

2020

African American College Students' Perspectives of Academic Challenges to Graduation

Bobby Calvin Lockett
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Bobby Calvin Luckett Jr.

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

African American College Students' Perspectives of Academic Challenges to Graduation

by

Bobby Calvin Lockett Jr.

EdS, Liberty University, 2015

MBA, Western Governors University, 2013

BS, Arkansas State University, 2002

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

June 2020

Abstract

Even though the enrollment numbers of African American students are comparable to other racial/ethnic groups at a university in the midwestern United States, the problem investigated through this study was that African American students were graduating at a slower rate compared to other groups. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American university students about the academic challenges they faced as they worked towards graduation as well as their experiences with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges. The study was based on Tinto's retention theory. For this basic qualitative study, data were collected using face-to-face semistructured interviews with 8 African American college juniors and seniors who were recruited through email and verbal communication. The data were analyzed using open and axial coding and themes were identified with the rapid identification of themes from audio recordings (RITA) method. The themes were challenges with adapting to university culture, building faculty rapport, access to institutional support services, academic advising, and building connection to leadership. In order to address one of the challenges immediately, a 3-day professional development training program for the student support services department was developed to provide additional professional best practices and recommendations for identifying student needs and providing the appropriate support while the university has a more systemic conversation about the other identified challenges to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students. The study promotes social change by addressing academic challenges faced by African American students that could help inform ways to decrease time to graduation.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this blessed journey to my savior Jesus Christ. This journey would not have been possible without him guiding me each step of the way. Dedication of love to my wife (Elizabeth), daughters (Cassiddie, Cierra, and Mallory), sons (Guren and Alonzo), and parents (Bobby Sr. and Grinda). I dedicate this to my family, church family, and friends because of your continuous support of my dreams.

Finally, all the glory belongs to God!

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Proverbs 27:17

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

A 4-year university in the southeastern part of the United States had an African American freshmen enrollment count of approximately 1,800 in the Fall semester of 2018, according to the university's study site catalog. The problem at this local study site, according to the Office of the University Registrar at the study site, is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. African American students are enrolling in large numbers but are taking longer to graduate. For example, according to the study site catalog, only 38.5% of African Americans who enrolled at the study site graduated within 6 years from 2010 to 2017, compared to 41.3% of Hispanics and 48.3% of White-American students who completed a program of study during the same timeframe.

Looking at the data on graduation rates within 4 years, the pattern is the same. For the years 2014 through 2017, shown in Table 1, the graduation percentages for African American students are lower than for Hispanics and White Americans. There were only 147 Hispanics enrolled at the local study site for years 2014 to 2017; however, 13% graduated, compared to only 11% of African Americans for the same timeframe, according to the study site catalog. There have been instances at the study site where it has taken some African American students more than 6 years to graduate with an undergraduate degree from the university, according to the Office of the University Registrar. Table 1 also shows that African Americans have the second-highest enrollment totals for each year from 2010 through 2013 at the study site, but the lowest

graduation percentages from 2014 through 2017. African Americans have the lowest graduation rates for each year displayed.

Table 1

Study Site Graduation and Enrollment Data

<u>Enrollment totals and year</u>				
Categories	2010	2011	2012	2013
African American	2,130	2,133	2,208	1,923
Hispanic	182	246	266	267
White American	9,459	10,026	10,072	9,995
Other	247	155	178	167
Totals of enrollment by Year	12,018	12,560	12,724	12,352
<u>Graduation percentages within 4 years. (Bachelor's Degree)</u>				
Categories	2014	2015	2016	2017
African American	10%	11%	9%	11%
Hispanic	19%	14%	16%	13%
White American	15%	13%	13%	13%
Other	15%	34%	28%	38%
<u>Graduation percentages within 6 years. (Bachelor's Degree)</u>				
Categories	2016	2017	2018	2019
African American	38%	29%	28%	36%
Hispanic	41%	37%	42%	50%
White American	48%	31%	32%	53%
Other	43%	41%	36%	45%

Note. Information obtained from the Office of the University Registrar study site catalog.

Table 1 shows that 4-year graduation percentages for African Americans trailed behind White Americans, Hispanics, and students identified as other for each year shown. Also, according to Table 1, African American students had the lowest 6-year graduation percentages at the study site from 2016 to 2019, showing delays in graduation. Table 1 shows that White Americans had the highest 6-year graduation percentage of 48% at the study site for 2016, but African American students had the lowest at 38%. According to the information shown in Table 1, Hispanics had decreasing 4-year graduation

percentages over the years, except for a slight increase between 2012 and 2016. White American graduation percentage rates decreased to 13% between 2011 and 2015 and remained unchanged throughout the years shown on the table. Even though Table 1 shows decreases in degree completion percentages among other racial/ethnic groups, African-Americans still lag for each year shown.

The problem of slower graduation rates for African American students has been noted on the national level as well (Tate, 2017). According to McDougal, Cox, Dorley, and Wodaje (2018), African American students face unique challenges on campus that cause decreased academic engagement, thereby increasing degree completion timeframes. Academic challenges have caused African American students to experience delays in graduation (Farmer & Hope, 2015). According to Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, and Manzo (2015b), some examples of academic challenges for students in higher education include difficulties such as finding time to study, trouble understanding course content, limited motivation and self-efficacy, and struggles to balance academic demands with social experiences and personal responsibilities. There is more work to be done to improve the slower degree completion timeframe problem for African American students (see Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018).

According to personal communication with the director of the student support services department from the study site, African American students tend to shy away from using assistance programs such as tutoring, mentoring, and academic support and guidance offered by student support services. The student support services director explained that African American students perceive that the institutional support offered

makes them feel that they are “weaker than or not as smart” as other students. The director also expressed that the student support services department is not doing enough to build a sense of community or publicize the academic support services and resources offered to African American students at the study site. African American students are not receiving an overall positive perception of the academic programs and services offered by the student support services department, according to the student support services director.

Therefore, the gap in practice is that although student support services at the university provide several services to African American students, the students are still graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups and there are additional areas of training and services that are missing. Factors such as academic challenges faced while attending college sometimes play a role in determining when African American students graduate (Flores, Park, & Baker, 2017). According to Archibeque-Engle and Gloeckner (2016), meeting the academic needs of African American students plays an essential role in defining institutional success. The problem at this local study site is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups.

Rationale

The problem at this local study site is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. According to National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the 1990 Student Right-to-Know Act requires that postsecondary schools report the percentage of students who finish their program of study within 150% of normal completion time, approximately 6 years for students working

toward a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2019). According to personal communication with a representative of the Department of Institutional Effectiveness from the study site, the 2017 graduation rate of African American students was lower compared to other racial/ethnic groups, showing a growing problem for the college. African American enrollment at the study site was 2,130 in 2010, but only 38.0% of those students graduated by the end of 2017, indicating a degree completion dilemma, according to the study site catalog.

The gap in practice is that although student support services at the university provide several services to African American students, the students are still graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups and there are additional areas of training and services that are missing. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges.

Definition of Terms

Academic challenges: In higher education, academic challenges are the academic difficulties that can have a disparate impact on graduation timeframes for students (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015).

African Americans: Individuals who have origins in any of the Black racial groups of the continent of Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

College retention: Students persist and reenroll in the next term (Pruett & Absher, 2015).

Graduation rate: In colleges and universities, graduation rates are the percentages of the institution's first-year undergraduate students who finishes their programs of study within 150% of the program's published time (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Persistence: In higher education, persistence refers to students' ability to continue pursuing their educational goals despite the various challenges that they encounter (Lightweis, 2014).

Student attrition: Individuals who do not complete a program of study (Beer & Lawson, 2017).

Student engagement: The degree of involvement and dedication that students exhibit toward their academic endeavors (Balwant, 2018).

Student support services: According to the study site catalog, this is a comprehensive program at the study site designed to provide students with academic and support services to promote retention and academic success at the university.

Significance of the Study

This study can help remediate the gap in practice in which, although student support services at the university provide several services to African American students, the students are still graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups and there are additional areas of training and services that are missing. Becton, Foster, and Chen (2016) highlighted that academic challenges to college graduation are often encountered by African American students. The preliminary findings of this study provided helpful insights on perceived experiences that African American students have faced, hindering degree completion timeframes.

The understandings gained from this study can aid the student services staff, college students, college counselors, and college faculty members in identifying and understanding academic challenges that delay graduation. These insights can support African American students in eventual and more timely degree completion. The findings from this study may lead to positive social change by addressing the academic challenges that delay African American students from graduating from college (see Finnie, Wismer, & Mueller, 2015). Because African American students are encountering academic challenges while pursuing college degrees at the local study site, supporting and increasing their college graduation potentially allows for expanded career opportunities and personal fulfillment.

Research Questions

African American college students are enrolling at the study site but graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. Therefore, exploring the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges may increase graduation rates. Improving degree completion timeframes could potentially lead to better career opportunities for African American students. The primary focus of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with, and suggestions to improve, institutional support to meet these challenges. The following research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: How do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation?

RQ2: What are African American students' experiences and perceptions of the student support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges?

RQ3: What suggestions do students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges?

Review of the Literature

I conducted a review of literature linked to academic challenges that delay the college graduation of African American students. This review was designed to highlight current research that shows that some African American students enroll in college but experience delays in graduation because of academic challenges. An expansive search of the literature was directed at providing an overview of current peer-reviewed articles used to address the various challenges that African American college students perceive to have while pursuing a degree. The published articles that I searched were discovered using databases such as ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, NCES Publication, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, ERIC Education Source, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Complete from library search tools. The articles used in this literature review were published within the past 5 years, extending from 2015 until 2020. There are a few older studies used because they contain important information that is useful to the study. I also visited several websites for useful material. Key search terms used included *academic challenges, African Americans, college retention, degree attainment, persistence, and student engagement.*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study was Tinto's (2004) theory of student retention and graduation. Tinto's theory is based on the idea that students are more apt to engage student services and succeed when academic support services are associated with everyday credit-bearing classroom courses of learning. Overall degree completion is related to the pace of students' progress toward completing a college degree by earning credit-hours and satisfactory grades (Lei & Lei, 2019). According to Lei and Lei (2019), there is a relationship between the connection that students have to the academic life of an institution and to undergraduate retention. On-campus efforts used to address retention for African American students are usually specific programs such as the federal TRIO student support services program (Tinto, 2004).

Additionally, according to Tinto (2004), programs such as TRIO "provide a visible home within the campus" for students and give them a safe, supportive place to meet and collaborate with faculty and staff on academic endeavors (p. 9). However, there is a tendency for some student support services programs to isolate students from other programs and their peers, thereby stigmatizing them and undermining their motivation to excel (Tinto, 2004). Effective student support services programs are linked in purposeful ways to the needs of students to succeed in their educational programs rather than acting as standalone academic systems isolated from the regular curriculum (Tinto, 2004).

When institutions identify students in need of support early and provide adequate assistance, retention is positively influenced (Ortiz-Lozano, Rua-Vieites, Bilbao-

Calabuig, & Casadesús-Fa, 2020). Institutional support services programs should be assessed for positive impacts on desired student outcomes (Milliron, Kil, Malcolm, & Gee, 2017). According to Tinto (2017), students' retention is shaped by the influences of institutional variables such as extracurricular involvement, interaction with peer groups, student-faculty communication, and academic support services. French and Westler (2019) argued that students who temporarily leave their program of study are less likely to complete an undergraduate degree than students who continuously enroll and are academically supported. Folk (2016) asserted that academic self-beliefs and student perceptions of themselves influence their motivation and behavior.

According to Tinto (2004), one of the most essential components of effective student support services programs is that they are linked to everyday student learning needs. Ishitani (2016) argued that higher levels of academic integration have a great influence on the decision of students to persevere and conclusively complete a college degree. A student's interaction with the university helps to guide the development of perspectives toward himself or herself as a learner and toward the higher learning institution (Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 2019).

Tinto's (2004) theory of student retention and graduation assisted in this research by helping to discover ways to understand the academic challenges faced by African American students that contribute to lower graduation rates than other racial/ethnic groups. According to Metz (2004), Tinto argued that some of the obstacles that students face while pursuing a college degree are as follows: (a) difficulty adapting to the campus community, (b) developing a positive rapport with faculty, (c) persisting through difficult

times, and (d) lack of institutional support. The conceptual framework of this study relates to the research questions by showing that students have a desire to persist in college degree attainment but sometimes need academic support to overcome challenges. Tinto's idea of retention was specifically tied to the purpose of this study because participants' shared experiences, perceptions, and suggestions were explored to help alleviate academic challenges and offer needed support. The information and improvement recommendations disclosed by students showed that they have a desire to persist in college degree attainment.

Review of the Broader Problem

Attrition

According to Boton and Gregory (2015), attrition in higher education has become a worldwide recurring problem. The term attrition describes individuals who do not complete a program (Beer & Lawson, 2017). The literature has also indicated that the lack of student motivation plays a significant role in increasing postsecondary attrition rates (Boton & Gregory, 2015). According to Crooks (2017), students are less likely to drop out of college when they are motivated to achieve academic success.

