state that he was working to schedule more afternoon courses to avoid this problem in the future, though in this instance this was the only time the course was available. He was also accepting of the situation, felt he was treated fairly, and remained positive towards his studies and completion. He stated, “I do feel like (the professor) was kind of receptive. She was only doing her job. So, I couldn't be mad at her. I guess it could have been worse. It was justice.” He also added he will retake the course in the summer and felt he could get back on track toward his completion goals.

Finances. While all three interviewees did receive financial aid in some form, none expressed any challenges with the process or receiving aid. However due to his issues stemming from his absenteeism and having to drop classes, Anthony did say he may find himself dealing with future financial constraints. Anthony stated because of the withdrawals from courses his Pell grant was likely to be cut. This would cause him to have to find a job, thus adding different challenges to his already difficult situation. As

previously mentioned, Ryan stated that his workload and other out of class responsibilities impacted his attendance.

Challenges with financial aid and the financial aid process were expressed within the group meetings, however. This was particularly observed in the January 21, 2014 meeting. As expressed earlier, many students in the group observations stated they worked in order to offset college costs. However, it was found in several cases this was a direct result of the aforementioned lack of financial aid literacy. One student stated that he was able to obtain financial aid, however he received a pro-rated amount due to being enrolled part-time. He said he was not aware how part-time enrollment would impact his available aid when he applied. He expressed that the pro-rated aid did not cover his total cost of college and elevated the need to work full-time.

Other students in the group meetings said they were not educated on the financial aid process prior to attending college. When asked if he received any information about financial aid at the high school level, one participant adamantly stated, “Not at all.” This trend is consistent with the findings of the American Promise Alliance’s (2013) report on closing the information gap students’ face when paying for college. Participants in the report expressed concerns over the lack of financial information about college available to high school students. The report found the information gap is due to factors such as high schools do not teach students about college finance prior to their senior year, colleges do not provide comprehensive and easily accessible data, and families tend to focus solely on getting accepted.

One student talked of holding a full-time job his first year at BSCC to pay for college completely out of pocket. He said he was doing this because he had no knowledge at all that financial aid was available. Due to his work load, he stated he could only take one class each semester during his first year. The student said he eventually learned about the FAFSA process through the educational planners at BSCC and went on to apply for, and receive, aid. A lack of understanding about the types of loans they had or the ramifications of loan acceptance was also evident. Several students in the meetings explained they had loans but did not know what type or what the difference was between subsidized and unsubsidized loans. In response to that, one of the mentees, a male in his early 40's, told the story of his son's misuse of financial aid funds and how that has impacted his life. He shared that his son had over \$22,000 in student loans, but ultimately dropped out due to poor decisions and is now with the Navy. In telling his story, he stressed to his peers the importance of understanding "what you are signing up for" and that despite his son leaving school they were still responsible for repaying any loan money accepted. Another student mentioned his father was 62, and still paying off his loans from college.

Pre-college Preparation. A major area of concern that was emphasized during the MON meeting observations was student organization and study habits. During his time in the program, Mr. Johnson realized many of his students were simply not prepared for the demands of college. Students coming in did not understand the importance of workload and class scheduling, time management, punctuality with assignments, and

college expectations. Mr. Johnson stressed to students they are now adults and will be treated like and expected to act as such.

In line with greater group challenges with pre-college preparation, study habits were a specific area of concern all three participants addressed as a challenge. Anthony was very blunt by saying “No, I do not” when asked if he felt he had good study habits. He added, “Actually I just learned how to study...well I'm still learning how to study.” He went on to say he never learned how to study in high school, and it's been tough learning how to study “when you're taking some of the hardest classes you've ever taken before.”

Ryan echoed similar sentiments in regards to lack of developing study habits at the secondary level. When asked to rate his study habits on a scale of one to five, Ryan gave himself a 3.5 and felt his study habits got worse once he stopped being home schooled and entered public school in 11th grade. He noted,

“Coming into (public) high school, they said that I'd be behind because I came from home school, parent taught, everything like that. They said I'd be behind all the kids, and it probably wouldn't be the best idea for me to come...but in all reality, public school turned out to be a lot easier than home school for me because the home school aspect was an accelerated mindset. So when I came to public school and it was like, ‘Oh, you have a paper due but it's not due until three, four weeks and next month, two months or whatever’. It seemed like in a way it was slowed down, and I didn't really feel challenged in (public) high school.”

He alluded to the lack of rigor in public high schools got him in the habit of not needing to study, and now in college he has had polish up his skills and refers back to his mentality from his home school experiences.

Quincy felt he had to “start over” when he started college. He explained he needed to completely learn to study differently that he did in high school. He elaborated,

“When I first got to college, I (studied) like I did in high school. In high school I just looked at it, remembered it or anything, maybe take pictures of it. When I got to college I learned you had to put in some hours and don’t let (anything) be a distraction. To help improve their habits, Anthony and Quincy specifically referenced advice Mr. Johnson had given the larger group about not being comfortable when studying. Anthony stated, “I used to think I had to be comfortable to study, and Mr. Johnson said that’s not the right way. He tells me I need to be somewhere uncomfortable like the library, and get away from all the things that can distract you.”

College Expectations. A general lack of pre-college guidance and counseling was evident and served as another deterrent to student persistence and success. Students came in with unrealistic expectations or preconceived notions about community college that painted an incomplete picture of what to really expect. This in turn caused some areas of concern or disappointment among participants. An example of this was discussed by Anthony who felt he would come to BSCC and, “make straight A’s, and

graduate and be out of here within the two years that they required me, and be on to (a four year university), with no struggling or nothing, just breeze by.” Anthony realized this goal was unrealistic during his first semester as he went through several academic struggles, and appeared ashamed in the interview that he had not met the goal and was likely not to graduate within two years. .

The suggested idea that community college would be easy appeared to have contributed to the Anthony’s struggles. This perception, however, is not uncommon. A study on the family dynamics of college selection by Bers and Galowich (2002) found that community colleges are not seen as equals to four-year universities. Their study found this may be rooted in the perception that community colleges lack academic rigor. Other factors that lead to the perception that the community college is an inferior option are the open admission policies, a misinterpreting of the community college’s mission and open door policy, and ideas portrayed in the media that are supported by family, friends, and colleagues (Proper, n.d.).

However, in an interview with a BSCC educational planner, the perception of community college inferiority may be an issue that is ingrained at the K-12 level. The counselor said, “A lot of high schools push students to go to a four-year college, which is fine, but not every student wants to go to a four-year college. We sort of get sold as the second option, like if you have to go to BSCC it’s a problem or something to be ashamed of.” The idea that community college would be easy or is a second rate education was troublesome and appeared to have contributed to the struggles Anthony referenced. Coincidentally or not, Anthony expressed the most academic struggles of the three

individual interviewees. He said, however, that he felt would be able to get back on track by going to summer school.

Ryan offered a different approach to his pre-college expectations. He said that he actually felt “over prepared” for college based on his high school experiences. He shared, “In high school they talk about how the college professors aren't going to tolerate this, and they're going to treat you certain type of way, and they're going to have high expectations of you. I mean when I came to college I had this idea that everything would be super strict in a certain type of way.” However once he got to college, Ryan felt college “turned out to be a lot more relaxed than I thought it would be” and this caused him issues with time management. In essence he felt he had too much freedom, and was not prepared for the transition from having a very specific schedule in high school. He added,

“In high school you have class from 8:00 am until 3:00 pm., trying to finish whatever homework you have, until 5:00. At 6:00, then try to eat and (then) go to sleep and make it in time for school the next morning.

Where as in college you can have one class at 8:00 in the morning, and that can be only class the whole day. You don't have people to constantly remind you of deadlines. You have to figure it out on your own.”

Confidence. Taking into account the aforementioned hindrances to persistence and success that participants expressed in the larger group meetings or individual interviews, it is no surprise that a general lack of confidence in their ability to be successful was cited. Ryan stated,

“Part of my biggest challenge would just to be just talking and speaking and having something to say. When classroom discussion goes on, I got plenty of say, but nothing comes up. I won't raise my hand. I'll stay in my little corner and do everything in my power to make sure I'm not called on.”

Anthony cited he had issues taking tests, even when he felt he knew the answers.

In a March 6, 2014 interview with Anthony we discussed midterms and how he felt about the upcoming part of term. The following is an excerpt from that interview.

Investigator: So how do you feel going into midterms?

Anthony: Nervous.

Investigator: OK. Why do you feel nervous? You feel prepared?

Anthony: Not yet... no.

Investigator: Not yet?

Anthony: No, not at all. I really don't think I'm going to do too good to be honest.

Investigator: Well why do you think that?

Anthony: I've never been good with taking tests. For some reason it's hard for me to take tests. Sometimes it's an incident where I know the materials just it's hard for me to, I don't know, focus or concentrate. Especially when I have a pen and paper and the time in front of me. I don't know. I have anxiety I guess.