Early attrition, usually within the first academic year, can be attributed to factors such as dissatisfaction with the university (Seidel & Kutieleh, 2017). This type of issue causes students to become discouraged and drop out of college altogether, hindering potential career opportunities that require postsecondary education. According to Resko (2017), some African American students have a hard time dealing with the thought of being at risk for academic failure and thus drop out. Some dropouts among African

American college students are sometimes associated with the ability of students to cope with college life (Resko, 2017). This shows that some students do not believe that they can successfully graduate with a college degree and withdraw from their program of study.

Institutional Challenges

African American college students sometimes encounter institutional challenges that hinder or delay graduation. Students sometimes feel that they do not belong when they enter higher education, and they also feel that they will have a difficult time fitting into the college environment (Taggart, 2016). Some institutional challenges that college students encounter can be easily identified but hard to mitigate (Brew & Mantai, 2017). Researchers have indicated that the college community has shifted to a population consisting of part-time and full-time students with jobs, affecting time spent on academics (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Attempting to pursue a college degree while working can be a difficult feat, causing students to need additional support. According to Osam et al. (2017), this shift has caused various researchers to start studying the challenges that African American students are encountering while pursuing their college education. Even though online learning is provided by universities to accommodate students who work, are disabled, or have families, institutional challenges to graduation still exist (Haynes, 2018).

One example of an institutional challenge that African American students face in higher education is learning to fit into the academic environment and do what it takes to succeed (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015a). According to Stephens et al.

(2015a), students want to “feel at home in school, rather than like a guest in someone else’s house” (p. 8). There is a great need for interventions or changes to universities’ practices to increase access and performance in higher education for African American students (Stephens et al., 2015a). A second institutional challenge that African American students encounter is struggling to establish a sense of belonging in a college atmosphere (Lee, 2018). According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), universities have increased competition globally for well-qualified students, increasing concerns for changes in funding and equity of access for students.

Lee (2018) showed that some undergraduate African American students reported feeling that they lack a university support system, indicating an institutional challenge for these individuals. The lack of support from faculty on university campuses can cause African American students to lose motivation and persistence to complete their program of study (Kakada, Deshpande, & Bisen, 2019). Another institutional challenge for African American students is difficulty adapting to assessment feedback practices (Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019). Also, according to Henderson et al. (2019), feedback from university faculty is sometimes ineffective and poorly understood by students, causing a good academic performance to be hindered.

A final university obstacle for African Americans enrolled in college is academic disidentification, which is defined as a phenomenon in which an individual’s academic performance does not impact their self-views as it does for others (McClain & Cokley, 2017). Students who are disidentified are not motivated to perform well academically because their self-esteem is not highly impacted (McClain & Cokley, 2017). Also,

according to McClain and Cokley (2017), students' trust in teachers is a factor underlying academic disidentification in African American students. The fear of being reduced to a stereotype in higher education can also lead to disidentification (Black & Allen, 2018).

African American Student Enrollment

According to Gray and Swinton (2017), in recent decades, there have been steady increases in college enrollment for African American students. However, graduation rates have not corresponded with college admission. Students are more likely to stay in school after they enroll if academic ability and motivation match the academic programs offered by the school (Gray & Swinton, 2017). African American students sometimes feel there is a lack of support once enrolled in school after the first year (Harper, Davis, & Smith, 2018).

The desire for some African American students after high school is to pursue a college degree (Crawford, 2016). The reality is that this dream does not always come true for everyone who enrolls in a postsecondary institution. According to Allen, Teranishi, Dinwiddie, and Gonzalez (2000), what lies at the center of the American dream is that the doors to success are opened by education. The NCES reported that college enrollment is expected to increase by at least 20% for African American students between the years 2010 and 2021 (as cited in John & Stage, 2014). This report is important because it shows the potential for more African American students to enroll in college, indicating the need to eliminate academic challenges that hinder or delay graduation.

According to Andrews (2018), students who enroll into a higher education institution immediately after graduating high school have a greater chance of completing a college degree than those that delay enrollment. The undergraduate enrollment of African American college students is expected to continue increasing (Gray & Swinton, 2017). African American youth generally aspire to earn a college degree, but sometimes do not graduate despite their aspirations (Hill, 2017). Results from a study showed that African American student enrollment into higher education institutions started to increase after the U.S. recession that lasted from December 2007 until June 2009 (Setari & Setari, 2016). According to Setari and Setari (2016), the method used to collect data for their research involved the use of Private School Universe Surveys (PSS), which indicated that more African American students would potentially enroll in college and that there would be a need to mitigate hindrances to graduation.

Student Engagement and Motivation

Some African American students start college with a high level of engagement and motivation but start to lose it as they encounter various academic challenges to degree attainment (Jones & Reddick, 2017). According to Flynn (2016), engagement theory indicates that integration into the social and academic systems of a college is most directly related to the student's endurance in that college. Studies show degree attainment for African American students has increased since the beginning of the 21st Century, but there is a concern about the engagement and persistence gap for African Americans (Flynn, 2016). One research study was used to explore the motivational factors of first-generation African American freshmen. The focus was on those who were

from large families and pursued degrees when their siblings did not attend college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

A grounded theory design was used to investigate African American postsecondary students at a university in Indiana. Taped interviews were used to help understand the motivational factors that led degree-seekers to pursue postsecondary education, but who still eventually lost motivation to graduate (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). The results concluded that environmental factors, lack of prior exposure to a positive learning environment, and inadequacy of encouragement from teachers and family contributed to the problem. The research from Blackwell and Pinder (2014) relates to my study by showing that African American students sometimes face various academic challenges that delay degree completion. According to Franklin-Guy and Schnorr (2016), effective institutional support and student engagement contribute to academic achievement.

Student engagement and motivation is a very important part of an African American student staying in college. Lester (2018) described engagement as an intricate set of behaviors and occurrences that influence student outcomes. Engagement can be separated into either psychological or behavioral segments, referring to time spent studying or the importance that students place on learning (Lester, 2018). Resistance to power structures and inequality in higher education sometimes cause African American students to have less engagement with their studies (Jones & Reddick, 2017). A motivating factor for students in higher education is the influence of others, especially their peers (Perrault & Clark, 2018). According to Young, Wendel, Esson, and Plank

(2018), African American college freshmen show interest in majoring in STEM careers but attain degrees at a low rate in these fields because they lose motivation before they become juniors in college. A research study showed that motivational declines for African American students in higher education were because of declining grades (Young et al., 2018).

Challenges and Degree Attainment Gap

A study was conducted to identify the academic challenges and success requirements of African American college students via online surveys, completed by 126 undergraduates in the field of communication science and disorders (Fuse, 2018). The results of the study suggested that African American students spent fewer hours studying and earned lower grades than other races, but the presence of positive role models may affect academic performance (Fuse, 2018). This is important because it highlights a possible need for extra support to overcome challenges. According to Kelly and Torres Lugo (2017), efforts need to be advanced by postsecondary institutions to close the degree attainment gap for African American students.

Kelly and Torres Lugo (2017) reported that two important steps in addressing college degree attainment gaps between Whites, Hispanics, and African Americans include making the problem known to leaders in higher education and implementing solutions at the state and university levels. Also, according to Kelly and Torres Lugo (2017), nationwide, the attainment gap of college degrees between African Americans and other ethnic/racial groups widened from 2005 to 2016 and is expected to continue increasing. Higher education institutions should conduct a review of current educational

delivery methods and institutional supports and make necessary adjustments to help close the student college degree attainment gap in the United States (Smith, 2017).

In 2009 after a U.S. recession, the government developed an associate's or bachelor's degree completion goal of 60% by 2020, and the Lumina Foundation also has a 60% target, but for the year 2025 (Nettles, 2017). Nettles (2017) argued that improved U.S. degree attainment percentage goals are not promising in the future, especially for African American student populations. According to Fuse (2018), African American students completing college degrees face various challenges such as poor academic preparedness, decreased persistence, and lack of institutional support, causing degree completion timeframes to be longer than other students pursuing the same educational goals. According to Mau (2016), low participation and graduation rates from African Americans are now a nationwide concern. Hinrichs (2014) reported that African American students lag in higher education completion percentages in the U.S.

Higher Education Diversity Legislation

The problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups is becoming a widespread issue in higher education (Eitzen, Kinney, & Grillo, 2016, p. 59). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 defined "universal design for learning" as a "scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice" that decreases instructional academic challenges and maintains high achievement intentions for all students (Eitzen et al., p. 59). This act is very meaningful to the study because it highlights that postsecondary opportunities should be equal to all races. According to Garces (2014), in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, strict parameters

was assigned by the Court for institutions to consider concerning race during the admissions process and other factors. This case showed that access is available, but retention is the real problem in postsecondary education.

President Obama introduced a legislative initiative called America's College Promise (ACP) to enhance higher education access and improve the American graduation initiative, especially for African American students (Palmadessa, 2017). Even though there is legislation in place to help African American students attain a degree, academic challenges such as dissatisfaction with the university and difficulty adapting to the college environment still exist that prevent degree completion (Gaston, 2018; Palmadessa, 2017).

Studies Related to Research Questions

The research questions asked in this study are as follows: (a) how do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation, (b) what are African American students' perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges, and (c) what suggestions do African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges. Flores et al. (2017) sought to provide information to better assess and provide solutions to the college completion gap and persistence problem that African Americans have in the U.S. This study showed that there are existing academic challenges such as difficulty developing a positive rapport with faculty and lack of student motivation that delay degree completion for African American populations.

A similar study was conducted by using a snowball sampling survey technique to detect and highlight the potential academic challenges that hinder graduation for African American college students (Becton et al., 2016). The findings in this study showed that completion rates were low for African Americans and that there was poor awareness of issues reported such as insufficient faculty involvement (Becton et al., 2016). The information discovered in this research also highlighted that African Americans encountered various academic challenges such as poor faculty support and an unreceptive college atmosphere while pursuing a college degree. The importance of this study is that the results showed that more awareness should be brought to the various academic challenges African American students face while pursuing a college degree. One of the academic challenges that delay the graduation process for African American students is that universities are not meeting their educational needs such as effective advising and academic support (Archibeque-Engle & Gloeckner, 2016). According to Roscoe (2015), institutions need to understand the perspectives of African Americans and provide support that will improve their college experience.

Academic Challenges and Difficulties

African American college students sometimes encounter various academic challenges and difficulties while pursuing a college degree. According to Stephens et al. (2015b), some examples of academic challenges for students in higher education include lack of motivation and struggles to keep up with academic demands. According to Farmer and Hope (2015), persistence toward completing a college degree has been a huge problem even though there has been a significant increase in male African American

student enrollment. There is a need for higher education institutions to do more to support the educational success of African American students and implement interventions in the academic environment based on knowledge of key factors such as persistence behavior (Farmer & Hope, 2015). A study was conducted to examine the effects of stress and college campus environment on persistence choices of African American and White students using Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of College Student Retention (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014). A sample of 1491 freshmen participants was surveyed and tracked for two years and yielded results showing that 17 of the 37 variables in the model indicated that stressful feelings about academic interactions, an uncomfortable campus environment, and racism had significant indirect and direct effects on the persistence of African American students (Johnson et al., 2014).

One of the most critical challenges to academic success for African American students is dealing with physical and mental health issues while pursuing a college degree. Academic challenges sometimes depress the scholastic performance of African-American college students, causing delays in degree attainment (Rothstein, 2015). Making the transition from home to college life can lead to dietary changes and physical behavior activities, causing delays in degree completion timeframes (Barnett, McFarland, Miller, Lowe, & Hatcher, 2019). Also, according to Barnett et al. (2019), African American students sometimes develop poor eating habits, become obese, start drinking, and deal with depression and mental health issues that negatively affect learning. Madson, Villarosa, Moorer, and Zeigler-Hill (2015) argued that African American

college students sometimes drink alcohol for reasons such as managing stress or increasing sociability, resulting in decreased positive academic performance. Barnett et al. (2019) asserted that compared to Asians, Latinos, and Whites, African Americans are less likely to use mental health and counseling services offered by student support services when support is needed.

Social Change

According to Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, and Swanson (2016), “solving societal problems requires recognition that the problems are in society” (p. 245), and that communal issues can negatively affect universities and their students, especially African Americans. Low degree attainment rates from African Americans is a potential societal issue. Addressing the academic challenges that African American students encounter could lead to positive social change by enabling them to graduate and potentially increase their opportunities to gain better jobs (Finnie et al., 2015). One of the major challenges for the nation is to improve degree attainment rates for African Americans to improve workforce opportunities (Perna, 2015).

According to Brown (2016), there is a greater need for more African Americans to graduate and pursue leadership positions on their jobs, potentially developing more positive agents of change. The Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI) program was designed to empower African American students to become adaptive leaders and agents of change through leadership development, mentoring, and experiential training (Aponte-Soto et al., 2014). A case study was conducted on 6 GEDI cohorts to gauge the impact of leadership development training with results indicating that a supportive

environment while facing challenges builds confidence and is crucial to African American career success (Aponte-Soto et al., 2014). This research is beneficial because it highlights that there is a need for African Americans to graduate college and become positive leaders in society.

According to Abrahamsen and Drange (2015), a study found that African Americans sometimes have high expectations and ambitions for completing their undergraduate bachelor program even though they face various obstacles that delay graduation. This study used a comparative approach to investigate career expectations and ambitions to see if respondents were willing to contribute to society once they finished college (Abrahamsen & Drange, 2015). An example of communal contribution is that one study established that African American students are drawn to teach because it provides an opportunity to change the lives of disadvantaged students (Tamir, 2014). There is the potential that more African Americans could acquire teaching positions and become agents of change if academic challenges to graduation were eliminated. When an individual earns a college education, they have the potential to benefit society as well as increase their “economic marketability and social capital” (Turner, 2016, p. 86). According to Kozleski (2017), qualitative research studies such as my investigation could contribute to social validity by offering real-time, useful significance to everyday life conduct.

Culture of Learning

As defined by Sagy, Kali, Tsaushu, and Tal (2018), learning culture in higher education is the set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that an individual or collection of

people have regarding their learning in distinct frameworks. Neem (2016) argued that America has prided itself on the achievements of its institutions of higher learning but has failed to provide African American students a fair learning culture. According to Neem (2016), students should be immersed in a culture of inquiry and have close contact with research-minded professors. A successful university should maintain an atmosphere that can provide an equilibrium between academic and social experiences (Turner & Thompson, 2014).

A study was conducted to gather narratives that described how African American students would collaborate in a learning environment that was conservative (Rakena, Airini, & Brown, 2016). These accounts describe strategies for overcoming academic challenges and outlined examples of “social practices” within their cultures regarding knowledge gaining (Rakena, et al., 2016). The results of this study showed that there was an improvement in instruction and intelligence as the learning atmosphere positively changed by including interaction and support (Rakena et al., 2016). This research is beneficial because it shows that degree attainment is even harder for African American students when postsecondary institutions do not provide a positive learning culture.

Education Values and Satisfaction

African American students sometimes value success expectancies and educational principles less when challenges are encountered (Ball, Huang, Cotten, Rikard, & Coleman, 2016). African Americans sometimes are not as excited about graduating from college and lose interest once they start facing academic challenges, causing an achievement gap between those that enroll and those that graduate (Lightweis, 2014).

The qualitative approach used in my study will potentially allow problems to be recognized and framed, solutions to be analyzed, and decisions to be justified based on values from African American students (Dornan & Kelly, 2017).

Research indicates that education has positive effects on a personal level and that facilitating access to learning is especially important to African American students (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2016). Kitiashvili et al. (2016) also expressed that African American students tend to register in schools with minimal academic demands and have larger dropout rates, causing them to have negative attitudes and perspectives about education. This is an important finding because it highlighted that delayed degree attainment was a problem that some African American students encountered. Another study showed interpersonal connections between African American students and university faculty are key to student integration and educational progress and satisfaction (Castellanos, Gloria, Besson, & Clark Harvey, 2016). This study included a population of 277 participants who completed a general demographic sheet that was evaluated with a 14-item scale to analyze the students' perspectives of the college atmosphere (Castellanos et al., 2016).

Even though research showed that universities could potentially be a part of the African American academic achievement problem, this is controversial because some colleges feel that they provide a positive learning atmosphere for all students. For example, Haynes and Macleod-Johnstone (2017) stated that educating is over-simplified in higher education rhetoric, however, trouble involved in acquiring knowledge has been downplayed and bundled as "teaching controversial issues" (p. 180). What remains to be

studied are the origins of academic challenges to degree attainment for African Americans.

Diversity in Higher Education

There is a growing concern about the lack of enough diversity in all fields of study among racial groups in higher learning institutions (Weng & Gray, 2017). According to Ghosh (2017), supporters of affirmative action in the U.S for university admissions claim that it establishes equal opportunity, but adversaries suggest that this policy permits inexcusable inequality or preferential treatment for African Americans, causing graduation academic challenges to develop. According to Testa and Egan (2014), students from different cultural backgrounds such as African Americans need help adjusting to university life, helping to overcome the feeling of aloneness.

Nonacademic factors are some of the academic challenges that African American students encounter in higher education (Ritchey, 2016). Faculty and support staff from institutions of higher learning are still lacking in awareness and understanding of academic challenges faced by low-income and African American college students (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). The academic ability of African Americans can be significantly undermined by the effects of stereotypical threats, social isolation feelings, and reduced confidence (Ballen, Wieman, Salehi, Searle, & Zamudio, 2017).

Benefits of Student Support Services

Student support services programs in higher education are designed to provide a supportive environment for students to discuss issues that they are having while pursuing a college degree and receive needed assistance (Allen & Nichols, 2017). Also, according

to Allen and Nichols (2017), student support services provide services that help promote retention and student academic success. Wilson (2018) asserted that African American students can remain more engaged, connected, and persist through college to graduation when supported by student support services. Institutional support develops more opportunities for African Americans to remain enrolled in school until commencement (Wilson, 2018). Higher education institutions generally provide services to help students with goal-setting within their support programs to increase their confidence and bolster academic success (McKenna et al., 2018). Also, according to McKenna et al. (2018), students without clear goals may drop out, showing that it is beneficial for student support services to offer goal-setting assistance.

Student support in higher education assists students with integrating socially and academically into the college campus community (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). “Validating experiences within the university are beneficial for students” and can create a college atmosphere that promotes academic success (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018, p. 1693). In higher education, tutoring is considered a great support mechanism intended to help enhance the educational experience of students (Ghenghesh, 2018). According to Ludvik (2019), higher education institutions use student support programs to help reduce achievement gaps and improve student success. Some universities provide counseling and advising services through their student support services department to help students complete their college degrees (Carr & London, 2019). Also, according to Carr and London (2019), students’ motivation to succeed increases when they are engaged in activities that are academically purposed beyond the classroom.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with, and suggestions to improve, institutional support to meet these challenges. Personal perspectives were captured from African American junior and senior students about academic challenges at the selected study site. By gaining a better understanding of the perspectives of academic challenges that African American students face, more can be done to mitigate this problem, leading to an improvement in college completion times at the study site.

The project that resulted from African American students appearing to need more institutional support than what is available is a professional development training program. This will be a 3-day event designed to provide the student support services department with the proper training, resources, and information needed to help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. Participants will receive tangible and intellectual resources that could be used to help improve the degree completion timeframes of African American students at the study site and possibly other higher education institutions. The professional development program includes the goals, purpose, and learning outcome of the training. Activities, outlines, and a sample implementation outline are teaching tools used in the training.

Summary

This study was aimed at exploring the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their

experience with, and suggestions to improve, institutional support to meet these challenges. As reported by Gardner, Barrett, and Pearson (2014), African American college students encounter various academic challenges that delay graduation, potentially hindering career success. In Section 1, I described the problem of African American students at the local study site graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. Key terms used in the study were identified and defined. The significance is that this study will aid in remediating the gap in practice of students appearing not to receive enough support to improve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups.

The rationale for selecting this problem was based on the low number of African American students who graduate compared to the higher number who enroll at the study site. The conceptual framework used was Tinto's (2004) theory of student graduation and retention. There is a theory among some university administrators that students are likely to withdraw from college if they do not achieve some degree of social or academic affiliation (Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 2019). A thorough review of the literature was conducted to help validate the study on a local and national scale. Implications of the study were outlined in this section, showing that professional development training could be a potential result of the data collected in this study.

In Section 2, I described the basic qualitative research method that was used to gather and analyze data to establish results. This qualitative study consisted of semistructured interviews intended to capture the perspectives of African American college students concerning academic challenges faced while trying to pursue a college

degree at the specified study site. The guiding research questions were based on Tinto's theory of student retention and graduation. The participants in the study consisted of 8 African American students who are juniors or seniors at the study site. In this section, I also explained data collection procedures that were used in this research. I also explained the role of the researcher and how organizing the data from the transcripts into codes, then developing themes analyzed the information. The evidence of research quality and procedures to assure credibility and accuracy are also discussed in this section.

In Section 3, I discuss the actual project that was developed based on the outcomes found in this research study. The project genre was identified and explained in this section. The rationale for the potential project was also discussed. A scholarly review of the literature related to the specific genre of the project will be presented. A thorough description of the actual project, project evaluation plan, and implications was be given. Section 4 contains information related to the strengths and weaknesses of the project. I provided recommendations for alternative approaches and provided information on scholarship, project development, and leadership and change related to the project. I also gave reflections on the importance of the work and what was learned during the project development. The implications, applications, and directions for future research were explained in Section 4. A strong concluding message was also given at the end of Section 4.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges. In higher education, some examples of academic challenges include a lack of motivation and struggles balancing keeping up with academic demands (Stephens et al., 2015b). In this section, I explain the research design and approach that was used in this qualitative project study. The research questions were aligned with Tinto's (2004) theory of retention and graduation. The conceptual framework of this study relates to the research questions by showing that students have a desire to persist in college degree attainment but sometimes need academic support to overcome challenges. I explain why the basic qualitative design was used and why other designs were not favorable for this study. The participant selection process, researcher-participant working relationship procedures, and protection of participant rights are explained in this section. Data collection procedures, including systems for keeping track of data and the role of the researcher, are highlighted in Section 2. Data analysis information, including evidence of quality, is also explained in this section.

Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research entails gaining insight into a current problem through analysis and observations (Merriam, 2009). This methodology is used by the researcher to acquire knowledge of what the problem means to individuals participating in the study.

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Yazan, 2015). The qualitative approach aids the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2012). A basic qualitative design “is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known (or more established) qualitative methodologies” (Kahlke, 2014, p. 13). According to Creswell (2012), inductive methods are used in qualitative research to analyze the information gathered.

I used the basic qualitative design to collect and analyze data to develop results. This study was designed to gather qualitative data using interviews (see Dornan & Kelly, 2017). Perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet those challenges were explored. The basic qualitative design follows a set of tasks that calls for the researcher to collect and analyze data and then report on findings (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). A basic qualitative design allowed the explained perspectives and challenges of participants to be analyzed to improve degree completion timeframes at the university.

The three questions that guided this project study are as follows: How do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation, what are African American students’ experiences and perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges, and what suggestions do African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges? These questions were designed to capture the perspectives of various academic challenges that African

American students face while pursuing a college degree. This study was designed to gather qualitative data by using interviews. The basic qualitative design allowed me to explore the perceptions of African American students about academic challenges, experiences, and suggestions to improve institutional support and degree completion timeframes. I was also able to follow a set of tasks that allowed me to collect and analyze beneficial data and then report on findings (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

I considered using other qualitative research designs, such as grounded theory, case study, and the narrative design but did not use any of these three designs because they were not favorable for this study. The goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory that accounts for a relevant pattern of behavior, which was not the objective of this research (see Baldwin, Ching, & Friesen, 2018). For this study, the reason a case study was not useful is that only interviews were conducted, and a case study requires 2 or more data collection methods (Yin, 2012). Narrative inquiries could not be used in this study because the research questions would be less defined instead of leading to exploratory openness towards the subject matter (Barabach, 2018).

According to Goertzen (2017), quantitative research methods entail collecting and examining data that can be represented numerically. Quantitative researchers target the “how” and “what” of a given situation (Goertzen, 2017). Quantifiable research does not provide any intuitiveness into why people act, feel, or think in certain ways (Goertzen, 2017). Lastly, quantitative research methods ask direct questions and look for measurements like percentages and proportions. The research questions in this study asked about the academic challenges, experiences and perceptions of institutional

academic support services for African American students, and suggestions for ways the institution could mitigate their graduation challenges. I also could not use a quantitative research design because it entails objectively measurable variables (see Willan, 2016).

I did not use a quantitative design because it would not answer my research questions. My research questions were designed to explore the shared experiences about academic challenges that participants face while pursuing a college degree and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges. A quantitative design could not provide descriptive data needed in this study but rather information about quantities, measurements, and percentages, which would not have been useful for this research.

Participants

Participant Selection

The population in this study was comprised of traditional African American college students ranging from ages 18 to 25 who are pursuing graduation at the study site, a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the United States. I recruited participants at the study site according to the following criteria: (a) African American, (b) at least 18 years of age, and (c) junior or senior college student. Juniors and seniors were selected for the study because they have been working toward college degree completion longer, adding more validity to the study. After I attained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I used purposeful sampling to select eight participants at the study site. Maximum variation sampling was the type of purposeful sampling technique used to capture the wide range of perspectives relating to the experiences,

information, and suggestions regarding effective academic support programs at the university (see Lund Research Ltd., 2012). I obtained variance by selecting participants from a larger pool of candidates by applying predefined criteria, specific characteristics possessed by some students but not all (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015). The maximum variation approach allowed me to interview a wide range of participants from a sample (Creswell, 2009)

Eight participants were chosen because there were no new codes or concepts emerging at this point, signifying data saturation (see van Rijnsoever, 2017). According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposeful sampling is a widely used method in qualitative research for choosing participants who will provide rich information that will benefit the study. The use of this method also involves selecting individuals who are knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest, in this case, academic challenges to graduation (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Gaining Access to Participants

Before attempting to gain participants for the study, I requested and received a letter of cooperation from the director of research compliance at the study site and a list containing the names and email addresses of eligible individuals from the same office. I recruited participants by sending emails to students from the electronic mail list provided to me by the university's research compliance department with details of the study and my contact information. I also enlisted qualified persons for my study by verbally providing specifics of my research and how they could get in touch with me. Participants who were interested contacted me by email or phone to schedule a time for their

interview. I persisted to respond to emails and phone calls from potential candidates until the planned sample size was met. When this occurred, I stopped contacting potential participants via email and the research department at the study site was notified by email that the number of respondents required was fulfilled.