Anthony's confidence level may be attributed to his aforementioned unrealistic expectations. When he realized college was not going to be as easy as he assumed, he admitted that impacted his confidence and he struggled with finding the proper motivation to move forward. When asked about his

expectations of college and the reality of some of his academic struggles, he noted, “I told myself I could handle it, but...it was harder than what I imagined it would be. I just realized I had to find the motivation.” He went on to add, “I don't know, sometimes, in the back of my head, something's telling me, maybe this is not what you want to do. Maybe just telling myself (to go to college) so that I could escape from something, but I don't know.”

Additional Themes

Stereotype Threat. Several themes mentioned during interviews and in observations had positive or negative impacts on success and persistence, dependent on the participants' situation. Students' perceptions and reactions to stereotypes were a major topic of discussion throughout MON meetings, as Mr. Johnson made it a constant point to make students understand to not allow themselves to be defined by such stereotypes. As previously noted in the excerpt from the January 21, 2014 meeting students felt the stereotypes that shaped that negative attitudes toward African American males were drug dealer, in jail or dead, and various other negative connotations. What was obvious in the meetings, and through the demands Mr. Johnson had on the students, was the work done in the MON program had an influence on the students wanting to alleviate these stereotypes. Students were not allowed to wear hats in MON meetings and were not allowed to sag their pants at any time they were on campus. If this was observed on the campus by a mentor or mentee, they would encourage the student to pull their pants up. Students were receptive to these ideals and what was noted in student

interactions was several students felt the image of African Americans put out in the media was a key contributor to the stereotype challenges.

On the February 17, 2014 MON meeting students engaged in a dialogue about stereotypes and a debate ensued about how one looks, versus how one should be judged. One student, who was in his 30's, commented that the impact of rap music has negatively shaped African American culture. He felt younger African American males are influenced by what they see in the media and act in a way that is mimicking what they see, and is unappealing to the status quo. A younger student, who as approximately 19 years old, disagreed and the following debate ensued.

Aaron (student in 30's): The problem we have (with being stereotyped) is the image that is put on television and in the media by rappers and actors...but even worse we embrace these stereotypes. Young black kids copy what they see, and the image we put out there for them to see if negative but we do nothing to change it [OC: *Several students nod head in agreement. It is also noticed Mr. Johnson appears to agree*].

Liam (student in his late teens, early 20s): I don't agree with that. People act how they want to act. What we see on TV or hear in music doesn't really impact how people think [OC: *Several students agree with this as well, all younger. It appears the difference between ages is impacting the view of culture, and its impact on this topic*].

Aaron: That's easy to say but reality is what is set as the trend to do is established through media and images that are put in our (mind).

Liam: But anybody that allows music or a video to control them has a problem. Their parents should be teaching them better.

Aaron: True, but how many of us grow up without both parents or any sort of (positive role model)? What if nobody is teaching you how to act and dress? How many people in here even have a suit for a job interview or know what is expected in that type of environment? And do you ever see anybody in rap music carrying them self like that?

Aaron went on to argue that he felt rap music perpetuates stereotypes and racism, while Liam still felt it was a personal responsibility to not be influenced by outside authority. While the students did not agree or not on this particular point, what was obvious in the discussion was regardless of point of view students understood the need to address the same issue: improving African American males' perceptions in order to alleviate stereotyping. Looking at the age difference between the two men, it may not have been surprising there were differences on the opinion of the culture rap music created, however to see them both understand the need for a change in African American males perceptions was noteworthy.

In the individual interviews, Anthony addressed this specific statistic as he had heard it in past MON meetings in regards to social issues that tend to plague African American males. He said he actually uses those as motivation, as opposed to discouraging him.

“At the end of the day, I guess I am a statistic. My parents are divorced, a lot of people say I'm not supposed to go to college. I should probably be in jail. I'm part of that statistic. I don't like the idea of that. I don't want to be part of that. I don't want to be another number, I guess you could say.”

To help combat these stereotypes, he says he tries to do things to show he is a serious student and does not worry too much of other's opinions. He added, “Actually, when I'm sitting in the classroom, I make sure I'm sitting in the very front and the last

thing I'm worried about is the people in the classroom.” Quincy noted a similar approach to stereotype threat as Anthony.

Ryan however, offered a different perspective on stereotyping. He did not so much feel extra pressure or stress from people outside of his race, but from other African American students. As previously noted, Ryan is from California and was homeschooled a majority of his K-12 schooling. He came to Texas in 11th grade because his mother moved to rural city in the state after his father passed away. However, he chose to leave that city and live with his uncle and attend BSCC while in college due to its metropolitan environment, which was more similar to his California upbringing. Ryan expressed once he got to Texas, he felt other African American students treated and thought of him differently. He stated about his high school experience that, “The way that they reacted and treated me, or whatever it kind of brought up forth confusion. They have this idea and mentality that I should be more like them, and I have this idea that they could probably be more like me.” While he stated students were more open in college, he still referenced at times what he experienced in high school did exist at the college. In regards to that he said, “I mean they have this weird notion that I talked too proper and I said things too smart.”

Family Support. Support and encouragement from family was another theme that varied dependent of the participant. Ryan described his family as loving, caring, and compassionate. He said his family has been most helpful by allowing him to explore what he likes and not put additional pressures on him in regards to class. He went on to say, “I have support from my family and they kind of let me know that it's okay. Just to

know that if I mess up, I can still go back and try again. We can relieve some of the pressure of the whole college feel. He added, “It's good to know because a lot of people come into college thinking ‘I got one shot and it's now or never’. Reality is if you don't do well in the class you can come back and try it again. Just because you did bad in one class, doesn't mean you're bad in all your classes. You might have something that's holding you back; it won't hold you back forever.” Ryan is thankful his family has been supportive in helping him find his niche, and credits their support as the biggest influence on his persistence and success. Quincy echoed similar sentiments, by also crediting his family as the number one factor to his persistence and success. He stated his parents taught him to be more self-sufficient and be able to handle any obstacles he may face.

Anthony had a completely different tone when discussing his family involvement. The following excerpt from an interview held on February 27, 2014 spoke volumes about his feelings toward his family's role in his college success.

Investigator: Any family influence?

Anthony: I wish I could say something. My family, they acknowledge that I am in school. They do acknowledge it. It's my mother especially, she does, but sometimes...My family...it's a touchy subject.

Investigator: Okay.

Anthony: I don't know. They do want to see me succeed in college, they do, but sometimes I feel like it's maybe for the wrong reasons. Like maybe I'm not doing what they want to do. That's a big problem too. My dad, he probably wants me to be an engineer or something and make, go straight to a chemical plant, making a lot of money, but I really don't want to do that. My mother, she really wanted me to be a nurse. My family, we have a long, strong line of nurses in our family, but that's not what I want to do. Sometimes I feel like I could be disappointing them a little bit maybe.

Investigator: Really?

Anthony: Yeah.

Investigator: Have they ever told you they're not disappointing them?

Anthony: They never told me that.

As noted in the excerpt, Anthony found discussing his family to be a touchy subject. When going through this question, it was observed his head was down and his shoulders slumped and in several parts of this questioning, he was almost inaudible. His complete tone and demeanor changed during any exchange of questioning discussing his family and it appeared through further discussion this relationship caused stresses that negatively impacted his academic success.

In examining the findings it was clear the role of the MON program served as a generally positive experience for participants and allowed participants the opportunity to make connections that they may have not had the opportunity to engage in, as well as understand and learn to combat negative stereotypes. While themes were separated in an effort to highlight the distinctness between variables to student success, the reality is many aspects of what participants cited as success intertwined with a general theme of mentorship. Participants cited very little in the form of engagement independent of the MON program, which is positive from the standpoint that the program appears to be successful in one of its key goals. However, it could also be seen as potentially negative that students appear to be struggling to assimilate without the shelter of the program surrounding them.

Among the themes that are highlighted as hindrances to success, finances were most consistently interrelated between the findings. Issues related to absenteeism due to

workload were closely connected with the need for finances to cover college costs. A lack of college preparation at the K-12 level also appeared to contribute to the lack of understanding of the financial aid process, and the challenges described due to lacking in that area. The lack of finances and understanding the financial aid process also impacted persistence. It was noted in the findings that a student expressed taking one class per semester due to the workload he took on to be able to pay for college. Had he known about the financial aid process earlier, perhaps he could have matriculated through college quicker. Traditionally, racial and ethnic minority students, low-income background, or first-generation college students are likely to be unaware or have very limited and untimely information about federal financial aid programs. Oftentimes, the perception about college costs that is held by students and their families affect their decisions and influences their behaviors about college enrollment and academic pursuits (Burdman, 2005). As college costs continue to rise, these struggles will likely continue to heavily impact this population's attitudes towards college.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the factors influencing the academic experiences and degrees of success among African American males at a Texas community college. As the researcher for this study, this topic served a specific interest. Working with African American males in community colleges and seeing their daily challenges have been a major aspect of my professional obligations. I also serve as a mentor in an MMI program at a community college, and in my role as a campus leader, I take pride in being a model and a guide for these young men through their academic journey. Through the research done in this paper, the goal was not only to understand what impacts student successes or failures, but how to take that information and improve services and support efforts that other colleges can model with their African American male populations.