The participants for this research provided data needed in the study. Qualitative research sample sizes are generally smaller than those of quantitative research (Marshall, 1996). Gutmann (2014) asserted that understanding the rationale and practice of sampling in qualitative research is necessary. According to Saunders et al. (2017), data saturation means that no new data are being discovered. All the relevant information needed to gain complete insights on my topic was discovered and I reached data saturation with eight participants (see van Rijnsoever, 2017).

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Interviews were scheduled for each potential participant once I confirmed that they met the requirements of being an African American, at least 18 years of age, and a junior or senior student at the study site. I did not have any type of existing relationship with the participants. The interviews took place at quiet public locations, which included the campus library and an authorized sitting area at the university. Before any individual interview officially began, I provided a written informed consent form to each participant. Each participant was given a copy of the form for their records, and I kept the originals. I verbally disclosed the expectations and rules of confidentiality to everyone taking part in the study. The participants were provided an opportunity to read

the informed consent document and make inquiries. Questions about the process were answered when asked by a participant.

Protection of Participant Rights

Participants in this study were provided with confidentiality for their safety (Bricki & Green, 2007). Information collected from participant interviews and documentation will not be shared with anyone besides my project study committee, if requested, to help maintain privacy. I also upheld ethical policies that will ensure protection for human participants. It is unscrupulous to put research candidates in a harmful position (Bricki & Green, 2007). To keep the study ethical, I carefully reviewed the information that research participants provided and eradicated any possible discriminatory intentions that I could have possibly developed from their responses. I did this by reading the data with an open mind. I also explained the stipulations for participation and the purpose and scope of the study in an honest way to participants and allowed them an opportunity to ask any questions that they needed answered.

I adhered to all guidelines identified by the IRB to safeguard the rights of individuals who participated in the study. I secured the appropriate permissions from Walden University and the study site, including IRB approvals (#07-24-19-0622575) needed to conduct research. Careful measures were taken to keep participant information, including their responses, confidential. The data are kept in a locked fireproof safe at my home, and I am the only person with access to this information. This process helped to maintain the integrity of the research. Each participant was reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time they choose without any

repercussions and was also provided with informed consent documentation, allowing me to collect data and gain access to them. The forms were given privately, and potential discussions about withdrawing from the study were scheduled whenever needed at an agreed time (see Bricki & Green, 2007).

I will give project study committee members access to unnamed interview transcripts through the capstone process if requested. All data will be discarded according to Walden University guidelines and 5-year timeframe (Walden University Institutional Review Board, 2018). The study was conducted according to the ethical principles required by Walden University's IRB to defend the rights of research respondents to ensure respect, beneficence, and justice for these individuals (Walden University Institutional Review Board, 2018). I thanked each individual who refused to participate or withdrew from the study and ensured that any data that they had given would remain confidential. This study was not conducted in any work environment that I am associated with, nor were there any incentives, conflicts of interest, or power differentials involved in this study. There were no existing relationships between me and the school, study site leadership, nor any of the participants. I also did not have any type of power over any participant.

Data Collection

The problem at this local study site is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their

experience with, and suggestions to improve, institutional support to meet those challenges. The shared information from interview participants was needed to help discover ways to improve degree completion timeframes at the study site.

Interviews

To receive permission to conduct my study, I first obtained authorization to conduct my research at the study site, including a letter of cooperation. Next, I acquired the proper permission and approval needed from the Walden University IRB. The data collected during this study included African American student perceptions of academic challenges, experiences, and recommendations to improve support at the university.

For this basic qualitative study, the instrument used for data collection was an interview protocol for African American college student participants. Maximum variation was the purposeful sampling strategy used to identify participants for the study. This type of sampling I used face-to-face semistructured interviews for data collection. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, allowing enough time to capture rich, beneficial data for the study. According to Golafshani (2003), interviews will lead to a more “valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities” (p. 604). The interview protocol was comprised of eleven researcher produced questions. The face-to-face semistructured interview method of collecting information allows participants to adjust to feel comfortable as needed, allowing them to be more cooperative and engaged (Schober, 2018).

The questions asked in the student interviews were opened-ended and straightforward for the participants to answer and to provide useful information that

helped gain an understanding of the academic challenges that African American students encounter while pursuing a college degree. The face-to-face semistructured interviews with participants at the study site were designed to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with, and suggestions to improve, institutional support to meet those challenges. The interview questions tied directly to the guiding research questions because both were used to explore ways to improve institutional support and improve degree completion timeframes for African American students. The interview questions also provided a way to capture shared experiences and valuable information used to help answer the research questions (Golafshani, 2003)

With proper authorization, email notifications were sent to potentially qualified students suggested by the study site's research department and by word-of-mouth advertising to inform potential participants about the study. Interested research participants contacted me via email or phone. I responded to participants who met the requirements of the initial screening and scheduled interviews by using the same method of communication that they originally used to contact me. Interviews took place in public places such as a library or authorized campus sitting area. The perspectives that student participants shared during the interviews provided valuable information that will aid in understanding the challenges that they face while attempting to attain a college degree. The views of academic challenges that African American students shared also provided some insight into the reasons that delays in graduation occur.

Systems for Keeping Track of Data

The semistructured interview sessions were recorded with a digital device and transcribed using Google voice tools software. On the consent form, I informed the respondents that they would be recorded before the interview began. The reason for recording the interview conversations is so that I did not miss anything and to be as detailed as possible about the challenges that African American college students have encountered. As the researcher, I carefully listened to participants and focused on the interviews without distractions (Matheson, 2007). The taped conversations were transcribed, then will be destroyed after 5 years following the conclusion of the study in accordance with Walden University ethics and compliance guidelines (Walden University Institutional Review Board, 2018). The transcribed copies were coded using alias names and locked in a keyed fireproof safe at my home once the interviews were over. I am the only person with access to this research material.

One of the systems used to keep track of data and emerging understandings in this study was a reflective journal. I chose to use a reflective journal because it allowed me to make my thoughts, experiences, feelings, and opinions clear and an acknowledged part of the processes used in this research study (Ortlipp, 2008). The journal is saved in an electronic file format. The second data tracking system used in this study was a research log. These accounts were used to keep brief records of exactly when and where I was when I conducted my research (Cleveland State University, n.d.). Dates were reflected in each entry of the log.

Role of the Researcher

I did not select participants with whom I have had or currently have a personal, job, or professional relationship. To reduce researcher biases, my interview questions were checked for clarity by an African American student who was not involved in the research study as a pilot tester. I chose this individual to help highlight any potential partiality conflicts or point out anything that may need clarifying. The pilot tester did not have research experience. The qualifications of this individual included being an African American student that is 18 years of age or older and has only been enrolled at the study site. My tone of voice and body language during the interview sessions were maintained in a professional manner to avoid any researcher influence. To help maintain an ethical study, there were no conflicts of interest or power differentials involved in this research. There were no ethical issues applicable to this study. I did not collect any data or conduct a study within my work environment. Several years ago, I was a student at the study site, however as the researcher, I am not affiliated with it, nor have I been affiliated with it in any professional manner.

Data Analysis

As the researcher, I collected my data using a digital recording device and my reflective journal to ensure that I did not miss anything while the participants were responding. After conducting each interview with African American students, I transcribed the data within one week of each interview using Google voice tools (Lantsman, 2015). Transcription involves converting handwritten notes and audio recordings to electronic text format (Creswell, 2012). The software for data management

that I used was MySQL, which is maintained by Oracle (Mysql.com, 2018). MySQL is used for managing, organizing, and indexing data. MySQL data management software has proven to be reliable, secure, and scalable because it allowed me to keep my information organized (Mysql.com, 2018). Next, I coded my transcribed text to help answer the research questions. Each of the participant names is kept confidential and I am the only one capable of identifying the subjects (i.e., Participant 1, Participant 2).

Data Coding

In qualitative research, coding is how you categorize the data you are analyzing (Gibbs, 2007). Also, according to Gibbs (2007), coding is the process of organizing information in the transcribed text, searching and determining concepts, and discovering relations between them. I started the coding process within 24 hours of transcribing the data, using the codes that I developed to allow themes to emerge. I used the inductive mode of open coding because it allowed me to start fresh and create codes based on the raw data. Inductive coding is less susceptible to bias than deductive coding (Medelyan, 2020). Open coding allowed me to break the transcribed data down into manageable sections. The type of open coding that I used was line-by-line coding, which entailed analyzing each sentence and word thoroughly to help build concepts and categories. The line-by-line method was time consuming but helped to provide me with structured details about the data.

My first step in this process involved reading through my transcripts several times and creating labels to summarize what emerged from the data. My newly formed labels were developed from the content of the transcripts (Vollstedt, 2020). Next, I defined my

coding categories. According to Vollstedt (2020), categories are ideas that are directly expressed in the text. Categories are also defined as simple descriptions of participant accounts (Vollstedt, 2020). Each code contained only a few words. For example, some of the participants expressed that they had trouble adapting to the college campus environment. Another respondent expressed the inability to fit in with other students at the university. In this instance, I used “university culture” as the coded category. Other examples of categories that I developed included support needed, institutional support, and needs from university leadership.

After coding and developing the categories manually to check for accuracy, I uploaded the interview transcriptions into a computer software program called ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti is a qualitative software program used to help researchers with identifying relations in data, developing codes, and organizing the data (ATLAS.ti, 2020). I also utilized this software to ensure that I did not miss any codes during my manual coding process. The codes that evolved from the software closely resembled the codes that I developed from the transcriptions. Once the open coding process was completed, I used axial coding to identify relationships among the newly developed codes. Axial coding is used by researchers to probe the connections between concepts and categories that develop during the process of open coding (Vollstedt, 2020). During the axial coding process, I examined the data and newly developed codes based on patterns observed in the transcribed interviews to determine relations between the categories (Vollstedt, 2020). I also used my reflective journal notes to aid in analyzing the actions and interactions of participants to help in identifying relations between categories (Böhm, 2004).

After I finished coding, I began developing themes. The purpose of a theme in qualitative research is to draw out the essence of participants' shared experiences and information (Vollstedt, 2020). I established themes in this study to portray the significance of information given by participants during the interview process. According to Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016), themes contain codes that have common reference points and a "higher degree of generality" that unites interpretations regarding the subject of inquiry (p. 101). The rapid identification of themes from audio recordings (RITA) method was used to aid in establishing themes (Neal, Neal, VanDyke, & Kornbluh, 2015). This method allowed me to work directly from the interview recordings, transcriptions, and developed codes to establish themes (Neal et al., 2015).

By using RITA, my first step in developing themes was identifying text segments from my transcriptions and reflective journal notes that I wrote while relistening to the responses from participants on my recording device. I reread my transcripts and checked my newly developed codes for accuracy a second time. The RITA technique aided me in identifying themes by tabulating the reoccurrences of codes and categories. My next step involved defining and describing my themes. Thirdly, I defined my themes based on the information collected during the coding process, known as stabilizing. During the stabilizing stage, themes are described, along with their variations, to enhance transparency and truthfulness of the data (Vollstedt, 2020). I was able to describe and relate the themes to established knowledge. During this time, I referred to my literature to make interpretations from data beyond what had already been developed. My final

step in theme development was verification. I went back and verified my codes and newly developed themes for accuracy.

Evidence of Quality

In qualitative research, the analysis of trustworthiness is imperative to ensure reliability (Golafshani, 2003). Also, according to Golafshani (2003), trustworthiness in a research study lies at the center of reliability and validity. I established trustworthiness by keeping a reflective journal containing notes about the development of patterns and themes that were associated with the category refining process. Credibility is referred to as assurance in the truth of the findings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). According to Anney (2014), credibility is also defined as “confidence that can be placed in the truth” of research preliminary findings (p. 276). I established credibility in this study with the use of member checking. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), member checking occurs when preliminary interpretations and conclusions are presented to participants for their feedback. Member checking is also a method used for the establishment of validity (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Member checks were administered by providing participants the opportunity to assess the preliminary findings for accuracy and correctness (Creswell, 2012). Each participant that responded agreed with the results. Member checks helped to ensure that I was not biased as the researcher and interviewer. I was also able to continuously monitor my own biases and perspectives by recording notes in my reflective journal (Clark, Birkhead, Fernandez, & Egger, 2017).

Transferability refers to preliminary findings having applicability in other settings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The strategy used for transferability in this research study

was a thick description, giving detailed accounts of field experiences in which, I explicitly showed the patterns of cultural and social relationships and put them into context (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This approach allowed me to provide richly detailed descriptions of my field experiences such as the perceptions and improvement suggestions by participants captured during interviews (RWJF, 2008). This research study would be applicable to other sites because of the details provided. Other universities could also gain ideas to conduct an independent research study from the information learned from this study.