Observations and discussions from the larger group mentorship meetings and individual interviews presented the lived experiences of this group of participants, and provided themes that they identified as relevant to their college experience. These themes were then coded and examined in relation to the Mason (1998) model, which served as a key conceptual framework for this study. Background variables, academic variables, environmental variables, and psychological outcomes are the key components Mason identifies as impacting a student's desire persist or leave the institution. This study examined how each of these constructs played a role in participants' success over the course of a semester. By analyzing the data that was collected over the course of the

semester, key implications from the findings are highlighted. Based on these key implications, recommendations for future research and implementing these findings in a practical context are discussed.

Background Variables. The themes that Mason identified as relevant to persistence and success in regards to a student's background were age, enrollment status, educational goals, and high school performance. Within this study, Anthony and Ryan had clear educational goals, while Quincy appeared to be undecided. In regards to Anthony and Ryan, their goals were consistent with Wood and Palmer's (2012) findings by being extrinsic in nature. Financial gain served as their motivations for attending college. An example was observed in the interview with Ryan, who said the only reason he was getting his HVAC certificate was to make more money than his two part-time jobs provided and while he enjoyed it, he had no long-term interest in the field.

Quincy, however, while stating he wanted to earn his necessary credits for transfer to a university, still had not declared a major. As addressed earlier, he was in his third year at BSCC. A factor that had impacted his decision in declaring a major was that he did not get off to a great academic start at BSCC. He added he had improved academically, learned several lessons from his first year and felt he would be ready to transfer by December 2014. He felt at that point he would then evaluate a major.

While participants expressed they did well academically in high school, they also did not feel high school prepared them for college. A direct result of the lack of academic preparation coming out of high school, that added a potential hurdle to the participants' persistence and success, was all three participants had to take developmental

(college preparation) coursework while at BSCC. Having to take developmental courses is not an uncommon experience, as roughly 60% of community college students enroll in at least one developmental education course (Lu, 2013). Among African American males, the need for college readiness courses is even more likely. ACT data show, that students of color are much less likely to meet ACT college readiness benchmarks. Around 16% of African American students meet the benchmark in reading, and about 14% meet the benchmark in math (CCSSE, 2014). However, while developmental coursework can be considered a benefit for community college students and aid in their retention, it can also be considered one of the strongest predictors of attrition (Fike & Fike, 2008). A study conducted by Hawley and Harris (2005) found the more developmental courses that a student was required to take, the less likely they were to persist, and ultimately drop out. A study conducted by Crosta (2013) found that early dropouts were more likely to have to take developmental coursework in reading, writing, or math, and were on average placed two levels below college-ready in these three subject areas.

In this study, instances of success and challenge with developmental courses were presented. Ryan spoke on a successful experience with his developmental courses. He said,

“Actually I did [have to take developmental courses], which was quite weird honestly, in my opinion. I came out of high school doing Algebra 2 and pre-calculus, but when I got here they said my scores weren't high enough, so they put me in a Math 0304, but when I went to

Math 0304 they realize I was more advance in that, and they skipped me to Math 0306, and I passed Math 0306.”

As noted earlier, Quincy did not get off to a great academic start at BSCC. This was at least partly attributed to the challenges he faced with completing the developmental course cycle. He noted he had repeated his math course work in his first year, and it took him longer to complete the cycle than expected. Despite his early struggles with the cycle, he did eventually pass all his developmental classes. He is now working toward his classes that can transfer for academic credit. He noted, “It was frustrating [repeating the classes] but I had to finish. I’m glad I stuck it out.”

While Ryan and Quincy shared levels of success in the developmental class cycle, Anthony was currently still taking developmental classes and had not experienced the same success. As noted in the findings, Anthony had to drop a course in each of the past two semesters. That course was a developmental course. With his struggles in his developmental classes, Anthony put his self in a position to become a victim of the developmental course cycle. This cycle causes frustrations and challenges for students that find themselves unable to pass the developmental cycle. In essence, students are already paying for courses that will not count for transfer credit. The frustration grows even more if they have to repeat a course, causing even more financial and academic frustrations. This in turn, can lead to students leaving the college. At BSCC, nearly half the students enrolled in developmental courses have to repeat them. Of that, approximately 33% never complete the developmental cycle and eventually drop out.

In further discussing variables impacted by background, Anthony discussed the instability of his K-12 experience. He talked about how he went between several schools to avoid having to go to school in the area he grew up in, and the issues that caused for him. He recounted a story where it was found out he was going to school out of his assigned district and got kicked out. "I was kicked out of Elwood (school district) because I was a young kid, and I didn't know any better. They had me hemmed up, asked where I stay, and I told and ever since I went to North Creek. When I entered the North Creek school district, that's when everything kind of went downhill, I guess." Further enforcing the issues Anthony expressed about the North Creek Independent School District, the Texas Education Agency shut the district down in 2013 due to a combination of a misuse of finances scandal, the completion rate at North Creek High School, and student performance district-wide on statewide assessments (KTRK-TV, 2013). Fortunately for Anthony, he was able to transfer to and complete high school, in a different and more stable school district within the BSCC service area. However, his time in the North Creek school district most likely directly correlated to the challenges he has faced at BSCC. Schools in low SES neighborhoods tend to have fewer resources and their students begin school with little preparation and require an educational system with a more skillful and focused approach. However, the teachers in the low SES schools are often less paid and less trained than the teachers in the higher SES schools. The results are low achievement rates for the students (Brogan, 2009). These factors that begin at the K-12 level tend to shape a students' attitude toward education, and cause challenges for those students fortunate enough to attend college.

Academic Variables. Study habits, absenteeism, and major uncertainty were the main constructs identified by Mason (1998) as impacting persistence. From a positive perspective, all three participants expressed a clearly defined plan of study at BSCC. Astin's (1991) retention model explains this as a key component to student persistence. However, challenges with absenteeism and study habits were identified.

As noted with Anthony, attendance issues due to a lack of transportation led to him having to drop a course. In his first year at BSCC, he had already dropped two courses. This situation can become particularly troublesome for Anthony and follow him beyond his time at BSCC because of the state of Texas' six course drop policy. Instituted in 2007, Section 51.907 of the Texas Education Code states that beginning in the fall 2008 semester, students who began full-time college enrollment at a Texas public institution for the first time in the Fall 2007 semester or later will be limited to a total of six dropped courses for academic reasons during their undergraduate studies ("State of Texas", 2007). The drops also follow the student from institution to institution within the state. So for example, if a student has two drops at one Texas public college and transfers to another Texas public college, they only have four drops remaining. The impact here is Anthony had already used two drops in only his first year of college. He put himself in a position where he has even less room for error in a situation where there was already little, and could lead to additional academic challenges.

Ryan's class attendance issues were more directly related to his workload. This is in line with literature on workload and its impact on academic success. A study conducted by Orzag, Orzag, and Whitmore (2001) reported that 55% of students with a

part time job felt their workload has a negative effect on their studies. Other findings include 40% report that work limits their class schedule; 36% report it reduces their class choices; 30% report it limits the number of classes they take; and 26% report it limits access to the library. Furthermore, it was reported that 40% of students that work full-time jobs ultimately drop out (National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2007). Fortunately for Ryan he was able to catch up on his coursework from any missed class time, and still do well academically in spite of his attendance issues. Ryan had passed all his courses with at least a “B” in the previous 8 week semester.

Struggles with study habits were observed with all three participants in individual interviews and a major area of concern among the group observations. These struggles cited by participants in the study were consistent with research conducted by the University of California system. In their 2008 study of 160,000 undergraduate students, workload and family responsibilities were cited as impediments to students’ study time (O’Brien, 2010). The second most common obstacle cited by students in the study, was that they were depressed, stressed, or upset. However, the number one reason agreed upon by 33% of respondents was that they simply did not know how to sit down and study. However what was observed in the study was that despite these obstacles with study habits, once students got to college they were not seeking out the college resources available to help correct these habits and improve any potential academic challenges. As mentioned earlier in the study, participants did cite some interactions outside of class they found helpful. However these interactions were not things the students needed to seek

out. They were directly associated with their class, the MON program, or some other means that correlated with their everyday routine.

Through the Office of Educational Planning, BSCC provides workshops on subjects such as time management, study skills, and other college success related topics. BSCC also provides free tutoring services in every subject through their Student Success Center. However when participants were asked about the use of these services, Ryan said that in general he felt students did not seek out what was at the disposal. He said, "I don't feel like as college students we really take advantage in every way that we can; mostly because we don't do the proper research and what's exactly offered to us." Ryan did note, however, that he personally had taken advantage of free workshops and the Student Success Center. Anthony, who admitted to having trouble with English and was actually failing an English class, had the following to say during an April 3, 2014 interview.

Investigator: Since we last talked, we had discussed midterms. We were getting around midterms. How did midterms go?

Anthony: Terrible.

Investigator: I remember you mentioning expressing yourself on paper was something you didn't feel that you were very strong at. Have you sought out any resources; writing labs or anything?

Anthony: Extra help and things like that? No, I'm not ... not really.

Investigator: Were you aware of the services; the writing labs, and those things?

Anthony: Yes.

Investigator: Why haven't you used them? What do you think would be the reason you maybe haven't used some of those services?

Anthony: Maybe because I really don't like the idea of asking people for help. I guess that's kind of stupid on my behalf.

While tutoring can help students become actively engaged in their learning, improve their grades, and adjust to academics and college life, a stigma is associated with tutoring that can be difficult to overcome (Dvorak, 2000). Students that resist tutoring may tend to because they may be anxious about revealing perceived ignorance, may be nervous about being critiqued, or may feel they are being forced to seek help ("Los Angeles Mission College", 2014). The stigma attached with tutoring, and seeking out additional help in general, is a challenge that appears to be impacting Anthony and causing further issues with his persistence and success.

As noted previously, Quincy is in his third year at BSCC and expressed when he first got to the college he had to start over with learning the necessary study habits to be successful. Quincy expressed that his first year at BSCC was the most difficult and admitted getting into the habit of studying was an adjustment. "At first, no matter what I told myself, I wasn't studying as much as I should have been. I wasted a lot free time on campus in the game room or just hanging out in the lobby area". He says starting in his second year he began going to the library during down time on campus, and using the Student Success Center and other services provided by the campus. He credits these changes as helping with his persistence and success.

Environmental Variables. Finance, outside encouragement, hopelessness/helplessness, and family responsibilities were themes identified to impact the environment for African American males in the Mason (1998) model. None of the three participants reported challenges related to family responsibilities or finances that

impacted their academics. As noted in the findings, however, Anthony's situation with course drops would likely impact his future aid and cause additional responsibilities. Despite finances playing a relatively small role for individual participants at the time this research was conducted, the troubles expressed in group observations were consistent with the literature and warranted attention. The issue of financial literacy is especially troubling for African American males because ethnic minority college students are more likely to encounter problems completing their degree because of large share of unmet financial aid (Haycock, 2006). Paying for a college education has worsened for students due to educational institutions increasing tuition while not increasing need-based aid (Palmer et al., 2010). Consequently, many low-income, underrepresented ethnic minority students are less likely to attain a degree. Furthermore, students at the low-income level have the greatest disparity between their aid packages and cost of attendance. Due to factors such as these, it is important that African American males understand the total cost of college, the financial aid process, how it can best work to their advantage, and the ramifications of not properly using available financial aid.

Perspectives on outside encouragement differed dependent on the participant. Ryan and Quincy cited encouragement from family and parental involvement as a strong tie to their success. Ryan however did reveal stresses from his engagement and impending marriage may impact his future academic decisions. This is further addressed in the psychological outcomes discussion. Anthony's testimony was so strong in the opposite direction it merited further attention. It was obvious during the interview

process that his family situation caused extra stresses for Anthony. He also cited he felt he was a disappointment to his family.

Lack of family involvement and support can be a difficult obstacle for students to deal with, and be a potential detriment to success. A study conducted by Bryan and Simmons (2009) on post-secondary success for first-generation college students focused on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) theory of human development. In his theory, Bronfenbrenner suggests development is influenced by four different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem comprises of the people and circumstances to which an individual is exposed on a daily or regular basis; the mesosystem is an integration of different environments such as home and school; the exosystem is influences outside an individual's environment that affect development (e.g. like neighbors, friends, extended kin, the media, social service agencies, or a parent's workplace); and the macrosystem consists of the laws, customs, attitudes, and values of one's culture and community. In their study, Bryan and Simmons specifically examined the impacts of the microsystem, which includes parents and other family members that live in the same home as the individual. All participants in their research identified close knit families as a theme relevant to their college experience. As related to the current study, Bryan and Simmons' research is important to note because differences in family involvement was noted among the participants and the subsequent academic impact varied, as well.

The hopelessness/helplessness factor was not specifically observed from students in the MON group meetings. No student specifically shared any challenge of not feeling

they can make it, or brought their specific struggles to the group at large. However, the actual goal of the program was to help students address that they could get a job, or be successful. Thus, through the workshops, programs, and lectures presented at the group meetings a proactive, educational environment was created to help make sure students could combat certain situations that can lead to a helpless or hopeless feeling. Some of these instances may have been associated with their college experiences, while others were focused on real-life scenarios away from the campus.

For example, during the March 4, 2014 meeting various scenarios were role played in order to help students understand how to respond or react to certain environments. One such example was discussing with students what to do if they were to be stopped by the police. Mr. Johnson, who is an attorney by trade, advised students on how to understand it is not up to them to choose why they were stopped and to comply respectfully would always be the best approach. In the same meeting, the topic of how to reach out to your instructor if you are struggling in a class was presented. Students were advised to be upfront and honest, keep regular contact with their professors, and take an “incomplete” if possible as opposed to an “F” or dropping the class. So again, while specific student challenges of their environment or not feeling they were able to make it through college was not brought up in any group meetings, the programming was centered around providing guidance that can ultimately alleviate the hopelessness/helplessness factor.

Among the individual interview participants, the hopelessness/helplessness factor was most prevalent with Anthony. As the semester moved forward, the demeanor and

tone of Anthony became more subdued. This was particularly obvious in the April 4, 2014 interview after he had taken midterms, a situation he described as a “lost cause”. Anthony admitted struggling with motivation and was starting to wonder why he was in college. It was clear at this point of the study the combination of different pressures throughout the semester had taken its toll on Anthony, and his enthusiasm about college was declining.

The influence of environment impacting a feeling of hopelessness/helplessness was noted by Quincy. Although he has been able to persist, he admitted that the struggles of going to college in the same environment he grew up in was challenging. He said, “It can be hard when I go home, and be around my old friends...it’s like I’m in college and everything, but it just doesn’t feel like anything has changed.” This is consistent with the literature presented by Mohammadi (1996) that suggests never leaving the environment they grew up in is a reason many low socioeconomic community college students struggle.

Psychological Outcomes. When assessing the psychological outcomes of Mason’s model, goal commitment and internalization, and an overall sense of satisfaction with the institution were all generally positive from the participants. Anthony rated his experience at the college an “eight” on a scale of 1-10 and stated he was “very satisfied” with his experience. He noted the other 20% were a result of his own struggles and motivations, and was “very satisfied” with BSCC. Quincy felt the college did a good job reaching out to students and also stated his own personal shortcomings, described as “being lazy”, was his biggest issue.

Only two minor areas of dissatisfaction with the college were mentioned at any point during the interview, both being with the MON program. Quincy noted that in the larger group settings, some students had become displeased with the direction of the MON program. He said, "Some students talk about how they miss when Men of (Nobility) was just us chilling and talking about our problems." It is fair to note that as the program gained financial support from the college, the scope of the program changed. Prior to having its own operational budget, MON did mostly serve as an informal meeting among African American males to discuss campus challenges. As the funding increased, the opportunity for specific workshops and programs relevant to specific student issues became more practical.

The more formal and informational approach appears to have impacted some student opinions of the program, although it did not appear attendance had suffered because of it. Anthony expressed not so much a dissatisfaction with the program, but more so an idea of how it can evolve. "I feel it's a little too focused on (African American males) and things like that", he said. "I feel like...there should be ways we should be able to reach out even more Caucasian or Hispanic males too." In the fall 2013 semester, Men of Nobility started efforts to expand its cope to Hispanic males, due to the similarities in challenges between them and African American males. So any feelings of the program being too exclusive, has started to be addressed.

The idea of utility, and the belief that if a student really believed the program would benefit his future, the more likely he will persist, was strong among all three

participants (Mason, 1998). Ryan exhibited the strongest connection to this theme. He noted in his April 14, 2014 interview:

“As far as long term, I feel like I'd need to complete what I've started not only just because it's what I wanted to do to begin with and it's in a field that I enjoy quite a bit and no matter what, it still going to be something I like whether I'm working (in another field) or not. It'll also allow for other career opportunities in the future if I decide to. So, say I do work air conditioning for 10 to 15 years and I get burnt out on it, I won't be stuck working air conditioning. I could at least start branching off into another digital graphics, you know. Hypothetically, I'm working and I've already completed my computer science degree, I can be working air conditioning while working in the computer science area together. It can be anything from web site designing odd jobs or maybe it's something I actually just do on the weekends that help in digital graphics.”

The most obvious factor when examining all the three participants' utility was that Ryan has the clearest idea of how to get where he wanted to get. He had the strongest plan in place to pattern his career and had very good grasp on all options available and how he planned to utilize them. While Anthony and Quincy stated plans for their future, Ryan clearly knew how get to where he wanted to get and how to execute his ideas.

Another major theme that impacted students' persistence and success was stress, and how they dealt with the stress caused by various challenges. One area of stress that

participants expressed was stereotype threat. While the impact of stereotype threat varied, the reality is stereotyping and how to respond to it was constant theme among MON group meetings and addressed in some capacity by all individual participants. This is not surprising when these negative stereotypes are constantly brought to African American males' attention, even if they are not correct. For example, it has been conventional wisdom that there are more African American males in prison than in college. However, through use of data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and the Department of Justice's statistics on prison enrollment, Howard professor Ivory Toldson reported in 2011 that there are 1.4 million African American males in college compared to 841,000 in prison (Bouie, 2013; Figure 2).

Statistics such as these and information to combat them were something Mr. Johnson constantly did throughout the semester. He felt it was important students understood the reality of their situation, and have the proper information to be able to challenge inaccuracies. Mr. Johnson also simply felt it was important that the students heard some good news about African American males, as opposed to so many negative stories and statistics that tend to be associated with this population.