Dependability in qualitative research shows that findings are consistent and repeatable (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The strategy used to establish dependability in this study was an audit trail. I developed the audit trail as a log document to help maintain all the research decisions and activities by recording all the data collection and analysis procedures throughout the study (Carcary, 2009). According to Jackson, Drummond, and Camara (2007), audit trails seek to verify the substance of what research participants said to prevent interpretations from being subject to the researcher's own beliefs. This method allows a transparent description of the steps to be taken during the research study from the beginning to the evolution and reporting of results (RWJF, 2006).

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of a research study can be corroborated or confirmed by other researchers (Anney, 2014). According to Anney (2014), reflexivity is an evaluation of a researcher's influence over their background, interests, and perceptions of the research process. Reflexivity was used in this study to help establish confirmability because it allowed a continuous process of reflection on

values, behavior, and preconceptions from myself and participants (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). In qualitative research, reflexivity enhances transparency in the researcher's subjective role during both the collection and analysis of data (Darawsheh, 2014). The method of reflexivity used in this study was a reflexive journal to record thoughts and experiences during the research process (Anney, 2014).

According to Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, and Neumann (2011), ethical or methodological predicaments can emerge when collecting data or sharing qualitative research results with participants. I followed the research and ethical procedures required by Walden University such as confidentiality, avoiding conflicts of interest, and refraining from researcher biases to help maintain integrity and establish trustworthiness for this study (Lewis, 2015; Walden University Institutional Review Board, 2018). I also practiced the confidentiality guidelines outlined by Walden University and the study site.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases involve information that contradicts patterns or descriptions that develop from data analysis and are also referred to as negative or deviant cases (Negative or Deviant Case Analysis, 2006). These types of incidents were treated with the deviant case analysis method, which probes for new, but unspecified explanations (Seawright & Gerring, n.d.). This type of study involves searching for and explaining details that may seem to contradict patterns that may emerge from data analysis (Negative or Deviant Case Analysis, 2006). I used this process in the study to seek out informational components that appeared not to support patterns that surface. Through member checking, everyone that participated in the study was allowed an opportunity to assess

their interview transcripts to check for accuracy. This helped to curtail discrepant cases, adding credibility (Creswell, 2012). The study participants gave analogous responses to the interview questions, providing insight on perceived academic challenges, experiences, and suggestions to improve degree completion rates at the study site. As a result, no discrepant cases were discovered among the preliminary findings.

Researcher Bias

One of the most common criticisms of qualitative research is that it is subject to researcher bias (Cope, 2014). Also, according to Cope (2014), the researcher conducting the qualitative research must avoid researcher bias because they are considered the “research instrument” (p. 90). In qualitative research, researcher bias occurs when a person conducting research unintentionally or intentionally influences the results of the study based on their own expected outcome, causing a threat to the study’s credibility (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). According to Cope (2014), one way a researcher can address bias is by keeping a reflexive journal to note feelings and thoughts to bracket subjectivity and perceptions. Throughout this research study I maintained a reflexive journal to keep a record of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Before conducting my study, my researcher bias was that I felt that the student support services department at the study site was not properly supporting African American students.

Data Analysis Results

Face-to-face semistructured interviews were used in this basic qualitative study for data collection. As the researcher, I designed the interview questions used in the study to explore the experiences of participants. The interview questions were directly

tied to the guiding research questions of this study. Tinto's theory suggests that student persistence is based on their degree of social and academic integration (Tinto, 2004). The student interview questions were based on Tinto's theory, which provided the foundation for data collection in this study. Tinto's idea of student retention relates to the interview questions in the study by exploring participant experiences about academic challenges and support to persist through those challenges.

While analyzing my collected data, I transcribed each interview, coded, and developed themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I identified similarities in the responses that the participants gave. The interviews were transcribed using voice-to-text dictation software, a personal laptop, and Microsoft Word. Each transcript was reviewed twice to ensure accuracy with each interview answer, then coded and arranged into identifiable themes. Discrepant cases involve information that contradicts patterns or descriptions that develop from data analysis and are also referred to as negative or deviant cases (Negative or Deviant Case Analysis, 2006). The deviant case analysis method was used to probe for new, but unspecified explanations. No discrepant cases emerged while analyzing the data.

The problem at this local study site is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. This study was guided by three research questions to gain a deeper understanding of the impact that academic challenges have on degree completion timeframes for African American students when more institution support may be required to meet these challenges. The first research question asked how African American students describe the academic challenges they

face as they work towards graduation. There were four interview questions associated with this research question (see Appendix B). The second research question asked, what are African American students' experiences and perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges. This question also had four interview questions associated with it. The third research question asked what suggestions African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges. There were three interview questions associated with this question. According to Creswell (2009), in a qualitative study, a narrative discussion is a summation of the data analysis findings. Eight participants, 3 males, and 5 females were interviewed. Table 2 shows the participants' aliases, gender, and undergraduate student class standing.

Table 2

Participant Gender and Demographic Information

Participant aliases	Gender	Undergraduate student class standing
Participant 1	Female	Junior
Participant 2	Female	Junior
Participant 3	Male	Senior
Participant 4	Female	Junior
Participant 5	Male	Junior
Participant 6	Male	Junior
Participant 7	Female	Senior
Participant 8	Female	Junior

Note. Undergraduate student class standing represents the earned number of academic credit hours determined at the beginning of each fall semester based on requirements in the participant's degree program. Students with 60 to 89 credit hours are classified as juniors, and students with 90 or more hours are classified as seniors at the university.

Research Question 1

How do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation?

Research question one asked, how do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation. Interview questions one, two, three, and four were derived to answer research question number one. The participants shared various academic challenges that they faced while attempting to complete a college degree. Most of the participants expressed that academic challenges can be alleviated, and degree completion timeframes can be improved if the university does more to gain a better understanding of these obstacles.

Theme 1: Identifying needed support. Theme 1 highlighted some of the various academic challenges that the participants shared during their interviews.

According to Flores et al. (2017), factors such as academic challenges faced while trying

to complete a college degree sometimes play a role in determining when African American students graduate. According to Hochanadel and Finamore (2015), academic, cultural, social, and self-efficacy difficulties in higher education can have a disparate impact on graduation timeframes for students. During the interviews, I learned that some of the participants felt that faculty members did not detect the support needed to perform better academically during their freshmen year. Participant 2 expressed that as a freshman, she had a difficult time passing her courses, and felt that her professors did not notice that she was struggling in school. Participant 7 argued that students who are new to college are sometimes scared to ask for help. Participant 5 stated “more should be done on campus to recognize when students need support” and provide the necessary assistance. According to Bruggink, Goei, and Koot (2016), members of faculty in higher education are regarded as “key players in the process of identifying” students’ actual support needs (p. 431).

Participant 6 acknowledged that he might have performed better academically during his first year of college if someone would have identified areas in which he needed improvement. He also noted that student support services should do more to help identify the academic support needed by African American students. The student support services staff in higher education can be regarded as informants because they identify the needs of students in everyday practice (Bruggink et al., 2016). I learned from talking to the participants that it is very important for the student support services department at the university to identify academic challenges that African American students face while pursuing a college degree.

Theme 2: Adapting to university culture. Three participants reported that the academic challenge they thought had the greatest impact in terms of their ability to graduate was adapting to the culture of the university. Fish, Gefen, Kaczetow, Winograd, and Futtersak-Goldberg (2016) argued that the environment of a higher education institution may be a “predictor of student learning outcomes” (p. 154). Fish et al. (2016) also noted that students’ positive perceptions of the support offered by their school appear to bolster academic success. An effective learning environment increases students’ degree of involvement, persistence, and feelings of integration into the college community (Fish et al., 2016). According to Scopelliti and Tiberio (2010), the level of a student’s commitment refers to their positive reactions to and feelings toward the new campus environment. Sometimes it takes students a while to adapt to college life. Participant 1 said that “arriving at a college campus with people that you don’t know can be very difficult for incoming freshmen. Learning to adjust to a diverse atmosphere was very hard and even lonely at times.” Participant 3 came from a “low-income predominantly African American community” with very few people holding a college education.

One participant expressed that the first academic challenge was getting adjusted to the college atmosphere. Participant 5 noted that “I was scared and didn’t know anyone when I arrived on campus.” Colleges should implement programs that require orientation and mentoring during the first semester for students. Several of the participants reported that they could do better in school if the campus environment were more conducive to learning. While conducting interviews with participants, I learned that students are

sometimes very scared and have a difficult time adjusting to the college atmosphere when arriving as freshmen, which hindered their learning.

Theme 3: Faculty rapport. Faculty rapport alluded to the relationship between the teacher and the learners. Several of the participants felt they did not have a good relationship with the faculty and were not receiving enough support from them. Four participants expressed that their first academic challenge was developing a personal connection with faculty members. Participant 6 thought that “a system of support from faculty members for students to discuss problems and concerns from knowledgeable people” was important. Participant 4 felt that faculty should “develop relationships with students and advocate for them.” Participant 2 acknowledged that referrals to the student support services department were usually by faculty for “students that need extra support in special areas such as better study habits, test-taking skills, and tutoring.” Students would prefer to develop a rapport with faculty before being referred to student support services. According to Guan and Stanford (2016), positive faculty rapport and support have a strong impact on student learning.

When teachers effectively connect with students via email, phone, online chat, or face-to-face, a sense of personalization is developed, whereby motivation and learning are increased (Guan & Stanford, 2016). Positive faculty and student interaction are crucial for “quality undergraduate education” (DeAngelo, Mason, & Winters, 2016, p. 317). Also, according to DeAngelo et al. (2016), members of faculty are valuable socialization agents for students, in addition to their peers. Effective mentoring relationships are sometimes developed through regular faculty and student interactions,

providing needed guidance to students during their educational experiences (DeAngelo et al., 2016). According to Birkeland, Davies, and Heard (2019), students mentored by faculty generally take more courses per semester, achieve higher grades, and have lower dropout rates. While conducting the interviews, I learned from participants that positive faculty rapport can improve student engagement, motivation, and learning.

Research Question 2

What are African American students' experiences and perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges?

Interview questions five, six, seven, and eight were derived to answer research question number two. The participants shared a variety of responses on how they used student support services and their perceptions of those services, and the assistance received. Some of the participants expressed that they did not feel comfortable using available institutional support resources at all.

Theme 1: Expanding knowledge of services currently offered. Theme 1 highlighted the various perceptions that students had of their experiences with student support services at the university. The university's student support services department is 100% funded by TRIO, which are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify needs and provide services and resources to specified college students (TRIO Home Page, 2019). All the participants reported that they have used academic advising, a part of the student support services department, to help handle their academic challenges at some point but did not always have good experiences. Four participants also reported that the image of student support services also needs to be

improved. Participant 6 reported that “the university needs to make the program more attractive to African American students.” Many students do not register with the student support services because the university is not doing enough to publicize the academic support services and resources offered (Student Support Services, personal communication, April 18, 2019). During the interview sessions, I was informed by participants of the importance of improving the image of the student support services department at the university. I discovered from the interview responses that students would be more inclined to utilize resources and services offered by the student support services department if the image were improved.

Theme 2: Lack of institutional support services. During the interviews, institutional support referred to the university providing academic development opportunities, assistance with college requirements, and motivation toward successful completion of an undergraduate college degree. Several of the participants expressed that they did not receive the level of support that they expected when receiving assistance from the student support services department. Many students fail because of a lack of institutional support (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018). During the interview, Participant 4 responded by saying that she would “love to see the academic advising component of support services improved. Students must feel truly supported when getting academic guidance.” According to Berumen, Zerquera, and Smith (2015), quality social and academic integration and support efforts for students should take place through academic advising, student orientation, and residence life provided by student support services. Participant 4 and Participant 6 both expressed that they did not receive the “proper help”

that they needed. Participant 4 felt that “student support services should give support on a more-personalized level.” Participant 4 went on to explain that she felt supported by student services as related to scheduling and making an appointment with them, but unsupported with “proper one-on-one academic guidance.” Participant 6 said that he felt “confused when visiting student support services about academic advising,” therefore feeling unsupported in that area.

The information that I acquired from participant interviews showed that the lack of positive experiences with student support services can cause students to feel unsupported. The shared responses also revealed that ineffective academic advising can be an academic challenge for students. According to Darling (2015), the advising component of a university helps to create a link between a student’s educational curriculum and campus experience. The conceptual framework of this study relates to Research Question II by showing that students have a desire to persist in college degree attainment, but sometimes need effective academic support to overcome challenges. I learned that students want to feel adequately supported and guided while attempting to complete a college degree.

Theme 3: Lack of faculty support. During the interviews, providing support referred to furnishing students with resources and educational services needed to meet learning standards. Five of the participants reported that they had at least one instructor who did not motivate or support them enough at some point in their higher educational journey, impacting their degree completion timeframes. Most of the participants felt that degree completion times could be improved with more institutional support. Participant

8 reported that faculty should “help students understand the importance of college education, motivate them to be successful, and provide support. Also, build their self-esteem and explain how a college degree can be beneficial to them in life.” Participant 8 reached out to a few of her instructors, but “did not feel fully supported.” Participant 8 felt that their method was “somewhat ineffective.” Participant 2 noted that she handled her academic challenge of not being properly supported by “trying to deal with the pressures of school on my own.” Participant 4 expressed that she “felt lost and didn’t know how to connect with professors” during her first two semesters but handled this by “scheduling several appointments” with her instructors. While conducting the interviews, I gained a better understanding of the importance of institutional support from the participants and that students can potentially perform better academically when supported by the university. I learned from participants that students perform better academically when they have a good rapport with faculty and staff at the institution.