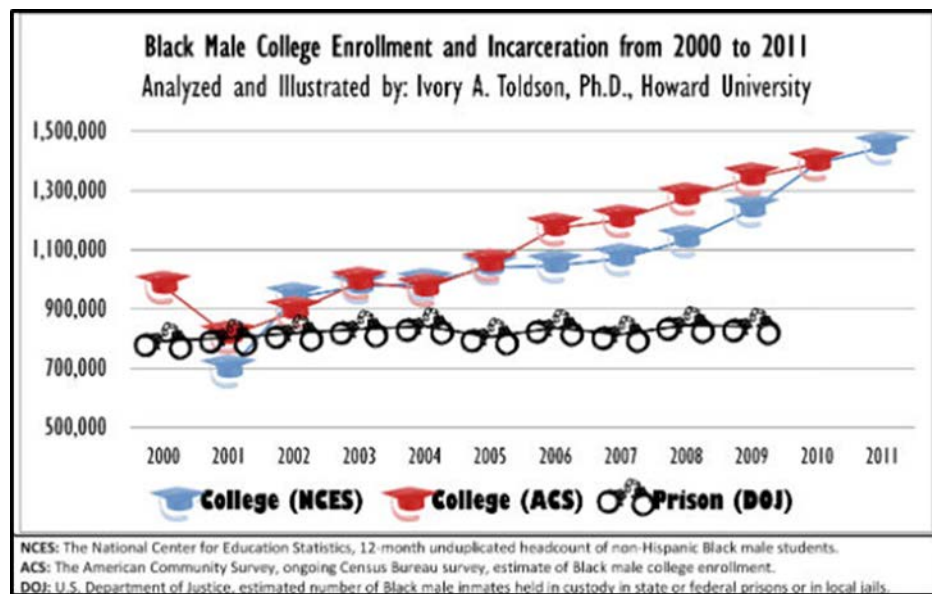


Figure 2. Toldson (2011) black male college enrollment and incarceration from 2000 to 2011

What was acknowledged about stereotyping is that while all participants dealt with it in some capacity, the response to it and where they felt it from differed. As mentioned, Ryan felt more stereotype threat from his own race, as opposed to a different race as other participants presented. Ryan's feelings of being treated differently from other African Americans can be partially explained by Ogbu's Acting White Theory. Introduced in the mid 1980's, Ogbu's theory explains why black students might disdain behaviors associated with high achievement, like speaking standard grammatical English (Lee, 2002). In short, Ogbu argues that African American's cultural attitudes toward intellect are a hindrance to academic achievement. Ogbu stated in a 2002 interview, "[African American youth] are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models, they are looking at entertainers" (Lee, 2002). Ogbu contends this attitude in turn shapes the way

African Americans feel they should carry themselves, and those that do not portray this stereotype are “acting white” and can be treated as an outcast.

Toldson (2013) however states the concept of acting white could “have more to do with styles of dress, communication nuances, music preferences and a particular swagger that is independent of intellectual aptitude.” The feelings Ryan expressed were more in line with Toldson’s idea. Ryan never compromised his academic prowess in an effort to fit in. As previously stated, he always felt students could stand to be more like him and has done well academically while at BSCC. It did however cause some social tensions for Ryan, and as a person that is naturally introverted he did admit it caused him to be even more protective of himself. As previously noted, Anthony and Quincy addressed stereotype threat consistent with Talbert’s (2012) study which cited students used negative societal stereotyping as a motivation for success, as opposed to a hindrance, and credited that with helping with their motivation to succeed.

The stresses from family obligations that were mentioned deserved some merit due to the impact it had on individual participants. Anthony’s shortcomings from family support have been well documented in discussion, and in many ways appeared to contribute greatly to his academic shortcomings. Perhaps the most telling observation from the interview process was him being thankful for having a chance to be a part of the research process. Despite the time and effort taken from his schedule, he mentioned the process of participating in this study was the first time since he had been in college that somebody listened to his problems, and offered any sort of insight, advice, and

encouragement. This exchange was not only quite telling as to how badly Anthony yearned for guidance, but also appeared to serve as a therapeutic opportunity.

While Ryan spoke of his family as generally supportive, he did share that the stresses of being engaged and an impending marriage put new priorities on his plate that he felt he needed to immediately address. As previously stated, he made this decision to earn more money but in further interviewing and discussion about this path he shared he planned to take a year off from school and work in HVAC for a year to help get his new life started. He said this decision was not one his parents agreed with, and while they had always been supportive up to this point, they preferred he finish school first then get married. Ryan did stress he planned to return to school after the year and complete his computer science degree at BSCC. He stressed computer science was always his main goal but through the HVAC program he can get the type of position that can provide a better income. He also was very adamant about the importance of having options and always “having something to fall back on” as the main reasons he intended to complete.

Assumptions

Coincidentally, the differences between Anthony and Ryan served as two case studies that confirmed the usefulness of the Mason model in examining African American male community college success. The two participants differed in almost every way with regards to the constructs from Mason’s conceptual model, and had different results with their current persistence and success. Conceptually, one set of variables directly affects another set, and this was directly observed when coding all the themes described throughout the interview process.

When assessing background variables, Anthony grew up dealing with a parental split in a self-described “terrible” neighborhood. He had an unstable K-12 experience, as he bounced between school districts growing and his pre-college preparation was severely lacking. While Ryan did have some transition from his home schooled environment to his public school environment, he felt “over prepared” for college. He also grew up in a self-described stable home environment, with a supportive family. Both participants had clear educational goals once getting to college, but other constructs such as absenteeism and bad study habits impacted Anthony’s experience much greater than it did Ryan. Anthony had to deal with having to drop classes and poor performance in other classes due to his shortcomings. Ryan did not describe his absenteeism to be as chronic and Anthony’s and did seek tutoring in other help to address his any shortcoming in his studies.

These shortcomings for Anthony most likely caused him to lose some, if not all of his financial aid, thus adding financial pressures. This in turn added burden of now needing a job to pay for college and transportation. The culmination of these factors added extra stress to Anthony throughout the semester, a subdued motivation that led him to questioning his college decision, and an overall increase in helpless/hopelessness factor. Ryan was doing well in school and working towards an occupational certificate in one field, and an associate’s degree in another major.

In short, based on his research and the his model, Mason notes “positive values for the academic variables also lead to positive values for the psychological outcome variables, which lead to increased persistence (p. 757).” In this study Anthony’s

struggles based on academic variables led to negative psychological outcomes, and based on his demeanor as the semester went on, lack of motivation, and questioning his place in college the likelihood of drop out appears high. Whereas the generally positive constructs for Ryan yielded greater success and persistence. Having two participants fall on such opposite ends of this construct helped to validate the Mason model. Being that the model served a key foundational piece for the study, these findings were beneficial. These findings also allowed an opportunity to find potential areas the model can be strengthened.

Another observation from the study is the challenge of addressing students not seeking the help they need in a timely manner. As noted earlier, all participants displayed utility. Data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) confirms this. Their study showed that over 10 years of benchmark data, African American males reported higher aspirations to earn a community college certificate or degree, accessed tutors more frequently, skipped fewer classes, and were more engaged with the campus than their peers (CCCSE, 2014). So the idea of African American male motivation and a willingness to succeed is not necessarily the issue. However, despite data that supports African American males being more engaged, only five percent of those who attend community colleges earn certificates or degrees in three years, as opposed to 32% of Caucasian males. So where is the gap between the data and the results? One idea based on the research in this study, and something not addressed in the CCCSE data, is when these African American males are becoming engaged. At what point in their community college experience are they taking the steps to be successful?

When are African American males accessing the information and making the decision to be more engaged? Research has consistently shown that more engaged students tend to do better in school. So why, if African American males are more engaged, are they struggling so badly at the community college?

Looking back at the data from this study, the experiences of Anthony and Quincy may shed light on this phenomenon. Quincy spoke of struggling early in his college career, and after he found the MON program and took the advice from Mr. Johnson, he started taking advantage of services the institution provided and in turn started having more success and has persisted to his third year. However looking at Anthony and all of his first year struggles, he clearly has shown little engagement outside the MON program and has still not fully taken advantage of the program's offerings nor taken advantage of campus resources. Despite his struggles in English he never took advantage of any services until it was suggested in the April 3, 2014 interview, after two-thirds of the semester was over. As a result of his lack of engagement, he struggled so badly in his first year to the point he admitted losing his motivation to be in college.

Many African American males drop out within their first year at the community college, or do not graduate within 3 years ("Complete College America", 2013, "USDOE", 2004/2009). Anthony and Quincy show how lack of engagement early in their college career impacted their persistence and success. In Quincy's case he will not complete within three years, and time will tell if he completes when he anticipates. While Anthony stated in his final interview that he learned a lot in his first year and was looking forward to getting on track in summer school, the reality of his first year academic

struggles, family situation, and anticipated financial impact may be too much for him to overcome; particularly if he does not have success in his summer classes. Will Anthony start becoming more engaged and persist, or will he become a part of the over 25% of African American males that drop out after their first year (“USDOE”, 204/2009)?