Theme 4: Academic advising. According to McGill (2019), effective academic advising in higher education has a positive impact on student retention. Some of the participants felt that the academic advising services offered at the university should be improved. During the interview, Participant 4 responded by saying that she would “love to see the academic advising component of support services improved. Students must feel truly supported when getting academic guidance.” While talking with Participant 4, I learned that she didn’t feel supported when given academic advice because her advisor would never communicate clear expectations, nor adequately monitor degree completion timeframes. According to Zarges, Adams, Higgins, and Muhovich (2018), academic

advising in higher education can be improved by providing assessments focused on determining outcomes and gathering and interpreting evidence to measure student knowledge with the intention of continuous improvement. When advising is assessed in higher education, the design of strategies and actions are guided to collect “evidence to support improvement and change” (p. 47).

Participant 4 and Participant 6 both found out about the academic advising component of the student support services department from the university’s website. Both individuals also expressed that they did not receive the “proper help” that they needed. Academic advising is a very important element of a higher education system that assists students in solving academic problems and achieving academic success (Suvedi, Ghimire, Millenbah, & Shrestha, 2015). The participant responses during the interview process exhibited the importance of having effective academic advising available to students. I also gained a better understanding of how inadequate academic guidance can cause students to feel unsupported.

Theme 5: Improving tutoring. Based on the interviews that I conducted with participants, effective academic tutoring can potentially be a good way for universities to support students pursuing a college degree. Some of the participants did not have a good perception of the tutoring component of the university’s student support services department. Participant 2, Participant 3, and Participant 8 each reported that they used the tutoring services offered by the student support services department. Participant 2 said that tutoring sessions were “not very beneficial” in helping her handle academic challenges related to difficult courses because the tutor was not patient and lacked

enthusiasm, decreasing motivation. She found out about this service from fellow students. McFarlane (2016) argued that student engagement and motivation for African American students in higher education increases when academic tutors are enthusiastic and supportive. Participant 3 and Participant 8 both responded that the tutoring services “did not benefit” them much because the sessions did not allow enough time to get all their questions answered, nor did they get the one-on-one attention needed. According to Colver and Fry (2016), individualized tutoring has become a standard offering among services and programs at universities to help students persist to graduation. Most of the participants felt that the tutoring component at the university needs improvements in academic reinforcement strategies, motivation techniques, and have different methods of relating to be beneficial to African American students. I learned from participant interviews that tutoring services at the university can better support and benefit students once they are improved. The participants suggested ways that leadership at the university can better help students with their academic challenges.

Research Question 3

What suggestions do African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges?

Interview questions nine, ten, and eleven were derived to answer research question number three. The participants shared a variety of ways in which institutional leadership could better assist African American students with the academic challenges that they face while pursuing a college degree. Each of the students that participated felt

that their suggestions were valuable and will help the university better assist students with overcoming academic challenges.

Theme 1: Building connection to leadership. Theme 1 highlighted the various suggestions that participants felt leadership at the university can do to help African American students overcome academic challenges. According to Farmer and Hope (2015), several academic challenges have caused African American students to experience delays in graduation. Leadership at the university can potentially alleviate academic challenges for African Americans and improve the student support services department at the university by considering student suggestions. The following are student suggestions to alleviate challenges for African Americans. During the interviews, identifying needs referred to gathering information about students and getting a clear picture of their strengths and challenges. Some of the participants felt that leadership at the university should encourage the student support services department to identify the needs of African American students. Participant 5 noted that university leadership should “gather and analyze data of struggling African American students, identify their needs, support them, and track their progress” to decrease academic challenges. Participant 5 also expressed that the university should offer “adjustment support for new students.” According to Souza, Veiga Simão, and Ferreira (2019), positive faculty support may determine incoming students’ adjustment to their university, as well as their well-being. Participant 8 reported that university leaders and faculty members should “identify the needs of students as early as possible. Negative perceptions of campus climate among

minority groups such as African Americans can lead to low academic achievement levels and a lack of a sense of belonging in the college environment (Souza et al., 2019).

Some students feel that they have to deal with challenges on their own during their freshmen year in college.” Participant 3 recommended that leadership at the university “implement some type of mandatory needs assessment protocol for freshmen and sophomores.” Overall, participants felt that leadership should put something in place to identify the needs of students early so that academic challenges can be alleviated, improving degree completion timeframes.

Theme 2: Increasing student forums for support. During the time I interacted with the participants, I gained valuable insight into how important it is for students needs to be identified. According to Gannon (2018), colleges and universities should implement inclusive teaching techniques and support methods to identify and assist African American students with their educational needs. In some colleges and universities, early alert systems help to identify students who are at risk of discontinuing their studies (Villano, Harrison, Lynch, & Chen, 2018). Jokhan, Bibhya, and Shaveen (2019) noted that early alert systems also help higher education institutions better aid students in their studies and gain a better understanding of student behaviors and academic performance. Some early alert tools and programs are designed to capture student logins, online engagement, and activity completion to predict student performance and identify student needs (Jokhan et al., 2019).

During the interviews, listening to the students’ voices referred to leadership addressing the concerns and suggestions of students at the university. Participants felt

that leadership should start listening to students about ways to help better assist with alleviating academic challenges at the institution. Participant 1 felt that university leaders should ensure that faculty and student support services staff members “listen to what students have to say.” Participant 1 went on to note that “students are more apt to express their feelings if they feel safe and that their voice is being heard.” Participant 3 expressed that “some faculty members do not show enough concern for student needs.” He also believed that university leaders should provide “more...surveys” for students to express their concerns. Overall, the participants suggested that hearing the students’ voices and making the appropriate adjustments can potentially help leadership alleviate academic challenges that African American students face while pursuing a college degree. While interviewing participants, I realized that students potentially become more engaged when they feel that leadership is listening to their suggestions and concerns at the university. However, leadership does not have one-on-one connections with students, therefore faculty members collect information from them.

Theme 3: Effective mentoring. During the interviews, mentoring referred to faculty and student support services staff members assisting students in needed areas whether educational, career-wise, or personal. Some of the participants suggested that leadership implement an optional peer-mentoring program that will allow students to be mentored from the time they enter college until degree completion. An improvement to the mentoring component could potentially change African American students’ perceptions of the student support services department at the university. According to Marthers (2018), a good mentor listens, observes, and offers advice based on what seems

to be best for the student's academic progress. Participant 5 recommended that leadership at the university "develop a mentorship program to motivate and offer encouragement to students and have knowledgeable faculty members providing good guidance." Participant 6 reported that he believes "leaders should develop...learning communities and more mentoring programs to show students the resources that are available to them because many are not aware of what benefits they have." The student voice could be heard during mentoring sessions and adjustments could potentially be made to help alleviate academic challenges for African American students.

Evidence of Quality

According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), trustworthiness, in qualitative research, is referred to as the extent of data confidence and the quality assurance methods of a study. I established trustworthiness by keeping a reflective journal containing notes about the development of patterns that were associated with the category refining process. I provided each participant with an opportunity to reassess their interview transcript for correctness to establish credibility. For member checking, participants were allowed an opportunity to provide feedback on the preliminary findings of the study. Ethical research procedures such as avoiding conflicts of interest, refraining from researcher biases, and confidentiality, as required by Walden University, were followed during the data collection and analysis processes. To help maintain an ethical study, there were no conflicts of interest or power differentials involved in this research. I did not have any power over any participant. To reduce researcher biases, the interview questions were validated by an African American student, who was not part of the

research study. This individual was 18 years old and did not have research experience but helped to highlight any potential partiality conflicts and pointed out anything that may have needed clarifying from the participants' perspectives. Careful measures were taken to keep participant information, including their responses, confidential. The data will be kept in a locked fireproof safe at my home, where I am the only person with access to this information and will be appropriately destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

The problem at the local study site is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. A basic qualitative design was used to probe African American students' perspectives to help determine services that would best support them and improve degree completion timeframes. The qualitative approach used in my study allowed academic challenges to be identified and suggested solutions to be analyzed based on shared information and experiences from semistructured interviews (Dornan & Kelly, 2017).

Tinto's (2004) theory of student retention and graduation was used as the conceptual framework in this study. The research questions related to Tinto's theory by showing that African American students have a desire to persist in college degree completion, but sometimes need academic support to overcome challenges. Student support services programs may be analyzed to determine positive influences on student outcomes (Milliron et al., 2017). The research questions asked in this study were as follows: (a) how do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation, (b) what are African American students'

perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges, and (c) what suggestions do African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges. I conducted semistructured interviews with eight African American students at a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the U.S. The collected data were analyzed, then coded into themes. Participant responses from the study provided me with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the services offered at the university, and what additional services are needed to alleviate academic challenges for African American students.

The findings of the study are based on the several themes. The themes from the findings provided suggestions for providing support to improve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. The results of this study provided a better understanding of the perceived academic challenges faced by African American students that delay degree completion timeframes. The literature, experiences, and information explored during the study allowed me to gain insights into student needs and suggestions for providing effective support.

Description of the Project

A project may be designed to provide the student support services department with additional training, resources, and information needed to help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. The project would be a 3-day professional development training for the student support services department at the university. According to Davis (2015), any effective

professional development training must be focused on long-term results and accompany the vision of the university. Good professional development in higher education requires individuals to analyze their competencies and establish a plan for addressing needed areas of improvement (Bureau, 2017). The training presents valuable information on various academic challenges that African American students perceive to face while pursuing a college degree. Best practices and recommendations for identifying the needs of students and providing the appropriate support will be provided during the training program. The project can be successful in improving the degree completion timeframes of African Americans at the university and promote positive social change by potentially expanding their career opportunities and achieving personal fulfillment.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In Section 3, I describe a 3-day professional development training program for the student support services department that can provide additional best practices and useful information to help African American students overcome academic challenges. The topic of the professional development training is “Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will.” This training can also potentially help the student support services department to gain a better understanding of academic challenges that African American students face and provide more effective support for the needs of students at the university. In the findings for this research study, I noted that most participants reported more resources and services are needed at the university to improve degree completion timeframes. The data analysis produced several themes that could improve degree completion timeframes and provide better academic outcomes for African American students at the institution. Some of the codes from participant interviews included the need for more encouragement, cultural diversity, support, mentoring, faculty rapport, and understanding of the resources and services that are available. The themes that emerged from this study included the following: identifying needed support, adapting to university culture, faculty rapport, expanding knowledge of services currently offered, institutional support, lack of institutional support, academic advising, tutoring, building connection to leadership, increasing student forums for support, and mentoring. The rationale, review of the literature, project description, project evaluation plan, and project implications are also included in this section.

Rationale

According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), effective professional development in higher education is an important component of an overall teaching and learning system that supports students in expanding their skills, competencies, and knowledge needed to succeed in the 21st Century. The findings of the study supported the content of the professional development training to focus on the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups at the study site. This professional development training is aimed at conveying the perceptions of academic challenges that African American students face as they work towards graduation. The training also provides suggestions to improve institutional support to meet the obstacles that students encounter.

Productive professional development can allow the student support services director and staff to be involved as learners, helping them to combat the uncertainties that come along with their roles in the university (see Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Torff, 2017). Findings from this study support a 3-day professional development training designed to help improve graduation completion times for African American students at the university by providing the student support services department with an opportunity to learn and implement their action plans in a short timeframe (see Davis, 2015). During the professional development training, participants will be equipped with the training, resources, and information needed to help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups.

This project will allow a solution to be developed for the problem of academic challenges delaying graduation for African Americans because it provides an opportunity for the student support services director and staff to engage with the presenters and learn from the training resources provided. Any effective professional development training should be focused on long-term results and accompany the university's vision (Davis, 2015). The professional development training is an advancement toward improving support and graduation completion times for African American students and increasing the student support services department staff rapport with students.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative project study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet those challenges. The literature review was conducted with peer-reviewed articles from the years 2015 to 2019. The database searches for peer-reviewed published articles included ERIC Education Source, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Complete. The search terms used included *professional development*, *college retention*, *degree attainment*, *persistence*, and *student engagement*. The themes emerged from the data analysis process and are supported by the current literature in Section 3. They are as follows: identifying needed support, adapting to university culture, faculty rapport, expanding knowledge of services currently offered, institutional support, lack of institutional support, academic advising, tutoring, building connection to leadership, increasing student forums for support, and mentoring. The professional development

training is aimed at equipping the student support services department with the training, resources, and information needed to help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. The primary objective of this research study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges.