Student engagement is an important contributor to success, but more importantly is *when* the institution gets them engaged. As the CCSSE data and the study suggest, African American males want to be in college and want to succeed. The key to helping them realize that success lies in how soon they can become engaged in the campus experience. While these challenges in persistence and success are legitimately rooted in pre-college preparation, as noted in the study’s research and in the observations getting students to take advantage of available resources poses an issue as well. The reality is no matter what happened in their pre-college experience the students are at the community college now, and are the colleges’ responsibility. The challenge at that point is reaching out to students in a timely manner and helping students understand the type of effort necessary to be a successful college student.

Limitations

Overall, the study was successful in answering the research questions. Over the course of 13 weeks, an in-depth observation of a minority male mentorship program, combined with individual interviews, helped identify factors that served as facilitators or barriers to African American males’ success at the community college. Experiences and resources both inside and outside the classroom that impacted their success was also observed and documented. This study could be replicated and used at other institutions

of higher education seeking to improve the persistence and success efforts of African American males.

Despite the contributions of this study, there are several limitations that warrant attention. One approach that could have strengthened the study is a longer ethnography. This particular study addressed success factors within a given semester. While the design of the four month study produced insightful findings, a case can be made that a full year of data points could help paint a more complete picture of not only student success, but persistence. What is not known in the study is whether or not the students in the individual interviews persisted to the next semester and if so, how they were able to do so. By following a group from one semester to the next, one can better understand the progression and growth a student may transition through.

A further advantage of a longer time frame is the opportunity to better account for the aspect of human error if a data point is missed. For example, during the four month study participants did not always make their scheduled interviews. There was also an instance where the investigator missed one session due to a scheduling conflict. While the intended data to be covered was made up in the next interview session, the length between sessions may have caused a participant to forget a key point that may have been fresh on their minds the week prior. Also there were instances where the MON meetings may have been cancelled or there was not a specific topic presented that could lead to data collection. For example, during the allotted time for the March 25 and April 8, 2014 meetings, a movie was sponsored by MON in honor of veteran's recognition. While the value of the group sponsoring the movie for the campus showed a commitment to

highlighting the program to a greater audience, as a researcher watching a movie provided no valuable data. By only having 13 available weeks to gather data, losing any potential data point may cause a negative impact on the research. A longer time frame of study can help alleviate that potential impact.

Increasing the number of individual participants being studied could also strengthen the research. While the rationale for three individual interview participants was deemed sufficient, examining more experiences and increasing the number of narratives can increase the richness of the study. As noted in the study, the richness of data came from Anthony and Ryan. Quincy added relevant insight, but the depth of his sharing was not as prevalent. An increase in participants can help ensure a fuller collection of experiences, can lead to new themes to persistence and success being recognized, and help further validate coded themes.

Outside of simply increasing participants at one institutional setting, expanding the study to gather data from more participating institutions would further strengthen the research. This is important because as previously noted the researcher was specifically connected to the MON program at BSCC. In some ways this served as an advantage because the participants were comfortable with opening up to somebody from the college. However, having research from other institutions and a researcher not connected to the college or the program helps further ensure any potential biases can be eliminated. Researching several institutions would also require extensive increases in time and manpower to manage. However, the study is easily replicable and can be used in any higher education setting to answer questions about African American male persistence

and success so the possibility of establishing a research team while ensuing consistency in delivery is plausible.

Implications

Outside of the themes highlighted throughout the research, several key areas of observation arose during the semester long observations that merit special attention. One area of note was the changes that students went through as the semester progressed. This was observed in both the group observations and in the individual interviews. Within the group observations, attendance dwindled as the semester went on. At the beginning of the semester there was an apparent motivation and enthusiasm about the meetings and the new semester. However, as the semester wore on attendance was inconsistent and dipped to as low 8 students in attendance at the April 22, 2014 meeting.

Outside of the idea that students had become fatigued over the semester, a possible reason for the changes could be attributed to the aforementioned idea that some students missed the informal tone of the meetings. As noted, this academic year as was the first year the MON received full funding from the institution. With that funding came an administrative change in expectations, and actual programming needed to be incorporated. These changes could have been a turn off for students who missed the more social aspect of the MON program that served as place where they were free to talk and share ideas. With the programming changes to the initiative, the time to simply talk to students about issues was lost in the group meetings.

Among the individual interview participants, Anthony displayed the most obvious changes in demeanor throughout the semester. When first meeting Anthony during the

semester, he appeared very confident and prepared for his second semester of college. As the semester wore on, it was obvious that Anthony was not as prepared as he initially appeared to be. The culmination of having to drop a class, poor performance in another class, and the impending loss of financial aid all visibly took its toll on Anthony over the course of semester. There were points during the semester Anthony appeared he had given up, and he openly questioned why he was in school in an aforementioned interview. However, as we wrapped up our final interviews of the semester, Anthony felt better about the upcoming semester and was looking forward to getting on track in summer school. Oddly enough, Anthony credited his newfound motivation to participating in the interview process for the study. In the final interview, Anthony was thankful for the opportunity to participate and was appreciative for having somebody to listen to him as he sorted through academic and personal problems. In our final interview, he asked me if he could stay in contact with me. Though Ryan had a smoother academic semester, he too was thankful for the opportunity to speak freely about his personal challenges, specifically his impending marriage.

Another key implication observed in the research was a sense that some students may have felt ashamed if they were not performing well academically; almost as if they were a letdown to Mr. Johnson, their mentor, or the MON program in general. There were instances where Quincy appeared uncomfortable discussing not having declared a major. An interview with Anthony in regards to not meeting the expectations he had set for himself also showcased a perception of being ashamed about progress.

Anthony: My expectations were to come in here and make straight A's, and graduate and be out of here within the two years that they required

me, and be on to [a four-year college], with no struggling or nothing, just breeze by.

Investigator: Okay.

Anthony: I didn't meet that expectation.

Investigator: Okay. Right. Understood.

Anthony: It wasn't a realistic goal, but...and...what was the other question?

Investigator: Okay. First of all, you said those were your expectations, and when you got here you didn't feel that was a realistic goal.

Anthony: Yeah.

Investigator: But you still have been able to persist to your second (semester).

Anthony: Yes, sir.

Investigator: When do you think you'll be finished and ready for transfer?

Anthony: Well, I might have to require to take summer school, but then the next year, in the summer, I think I should be able to...[OC: *Anthony's voice trails off, stops talking. Looks at the ground as if he has done something wrong*]

Investigator: Let me tell you right now. First of all, when you answered that question, I kind of noticed, it almost felt like you were ashamed to say that. Look, if it takes extra time that's okay. I was an undergrad for six years. I changed majors. I was just like you. I got to (my university). I thought I'd just jump in, be done in four years, just kind of go to college. But I get in there, and it is hard. It is a transition. I changed my major. You might end up going through that. Hopefully, you don't, but just saying. So there's no shame with any aspect of the struggle. It's all about getting what you need to get done to finish and staying on course. Don't be ashamed about that. There's no need to...If you have to be here a third year or whatever, trust me. You're A-OK.

Anthony: Thank you. [OC: *Anthony smiles, as if he feels relieved to hear okay to struggle; to know somebody else went through what he's going through.*]

While no students specifically expressed any additional pressures from being a part of the MON program, it was sensed that a possible unintended consequence of being a part of the program is the added expectations could be making students uncomfortable if they are not living up to the standards the program attempts to implement. While nothing Mr. Johnson or any mentor had specifically done to chastise students for a lack of performance, it is obvious that students that are committed to the program feel a sense of loyalty and don't want to be a letdown. While that is a positive thing, it can also be a negative if students are giving the perception that everything is okay simply because they feel mentors want everything to be okay. If students are not being honest, they cannot be helped.

Though the scope of the project was not for interviews to serve as counseling sessions, it was obvious that students, despite being in the program, were lacking in areas of mentorship and one-on-one guidance and such questions and conversations that dug into their specific challenges were needed and welcomed. There were several instances that once the tape recorder was turned off the participants still stayed, sometime as much as up to 30 additional minutes, asking questions and advice on various topics they wanted to address. There were times during the study it was very deflating to hear how little support students had in their educational journeys. Also as noted in the study, several students missed the informal tone of the MON meetings. Students were missing the opportunity to simply vent about their problems and challenges, or perhaps even share

successes. As a community college practitioner and mentor in the MON program, these off the record discussions were more valuable than anything that was specifically addressed for the study. These off the record discussions also validated the need for more work to be done within the MON program, specifically with the mentor/mentee relationships. To be fair, Mr. Johnson had observed the need for better mentor/mentee relationships. At the April 22, 2014 meeting he talked to group about proposed changes to be implemented over the summer. One of these changes was to get the mentee-to-mentor relationship to two or three mentees per one mentor. Currently mentors have as many as five mentees, and in Mr. Johnson's opinion that is too many students per mentor to administer the one-on-one attention program participants need.