Professional Development

In higher education, professional development is vital in equipping and motivating the institutional support staff with the tools and resources needed to effectively support students (Coomber, 2019). According to Ozen (2018), effective professional development in higher education can help improve the learning climate on campus. Valuable knowledge and resources are presented. Professional development in higher education communities aims to enable interprofessional learning and facilitate relationships that are productive and positive through cultural interchange (Lofthouse, 2019). According to Tolliver and Miller (2018), effective professional development can provide staff members of academic support programs with the tools needed to target students who may be at risk of dropping out. Sometimes educational professionals struggle to find the most efficient ways to reach out to students and provide effective support (Tolliver & Miller, 2018). According to Miller, Laurie, and Koch (2019), professional development programs that are systematic and coordinated are related to improving student outcomes, including higher retention and graduation rates.

The professional development genre would be beneficial in training higher education academic leaders and faculty members to identify the needs of African American students and provide the necessary support to improve graduation rates. Professional development training may include both informal and formal experiences and activities through which participants are given an innovative insight to carry out their responsibilities and professional roles more efficiently (Lodhi & Ghias, 2019). According to Gerken, Beusaert, and Segers (2016), “Professional development is built upon learning from others through collaboration” and reflective dialogue among colleagues (p. 136). According to Lodhi and Ghias (2019), higher education institutions should specifically foster the professional development training of their faculty by encouraging the seeking and sharing of information by using feedback with participants in a proactive manner. Professional development also nurtures professional relationships to collectively construct new meaning and improve the knowledge and skills of faculty/staff that result in action (Gerken et al., 2016). Professional development in higher education should be designed to provide quality improvement in student learning outcomes (Barrette, 2017).

Professional development is essential to help the student support services director and staff prepare to become more transformative and understand the needs of African American college students. Transformative knowledge in higher education is aimed at “providing students with creative problem-solving skills” (Peppers, 2016, p. 90). According to Generett and Welch (2018), to bring about transformative, institutional change, universities are beginning to train academic leaders and faculty members to

embrace uncertainties and take risks. Higher education leaders “must be able to see and do what is necessary now” to be able to identify the educational needs of African American freshmen and sophomores through effective training (Generett & Welch, 2018, p. 1114). The main purpose of higher education is to prepare students for success in the workplace, their personal lives, and communities (Peppers, 2016). According to Jackson (2016), to align teaching and learning practices to educational goals, there is a need for universities to develop a collaborative understanding of shared priorities through professional development for members of faculty and academic leaders.

The professional development training can help the student support services director and staff at the university become supportive, transformative academic leaders by inspiring students to achieve unexpected or remarkable results. Transformative academic leaders and members of faculty in higher education identify and address the needs of students and attempt to acquire the resources necessary to create positive change, especially for African American college students (Graham & Nevarez, 2017). Graduation rates for African American students could rise with an increased number of transformative postsecondary education personnel recognizing and devoting an effort to alleviate academic challenges for African American students. Through professional development training, the student support services department can uniquely contribute to individuals’ academic ability because of their ability to view the college campus as a working system and the student as a whole person (Patterson, 2019).

Professional Development and Academic Challenges

Each of the students who participated in the study admitted to facing various types of academic challenges while attempting to achieve degree completion. According to Harper and Newman (2016), African American students sometimes encounter significant academic challenges while pursuing a college degree. Institutions of higher learning that serve many African American freshmen and sophomore college students have a responsibility to recognize the needs of these individuals and provide resources to help them to achieve academic success (Lee, 2018). Graduation for African American students continues to be an area in need of improvement in higher education (Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015). The conceptual framework used in this study was Tinto's (2004) theory of student retention and graduation. Tinto's theory includes the idea that students are more apt to engage student services and succeed when academic support services are associated with everyday credit-bearing classroom courses of learning. Tinto's theory assumes that students will potentially succeed academically with the support of the student support services department in their classes.

A key element to African American student academic achievement and success at higher education institutions is the ability of administration and faculty to identify the needs of the students and provide more academic support and encouragement, potentially increasing graduation rates (Kneale, 2018). The staff members and director of the university's student support services department need to be properly trained, supported and have good communication among each other to be able to adequately support and encourage African American students when they face academic challenges (see Harper,

2015). According to Lemons and Toste (2019), a professional development training program can improve abilities to develop effective tools that faculty/staff can use to properly provide support to students facing academic challenges. To help African American students succeed in higher education, administrators and members of faculty must consider the college academic challenges from the student perspective and put support systems in place that will fulfill their need for guidance, support, and encouragement (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Roscoe, 2015).

Student Support Services and Professional Development

The university's student support services department is fully funded by the federal TRIO program, which is designed to identify the needs of specified college students and provide them with supportive services and resources (TRIO Home Page, 2019). The image of student support services can be enhanced through efficient professional development. According to Carr and London (2019), "increased satisfaction with one's institution, something that may occur when receiving supplemental support from the university, is also related to academic success" (p. 81). Carr and London (2019) also show that students may potentially become better satisfied with college if they receive the proper services and resources from the institution. A professional development training for the student support services director and staff will possibly improve the student support services department at the university. According to Coomber (2019), institutional professional development training can accelerate learning by providing skills that are organized and focused on developing skills to solve problems at the institution. Some of the participant learning outcomes of the training include gaining an

understanding of academic challenges, learning to identify student needs, and applying best practices that will best support African American students and improve degree completion timeframes.

Kane, Shaw, Pang, Salley, and Snider (2015) stated that regularly scheduled professional development and training related to educational support, as needed for university administrators and faculty, have been shown to help ensure quality teaching and improve academic performance for African American students. Learning communities, campus religious organizations, counseling services, and career services are also good resources that can provide encouragement and support to African American college students, potentially increasing student engagement through an all-embracing campus community (Kane et al., 2015).

Proper training is needed for universities to gain a better understanding of the academic challenges that African American students face and provide the support that yields effective results (Louis, 2015). According to Thomas, Bystydzienski, and Desai (2015), professional development at universities can help to provide mutual support among colleagues and potentially provide a better understanding of the academic and social needs of African American students. Li, Malin, and Hackman (2018) suggested that relationships among academic leaders and colleagues in higher education are a critical factor in preparing faculty members to become more effective in helping African American college students graduate.

Alleviating Academic Challenges

During professional development training, information and tools can be shared with leadership to help alleviate academic challenges for individuals pursuing a college degree. Various academic challenges have caused African American students to experience delays in degree completion (Farmer & Hope, 2015). During the professional development training, participants will be allowed to have discussions on ways that they can aid in alleviating academic challenges for African American students. Some of the participants suggested that leadership should implement a mentoring program for students. According to Fowler (2017), mentoring occurs when an informal relationship emerges between a person in the mid or late stage of their higher education career with a less experienced individual and transfers their knowledge and experiences to them to facilitate development and support. According to Li et al. (2018), quality mentoring is very beneficial in helping to identify the needs of African American students, especially when everyone involved is properly trained. Mentor training for the student support services department will potentially occur during the professional development training.

Participants suggested that leadership at the university find creative ways for students needs to be identified and start listening to students about ways to help better assist them with alleviating academic challenges. These are two institutional support service suggestions that can potentially be implemented by leaders at the university and a discussion topic at professional development training. Research indicated that effective training is beneficial in helping college administrators and faculty members understand the educational needs of African American students and provide support to them (Healy,

Doran, & McCutcheon, 2018). The professional development program will potentially help to prepare the student support services department to provide recommended best practices, services, and resources to support African American students based on findings from my study. Student support services in higher education can aid in alleviating academic challenges by building, fostering, and sustaining a community of educators and a culture of teaching that provides resources, assistance, and support to African American students, potentially increasing degree completion rates (Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004).

Student Goals and Persistence

During the professional development sessions, the student support services department will be trained to apply various best practices, services, and resources to help African American students persist in goal achievement. “The visualization of future success can result in more persistent goal pursuit and less anxiety when facing obstacles” (Li, Sheldon, Rouders, Bergin, & Geary, 2019, p. 359). Goal establishment is very important to the academic success of college students. The professional development training will prepare the student support services department to ensure that student goal setting is effective by being meaningful, challenging, specific, and attainable (Dobronyi, Oreopoulos, & Petronijevic, 2019). Also, according to Dobronyi et al. (2019), students perform better when they believe that they are making adequate progress toward a goal.

During the training, participants will be allowed to discuss ways that the student support services department can assist African American students in being persistent and achieving academic goals. According to Savage, Strom, Ebesu, and Aune (2019), students’ commitment to the university and graduation goals affects persistence

decisions. The professional development training will provide participants with best practices that will improve degree completion.

Goal-setting. During the professional development, the student support services department will be provided with valuable information, tools, and resources that can be used to help students set positive educational goals and achieve them. According to Lerdpornkulrat, Koul, and Poondej (2018), student goals and educational commitments can be positively modified through good institutional support shaped by effective training. During the training, the student support services department will be educated on how goal-setting with adequate institutional support can lead to better student performance (Roy & Saha, 2019). According to Student Achievement (2017), student support services professionals should be properly trained through professional development to identify the needs of students, assist in establishing goals, and provide effective assistance, especially when there is a lack of academic effort by students.

Best practices. The student support services department will be provided with valuable information on recommended best practices during professional development training to help African American students overcome academic challenges while pursuing a college degree. According to Goode (2018), in higher education, best practices are the wide range of policies, activities, programmatic approaches, systems, and procedures to achieve positive changes in student behaviors. To better help improve student experiences and develop professionally as an effective student support services department, it is necessary to use relevant best practices, which can be achieved by professional development activities (Hall, 2017). Training the student support services

department during professional development on how to implement best practices will assist students in being more successful and improve retention (Hensell & Fiano, 2018).

Some good best practices that the student support services department can implement to support African American students are as follows: provide prompt feedback, communicate high expectations, encourage student/faculty rapport, emphasize time on task, and encourage active learning (Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017). According to Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella (2015), best practices are implemented to aid in ensuring that the students get the most out of their college experience. One best professional practice that is rarely mentioned in higher education is providing various learning experiences for faculty to engage with students (Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017).

Services and resources. Various services and resources are available to provide support to African American students at the university such as tutoring, career coaching, and academic advising. The professional development training will provide information on ways the student support services department can aid students by providing resources and services that will help them complete a college degree (Carr & London, 2019). Some free resources and services that can be offered to students by universities include drop-in support programs, academic coaching, college readiness websites, and group advising sessions (Milliron et al., 2017). Also, according to Carr and London (2019), student support services on a college campus are designed to supply students with what is needed to succeed academically, especially those who are at risk of failing. During the professional development training for the student support services department, information on services and resources that support all students, including mature-aged

African Americans will be provided (Heagney & Benson, 2017). The student support services department will be trained to offer solutions through resources and services for challenges that students encounter while pursuing a college degree (Julal, 2016).

Project Description

Several themes emerged from the data analysis of African American student interviews. With an effective professional training program, additional resources and services could be implemented to improve the degree completion timeframes of African American students at the university. Based on the findings, it would be advantageous for the student support services director and staff to gain a better understanding of the academic challenges and provide needed support for students at the institution.

The professional development training will help the student support services department at the university to learn new ways to support students and improve degree completion timeframes for African American students. The title of the professional development training program will be “Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will.” The purpose of the professional development training is to help the student support services department to gain a better understanding of the academic challenges that African American students face, identify their needs, and recommend ways to support them. The PowerPoint presentation that will be shown to the student support services department was designed based on the findings from this research study and from the literature, and it also presents recommended resources and best practices regarding improving degree completion times for African American students.

According to Kennedy (2010), professional development aims to increase the knowledge of university faculty and staff and equip them with the resources, tools, strategies, and skills needed to motivate, encourage, and support students. The 3-day professional development training aims to help the student support services department to be more aware of African American students' academic challenges and needs and recommend ways to support them. Day 1 consists of discussing the goals of the training and learning objectives, understanding perceived academic challenges that African American students face, and providing information and methods that the student support services department can use to improve support for African American students at the university. Day 2 consists of follow-up questions from the Day 1 training and a discussion on how the student support services department can help students persist, set attainable educational goals, and achieve them. Also, various scenarios will be discussed in small groups and participants will have discussions on how they could help students in each scenario. Day 3 consists of learning best practice techniques such as providing extra support, communicating high expectations, and monitoring students' progress closely.

The professional development training will present best practices and techniques that can be used to help the student support services department improve support given to students. The project will potentially aid in bringing about awareness of the need to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students at the university and how the student support services department can provide support in that aspect. This training is designed to educate the participants on ways to improve degree completion

timeframes and improve student engagement and academic goal setting. The 3-day professional development includes the following goals and learning outcomes:

- Gain a better understanding of academic challenges that African American students face
- Identify the needs of the struggling students before the onset of academic failure
- Learn how to develop a positive rapport with students
- Put the information learned in the professional development training into best practice.
- Provide needed support to students in a timely manner

By the student support services department successfully achieving these outcomes, degree completion timeframes for African American students at the university may improve. Students could see an increase in motivation, persistence, and academic success, making the entire institution better.