Recommendations for Future Research. Based on the implications of the research, recommendations for future research on the topic of African American males' success should further address the point that African American male students become engaged. As a result of his model, Mason (1998) notes that services such as advising, academic skills workshops, financial aid seminars, and student activities were strengthened at his institution in order to meet African American males' needs. Based on the research in this study, it is agreed that these services are needed however in the case of BSCC do not necessarily need to be further enhanced. What was observed in this study is that students do not always take advantage of these opportunities or may tend to do so later in their community college career. With that said, it is suggested to evaluate when engagement begins at the institution, and if it is not immediately after enrollment, determine the factors that are impeding engagement. From that point, it would be

beneficial to examine if early engagement impacts students' ability to be able to better navigate through the variables cited in the Mason model.

While it is understood students' background, environmental, and psychological constructs play a role in impacting persistence and success, the trends seen in the CCSSE data and within this study suggests engagement and motivation among African American males is high. So if the engagement and motivation is prevalent when a student enters, the institution must make sure to take advantage of the motivation and keep students interested and on task. However, data suggest institutions are not doing a good job engaging students early. According to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2007) on engaging entering students, 40% of participants surveyed documented that in their first three weeks of college family, friends, or others students were their primary source of academic advising. In comparison, only 31% reported interaction with faculty as a means of advising, and only five percent reported a non-faculty academic advisor as their source of academic advising. Forty-one percent of students surveyed stated they had not used academic advising or planning at all. Based on the findings, the personal and institutional shortcomings that may be playing a role in the timing of engagement appears to warrant further examination.

In regards to the Men of Nobility program, being that it was so closely followed throughout this research, there are suggestions based on the observations that could help enhance this and other MMI's. The obvious improvement needed is a stronger and deeper stable of mentors. While the mentors observed in MON seemed genuinely engaged and active with the students in the group settings, what was not observed or able

to be tracked in this study was how often mentors met with their individual mentees, if at all. However, based on the changes in this area Mr. Johnson felt are vital to the programs' success and the sampling of experiences from the individual interviews, it can be assumed the mentor-mentee relationship needs to be stronger.

Another area worth noting is the balance between the formal versus informal approach to mentorship. As witnessed in the study, and mentioned by mentees, the more formal approach to mentoring students appeared to be a turn off of sorts. A question every mentorship program needs to address is what is the balance between making sure students are being educated on success initiatives while still maintaining an environment students enjoy? Many times the MON meetings seemed to be too much of a lecture. It is fair to assume that after sitting in various classes all week, students did not want to sit through another lecture, and that may have impacted attendance as the semester drug on. To help combat this, it would be suggested to create more interactive activities involving the group. In general, there were not a lot of activities the typical MON meeting that encouraged the students to take ownership or produce the end result. It was more so guided discussions that students contributed to. By creating more interactive opportunities, or perhaps even having meetings the mentees organize to address the topics they find most important, the program would be able to establish that sense of ownership while still incorporating success factors the students can implement.

A final recommendation for future research as a result of this study is for community colleges to evaluate the faculty's role in engaging African American male students. Outside of interactions with faculty who served as mentors in the Men of

Nobility program, neither participants in individual interviews or in the group observations cited faculty interactions as playing a role in their success. Considering that not every African American male student at BSCC participated in the MON program, the need for engagement to take place in other areas is vital. Research from Harper (2009) suggested African American males' disengagement is a byproduct of institutions lack of investment in this population's success. A 2009 report released by the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation found that community college faculty interviewed in their study did not place an emphasis on developing strategies to enhance engagement with students of any particular racial or ethnic group. Research from Chang (2005) and Cotton and Wilson (2006) suggested that negative prior educational experiences may lead to a lack of engagement by African American males. Understanding that community college students are likely to spend a majority of their on campus time in the classroom, it is important that institutions take the challenges into account and understand that faculty serves as the gateway for student interactions.

Closing comments

This case study sought to identify factors that led to the persistence and success of African American male students at a Texas community college. By following this population for an entire semester, specific factors and challenges that impacted student success were able to be more carefully examined. These findings are useful because they contribute to the prioritized research aimed to closing the achievement gap between African American males and their ethnic counterparts. The research from this study also addressed how the specific constructs in the Mason model shaped the college experiences

of this student population. While the constructs from Mason's model are still relevant today, the educational experiences of African American males in community colleges appear to be shifting. It is vital to continue contributing research that is up to date with the changes impacting this population in hopes of building future models that can help increase success among African American males in community colleges.

The participants, both individual and in group meetings, provided telling narratives of their experiences and the challenges associated with these experiences. The most discouraging aspect of the participant narratives was in most cases the desire and motivation was evident, but the results did not always reflect that. While these challenges in persistence and success are rooted in various factors, as noted in the study's research and in the observations, getting students to take advantage of available resources poses an issue as well. As data in this study and literature highlighted, mentoring programs, peer support, and faculty and academic advising all plays a role in the success of African American males. It is important to make sure these students are taking advantage of these services, particularly early in their college career. With the motivation to succeed being evident, it is the institutions responsibility to ensure African American males understand the type of effort necessary to be successful college student, and to take immediate advantage of services that can help them reach their educational goals.

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Appendix A

Sub questions for Men of Nobility interviewees

Topic domain: Questions probe the subjects' background characteristics, in order to determine if there are any trends or similarities within specific groups. These questions also lead the interview because they are simple to answer and opening with easier questions can establish comfort.

Covert: Is there any connection as cited in the literature, if subject grew up in single parent home? Does subject have a degree plan/goal in mind? Was education stressed in their upbringing?

Lead off question: How do you identify yourself racially/ethnically?

1. What is your academic major/program of study?
2. Has anybody else in your family ever earned a college degree, and if so what was the highest degree they earned?
3. Did you grow up in a single parent home? If yes, which parent?

Topic domain: Probe about their rationale for their attendance decision, probe to understand their preparation level, probe to understand if they are moving toward completion.

Covert: What is their desire and motivations in regards to their desire/ability to persist? Are they staying on an academic track toward completion or whatever interpersonal goals they may have? Do they have a plan? How were they able to come up with this plan? What factors impact attendance decisions?

Lead off question: Why did you choose to attend a community college?

4. Do you attend part-time or full time?
5. Have you declared a major? If not, why?
6. What are your intentions after completion at the community college?
7. Did you feel prepared for college when you came to BSCC? Please explain.

Topic domain: Questions are used to probe students about variables in their environment that may cause challenges with their college experience, both social and academic.

Covert: How do students cope with external challenges? How do these challenges serve as a hindrance or possibly a help (i.e. faculty interaction a positive)? Do students feel they will “make it” in life?

Lead off question: Do you have any outside obligations (work, family, etc.) that influence your college going decisions? If yes, please explain what obligations you have?

8. Do you receive financial aid? If so, what types? (i.e. scholarships, grants, loans)
9. Have interactions with faculty (positive or negative) impacted your college experience? If yes, how so?
10. What are some specific challenges you face as a college student?
11. What changes do you feel BSCC should make to better address your specific challenges?
12. Do you feel your race plays a factor in these challenges? If yes, have you ever reported your concerns and were they addressed?
13. Do you feel the college provides an environment that embraces cultural diversity?

Topic domain: Questions are used to probe students about resources and/or other variables the institution provides that impacted (positively or negatively) their experience.

Covert: What could have made their community college experience better? Are students satisfied with their community college experience? What ideas do students have that could be implemented to make the situation better for future African American male students? An opportunity to really provide their opinion as input for any recommended changes for the final edit of the research project.

Lead off question: Do you feel the Men of Nobility program has had any impact on your student success?

14. Outside of the Men of Nobility program, do you feel BSCC provides any resources (academic or culturally) for African American males? What aspects of these resources did you find most helpful? Least helpful?

15. Do you feel informed and/or socially connected to the college?
16. Do you feel BSCC provides the resources to help you attain your educational goals?
17. Are you satisfied with your experience at BSCC? If no, what has caused the dissatisfaction?
18. Thinking back on your time BSCC, what factors do you feel contributed most to your ability to persist as well as overall satisfaction with your experience?

Appendix B

List of AACC's Minority Male Initiatives

Source: American Association of Community Colleges (2014). <i>Minority male student success programs at community colleges.</i>				
Program	College	City	State	Zip
African American Male Initiative	Delgado Community College	New Orleans	LA	70119
Alamance Community College - Emerging Minority Leaders	Alamance Community College	Graham	NC	27253
Alamo Community College District - HOME [Help Own Male Education]	Alamo Community College District	Universal City	TX	78148
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College - Minority Leadership Academy	Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College	Asheville	NC	28801
Atlanta Technical College - Institute for Males	Atlanta Technical College	Atlanta	GA	30038
Baltimore City Community College - The QUEST: African American Male Learning Cohort	Baltimore City Community College	Baltimore	MD	21215
Black & Hispanic Male Initiative Program	Westchester Community College	Valhalla	NY	10595
Broward College - B2B Learning Communities Encourage Broward Social Status on Black Men and Boys	Broward College	Fort Lauderdale	FL	33301

Capital Community College - Black and Latino Male Resource Center	Capital Community College	Hartford	CT	6103
Chattahoochee Valley Community College - Future Leaders Program	Chattahoochee Valley Community College	Phoenix City	AL	36869
Cincinnati State Technical & Community College - Black Male Initiative	Cincinnati State Technical & Community College	Cincinnati	OH	45223
Coastline Community College - African American Male Education Network and Development	Coastline Community College	San Bernardino	CA	92427
College of San Mateo - Writing in the End Zone	College of San Mateo	San Mateo	CA	94402
Community College of Beaver County - Student-Athlete Success Program	Community College of Beaver County	Monaca	PA	15061
Community College of Denver - Urban Male Initiative	Community College of Denver	Denver	CO	80217
Community College of Philadelphia - Center for Male Engagement	Community College of Philadelphia	Philadelphia	PA	19130
Craven Community College - Male Mentoring Empowerment Group (M.M.E.G.)	Craven Community College	New Bern	NC	28560
Cuyahoga Community College District - Minority Male Initiative	Cuyahoga Community College District	Cleveland	OH	44115

Dallas County Community College District/African American Male Initiative	Cedar Valley College	Lancaster	TX	75134
Delaware Technical & Community College - The Vanguard Society	Delaware Technical & Community College - Stanton/Wilmington Campus	Wilmington	DE	19801
Durham Technical and Community College - "Visions" Minority Male Leadership Initiative	Durham Technical and Community College	Durham	NC	27703
East Arkansas Community College - Minority Male Assistance Program (MMAP)	East Arkansas Community College	Forrest City	AR	72335
Edgecombe Community College - Empowering Males with a Purpose to Achieve and Celebrate (EMPAC)	Edgecombe Community College	Tarboro	NC	27886
El Centro College's - African American and Latino Male Initiative	El Centro College	Dallas	TX	75202
Elgin Community College - MEN Inc. (Male Education Network) Leadership Program	Elgin Community College	Elgin	IL	60123
Forsyth Technical CC - James A. Rousseau Minority Male Mentoring Program	Forsyth Technical Community College	Winston-Salem	NC	27103
Georgia Perimeter College - GPC Leadership Academy	Georgia Perimeter College	Clarkston	GA	30021
Goodwin College - Men of Vision in Education	Goodwin College	East Hartford	CT	6118

Grayson County College - It's My Pathway!	Grayson County College	Denison	TX	75020
Halifax Community College - P.R.I.D.E. of Halifax Male Mentoring Program	Halifax Community College	Weldon	NC	27890
Harford Community College - Rites of Passage Mentoring Program	Harford Community College	Bel Air	MD	21015
Highline Community College - Heritage Leadership Camp	Highline Community College	Des Moines	WA	98198-9800
Hillsborough Community College - Collegiate 100 Program	Hillsborough Community College	Tampa	FL	33605-3648
Housatonic Community College - You Can Do It	Housatonic Community College	Bridgeport	CT	6604
Housatonic Community College - You Can Do It (YCDI)	Housatonic Community College	Bridgeport	CT	6604
Houston Community College System - Minority Male Initiative	Houston Community College System	Houston	TX	77002
Illinois Central College - Harvesting Dreams	Illinois Central College	East Peoria	IL	61635
Indian River State College - African-American Males Leadership Institute	Indian River State College	Fort Pierce	FL	34953
Jackson Community College - Men of Merit	Jackson Community College	Jackson	MI	49203
Jackson Community College - Student Diversity Initiatives	Jackson Community College	Jackson	MI	49201

James Sprunt Community College - Male Mentoring Achievement Program (2MAP)	James Sprunt Community College	Kenansville	NC	28349
Kansas City Kansas Community College - Fringe Benefits of Education (FBOE)	Kansas City Kansas Community College	Kansas City	KS	66112
Lone Star College System - Brother For Brother (B4B)	Lone Star College System	Houston	TX	77073
Manchester Community College - Brother-2-Brother Program	Manchester Community College	Manchester	CT	6045
Maricopa County Community College District-Minority Male Initiative	Maricopa Community Colleges	Tempe	AZ	85281
Massachusetts Bay Community College - YMOC (Young Men of Color)	Massachusetts Bay Community College	Wellesley Hills	MA	2481
Medgar Evers College - Black Male Initiative	Medgar Evers College	Brooklyn	NY	11225
MESA Community College Program - Washington MESA, WA-MCCP	MESA Community College Program	Seattle	WA	98195-5845
Midlands Technical College - African American Male Leadership Institute (AAMLi)	Midlands Technical College	Columbia	SC	29202
Milwaukee Area Technical College - Just One Mentoring Program	Milwaukee Area Technical College	Milwaukee	WI	53233
Mississippi Delta Community College - Pathfinders Program	Mississippi Delta Community College	Moorhead	MS	38761

Mitchell Community College - Minority Male Mentoring Initiative (3MI)	Mitchell Community College	Statesville	NC	28677
Montgomery College - Boys to Men	Montgomery College	Rockville	MD	20850
Montgomery County Community College - Minority Male Mentoring Program	Montgomery County Community College	Blue Bell	PA	19422
North Carolina Community College System - Minority Male Mentoring Program	North Carolina Community College System	Raleigh	NC	27699
Northeastern Technical College - TRUMPET	Northeastern Technical College	Cheraw	SC	29520
Northlake College - African American and Latino Male Initiative (AALMI)	Northlake College	Irving	TX	75038
Ouachita Technical College - Men on a Mission (MoM)	Ouachita Technical College	Malvern	AR	72150
Pitt Community College - NEXT LEVEL Minority Male Mentoring Program	Pitt Community College	Greenville	NC	27835
Prince George's Community College - Diverse Male Student Academy	Prince George's Community College	Largo	MD	20774
Prince George's Community College - Diverse Male Student Initiative	Prince George's Community College	Largo	MD	20774
Prince George's Community College - Men Moving Forward	Prince George's Community College	Largo	MD	20774

Pulaski Technical College - The Network for Student Success	Pulaski Technical College	North Little Rock	AR	72118
Queensborough Community College - MALES Initiative (Men Achieving and Leading in Excellence and Success)	Queensborough Community College	Bayside	NY	11364-1497
Randolph Community College - Inner Strength 3 MP	Randolph Community College	Asheboro	NC	27204
Robeson Community College - Minority Male Achievement Program	Robeson Community College	Lumberton	NC	28359
San Jacinto College District - Men of Honor	San Jacinto College District	Houston	TX	77089
Santa Fe College - My Brother's Keeper (MBK)	Santa Fe College	Gainesville	FL	32606
St. Louis Community College - African-American Male Initiative "Empowering Student Leaders for the Future" (AAMI)	St. Louis Community College	Saint Louis	MO	63135
St. Petersburg College - Male Outreach Initiative (MOI)	St. Petersburg College	St. Petersburg	FL	33733
St. Philip's College African American Male Initiative	St Philip's College	San Antonio	TX	78203
STCC - MILE (Male Initiative for Leadership & Education) Mentoring Program at STCC	Springfield Technical Community College	Springfield	MA	1105
Tarrant County College District - Men of Color Mentoring Program	Tarrant County College District	Fort Worth	TX	75033

Technical College of the Lowcountry - PILAU -- Promoting Integrity, Leadership, Academics, and Cultural Understanding	Technical College of the Lowcountry	Beaufort	SC	29901
The City University of New York Black Male Initiative (CUNY BMI)	The City University of New York (CCNY)	New York City	NY	10031
The Tacoma Community College Center for Multi-Ethnic and Cultural Affairs and the College Success Foundation	Tacoma Community College	Tacoma	WA	98466
Trident Technical College - M.E.N.S. Program	Trident Technical College	Charleston	SC	29423
U of Pittsburgh - iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3)	U of Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh	PA	15260
University of Texas - Austin - Project MALES	University of Texas - Austin	Austin	TX	78212
Wake Technical Community College - Pathways 3MP	Wake Technical Community College	Raleigh	NC	27603
Wayne Community College - Minority Male Mentoring Group	Wayne Community College	Goldsboro	NC	27533-8002
Wilson Community College - Male Mentoring Improvement Coalition	Wilson Community College	Wilson	NC	27893

Appendix C

Men of Nobility Mantra

Leader.....Starts.....I am.....(Name).....participants follow.....I am (name)

Leader responds”And we are?”

Team responds.....”Men of (Nobility)”

Leader responds.....”And?”

Team responds.....”You know”

Leader.....I know what?

Team responds....That we know

Leader responds....That you know what?

Team responds..... “Our values”

Leader responds.....”Oh, How many are there?”

Team responds....”Eight”

Leader responds....”Number one”

Team responds....”Integrity”

Leader responds....” Number 2?

Team responds....”Excellence”

Leader responds....”Number 3?”

Team responds....”Accountability”

Leader responds....”Number 4?

Team responds....”Innovation”

Leader responds....”Number 5?

Team responds....” Sense of Community”

Leader responds...” Number 6?

Team responds....”Student Success”

Leader responds....”Number 7?”

Team responds....”Diversity”

Leader responds.....”Number 8?

Team responds....”Collaboration”

Leader responds....”Say it again”

Team responds....”Collaboration”

Leader responds...”And who are we?”

Team responds.....”Men of (Nobility)”

Leader Responds... “Are we our brothers’ keeper”

Team responds....”Yes we are”

Mentors Leads...Brothers, If I can make it you can make it...

Team responds...We will make it...

Leader responds...And who are we?

Team responds.....Men of (Nobility)

Leader responds...Are we are brother’s keeper?

Team responds....Yes we are