Needed Resources and Existing Supports

The student support services department and time will be the most important resources needed for the training to ensure the success of the training. I will also need the support of university leadership and faculty. This professional development training will take place at the university during the Fall semester of 2020. Several presentations of the training will be scheduled during the specified term to ensure that all student support services department staff have an opportunity to participate. The following materials will be required for the training: a laptop computer, projector, projection screen, internet

access, sound system, flash drive, tables and chairs, pens, pencils, and hard copies of the agendas and PowerPoint presentations. All participants will be given a hardcopy of the PowerPoint presentation during each day of the professional development training. The local resource that already exists at the university includes the meeting room and podium.

The facilitator of the professional development training will use a PowerPoint presentation during each session, along with interactive discussions and group activities, to potentially gain positive responses from participants. There will be no charges for anyone to attend any of the professional development training sessions, and the facilitator will provide all learning materials. Each participant will receive a certificate of achievement to keep in their records upon completion of the training program. During the presentation, the facilitator will give a clear explanation of the importance of understanding academic challenges perceived by African American students, identifying their needs, and providing resources and support to improve degree completion timeframes.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers

Potential barriers. The main barrier that would negatively affect the implementation of this project is a lack of support from leaders at the university and no buy-in from the student support services department. The project will potentially be less effective in alleviating academic challenges for students if there is not enough support from university leaders and faculty. According to Wasser (2019), when the students support services department, university leadership, and faculty work collaboratively, student academic success is promoted and academic challenges can be alleviated,

improving student outcomes. Members of faculty at the university can support the student support services department by integrating services offered with instruction (Wested, 2020). Leadership at the institution can bring faculty and the student support services department staff together for planning and implementation of ways to improve degree completion timeframes, providing support (Wested, 2020). The student support services department staff will receive a notification by email about the professional development training program. There will be a requirement for each potential participant to respond to ensure that proper accommodations are made, and session resources are available. Although the findings presented in Section 2 of this doctoral study show that training is necessary, the student support services department staff may not be willing to participate.

Potential solutions to barriers. One way to solve the potential barrier of lack of support from leaders at the university is to articulate to them that the professional development training program will benefit the overall perception of the university. To obtain buy-in from the student support services department, I will express how improving the student support services department at the university will positively affect social change throughout the university by helping students achieve academically. I feel that alleviating potential barriers to the project will help the training program function smoothly.

Project Implementation

To successfully implement the professional development training, I will need the full cooperation of university leaders and the student support services department. The

proposed implementation will occur between August and October of 2020. The prospective time for the implementation was determined based on the beginning of the new semester at the university, which can provide more time for individuals who are participating to make plans or preparation for changes if the response received is favorable. The university chosen for professional development training has an IRB that has analyzed and approved the project study's proposal. The university's research compliance department will review the project and give approval for the professional development training program to take place at the university campus. The intended audience for this training will be members of the student support services department; however, other campus faculty may attend as well. The main goal of this professional development training is to help the student support services department gain a better understanding of perceived academic challenges and provide information and recommended best practice techniques to assist African American students with needed support. Participants who attend the professional development session will be able to better serve students when they share and implement the information learned from the training.

The "Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will." professional development training will be offered again in the Winter of 2020 if there is a strong response from participants. Individuals who attend the fall session will be invited to share their perspectives via email to me on recommended best practices and techniques that they have implemented in supporting African American students. By Spring 2021, a meeting will be set up by the facilitator with leaders at the selected university to

determine if the professional development training has effectively aided in alleviating academic challenges and improved degree completion timeframes for African American students.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Researcher and Others

As a scholar-practitioner, my role is to present the findings of this doctoral study to the leaders at the selected university and equip the student support services department with the additional necessary resources, information, and recommended best practice techniques needed to improve degree completion timeframes at the institution. The role of the student support services department would be to attend the sessions, actively participate in the training exercises, and apply resources and recommended best practice techniques to their daily interactions with their African American students. Additionally, the student support services department staff should be able to illustrate what was learned during the professional development training by alleviating academic challenges and improving student engagement by providing more needed support. The facilitator can be contacted by email for support, information, or training resources after all the presentations are completed. Lastly, my role is to design, develop, implement, and facilitate the professional development training program to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students at the selected university.

Project Evaluation Plan

In higher education, professional development is an obligation as well as an opportunity, serving as a venue for change of current practices (Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). An outcomes-based evaluation plan will be used to determine the

effectiveness of the professional development training project in this research study. The outcomes evaluation method is a fundamental way of gauging if a program is achieving its intended results (Premalatha, 2019). It is essential to evaluate professional development programs to provide stakeholders with useful information on whether any value was added to the university and to acknowledge the achievement of any learning outcomes (Edmonds, 2016; Treat, 2009). According to Guskey (2017), the evaluation process is simple and begins by answering the following three essential questions: (a) What are we trying to accomplish? (b) How will we know if any accomplishments are made? and (c) What else, good or bad, may happen? These three important questions will be useful in helping me plan for an evaluation of the professional development training program and prepare to present the results to the student support services staff at the university once completed. The overall evaluation goal is to find out if the professional development program was useful in helping the student support services staff and director provide the necessary support to improve degree completion timeframes at the university.

The outcomes-based evaluation plan used in this study will assess the program's effectiveness in providing useful information designed to better support African American students at the university. The use of this project evaluation will answer questions such as what difference the training program made and did the participants benefit from it (NYSED, 2017; Premalatha, 2019). Participants will also be asked to complete an anonymous evaluation form designed with Likert-style, closed-ended questions at the end of the professional development training. There will be an optional

section for participants to share comments and suggestions. The completed forms will provide feedback about the project and session processes. A post-test will be administered to all professional development training participants to assess the skills and learnings acquired from the program sessions. The post-test will be comprised of 10 true/false questions that each participant will be asked to complete.

A thorough review of the evaluation forms and post-tests will also help determine the overall effectiveness of the training program. The project evaluation form is in Appendix A. The student support services department director and staff, university leaders, and university faculty are stakeholders who the evaluation results will be shared with. The evaluation information may be used to help develop future professional development sessions aimed at establishing opportunities within the university's educational system. Knowledge gained from the evaluation will also help ensure that members of the student support services department are equipped with the knowledge, qualities, and competence needed to aid students in achieving academic success (see Premalatha, 2019).

Project Implications

Local Community

The research presented in this study revealed the need for the student support services department to identify and gain a deeper understanding of academic challenges that students face and provide needed support. The project that resulted from the findings will potentially have a positive impact on African American student degree completion timeframes at the university. Through the implementation of best practices, strategies,

and recommendations acquired from the professional development training, the student support services department director and staff can have a positive impact on students through their engagement, active communication, and feedback.

African American students will receive additional needed support, mentoring, encouragement, and guidance from members of the university, especially if they are facing various academic challenges. Positive social change can be achieved through this project by equipping the student support services department to address the academic challenges and possibly expanding career opportunities and achieving personal fulfillment for African American students. The professional development training program has the potential to improve the students' perceptions of the student support services department at the university by alleviating academic challenges and improving degree completion timeframes.

Broader Implications

As the institution strives to positively affect the lives of students through the professional development for the student support services department, agents of change can be developed. Students from the university can potentially become change agents after completing a college degree and make a great impact locally, at the state level, and nationally by having more education and better careers. The project outlined in Section 3 was developed to help increase the knowledge and understanding of the student support services department on the perceived academic challenges that African American students face while trying to pursue a college degree. The project described in Section 3 was also designed to encourage the student support services department to develop a

good rapport with students, identify their needs, and provide the resources and support needed. When African American students become positive agents of change, they are inclined to share their stories with other people in their communities, potentially increasing enrollment and improving degree completion timeframes at the university. Essentially, the professional development training program is about developing positive relationships between students and faculty to establish a foundation for improved engagement and degree completion timeframes at the institution. The student support services department professional development training will be beneficial to all stakeholders at the university because students will potentially receive the resources and services that they need to improve degree completion times, causing the overall image and ratings of the institution to improve.

Summary

In Section 3, I presented information on a professional development training program that was created to set the foundation for improving degree completion timeframes and student engagement through gaining a better understanding of academic challenges, identifying needs, and providing needed resources and support for African American students at the selected university. Additionally, I provided a thorough review of the literature, described potential resources and support information, outlined project implementation plans with roles and responsibilities, potential barriers, and introduced a plan of evaluation. Section 3 concluded with implications for positive social change. Even though this study was designed for a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the U.S., there is the potential that it can be used at other higher education institutions

seeking ways to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students.

In Section 4, my reflections are summarized, and an explanation of my growth throughout the research process is given.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of African American students about the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation as well as their experience with and suggestions to improve institutional support to meet these challenges. A 3-day professional development training resulted from the study's findings. I developed the training to provide the student support services department with the valuable training, resources, and information needed to help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. The professional development training program can help to ensure that positive experiences with student support services help students improve academically (see Walton, 2016).

The professional development training project was designed to help participants gain a better understanding of the academic challenges that African American students encounter, provide needed student support, and improve degree completion timeframes. The project's success is dependent on the student support services director and staff's desire to learn and apply this new knowledge. There is an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the professional development training project and recommendations for alternative approaches included in this section. I also present reflections on the importance of the work, implications, applications, directions for future research, and a conclusion in this final section.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

In developing this project, I considered the academic challenges, the importance of support, and the resources, services, and best practices needed to provide additional assistance to African American students. Therefore, I attempted to provide the student support services department with effective research-based information and strategies through the professional development training program to support students. The intent of this professional development project is to improve student experiences with the support services department to increase learning (see Bachelier, 2015). The data gathered from the study provided me a basis from which to develop the project based on the needs of African American students at the university. A main strength of the project is that participants will have an opportunity to communicate their strengths, weaknesses, and needs, as well as express their views as professionals in a supportive atmosphere. An additional strength of the project is that it will allow student support services staff members and the director to collaborate about ways to improve as professional individuals and enhance the student support services department.

One of the most important strengths of the project is that it can potentially be adopted by other universities because it addresses ways to enhance institutional services and improve degree completion times for African American students. The project's outcomes may provide beneficial information to help the student support services department better identify the needs of African American students, build rapport with them, and effectively provide the support needed. During the project, valuable

information will be given on how to apply professional best practices for supporting students by engaging in group videos and scenario discussions. The project will potentially help African Americans complete their college degrees in a timelier manner.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the project is that its effectiveness is based on if/how well knowledge learned is applied to real situations. Although helping students overcome obstacles is vital to improved degree completion timeframes, other factors may deter a student from finishing college on time. However, I focused directly on ways that the student support services department can effectively support African American students. The student support services department may need additional professional development training that might influence the holistic aspect of African American students' learning experiences and academic success.

Another limitation of the project is that its effectiveness is restricted to only one university. The project may have been more beneficial if the research study used to design it was extended to other higher education institutions, providing access to more participants. Using other universities and demographics could have yielded some differences in the project's architecture and effectiveness. To help overcome this limitation, the university under study could become a model for other higher education institutions and share the training, information, and instructional strategies they are using with other colleges. Although universities may have varying aspects, the research-based methods recommended, and knowledge gained during the project can still be used to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students just the same. A

third limitation of the project is that the project is limited to the student support services department. The project may have been more beneficial if it was extended to other departments at the university that directly help students with their educational coursework. To help overcome this limitation, the university under study could amend the project's design to include other divisions of the institution that assist students with their academics.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem identified in this study is that African American students are graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups. One alternative definition of the problem is that African Americans students are dropping out at a greater rate. The 3-day professional development training was designed to address the problem. One alternative approach would have been to create a mandatory single semester course for all students at the university to learn different ways to complete a college degree in a timelier manner. According to Fuse (2018), the success of students in higher education depends on how they are empowered, especially in their courses of study. This class could also teach various ways that students can overcome academic challenges that delay graduation. Another alternative definition of the problem is that home and work situations are delaying degree completion timeframes for African American students. Because the results of this research study presented the African American students' perceptions of academic challenges faced while pursuing a college degree, another alternative approach to address the problem could have been to revise the curriculum or implement pedagogies to fit their needs. For example, various components of the

curriculum could be designed to define and address the academic challenges that students have faced.

Another alternative approach that could have been used to address the problem at the university was to implement an intervention program. According to Stephens et al. (2015a), interventions in higher education are designed to address issues that can impede academic success. Student grades would be monitored, and an intervention program faculty member would assist students at the first sign of struggle. The results of this study showed that African American students would potentially benefit from having more institutional support and having interventions from university staff could be a good way to assist students. According to Dominguez-Whitehead (2018), support services at higher education institutions are designed to promote academic success and positive college experiences for students.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

Scholarship in research involves uncovering something new, acquiring information, and enhancing it, therefore making the world a much better place. To be a good scholar, you must do good research. Structured and practice-oriented experiences are required for a scholarly practitioner to design and construct research that is meaningful (Arslan-Ari, Ari, Grant, & Morris, 2018). Pursuing my doctorate and completing my project has shown me the importance of scholarship and how it can support the advancement of education. I must admit that my doctoral journey has been the most challenging but rewarding experience that I have faced in my life. According to

Arslan-Ari et al. (2018), good scholars also evaluate the trustworthiness and rigor of the data to ensure a quality research study. Throughout the entire process, I gained stronger research and analytical skills that helped carry me through the study. One way to become a productive scholar is to set aside time for scholarly work (see Burton, 2015). I learned that persistence, time, and patience were necessary for me to advance my scholarly writing skills. The use of scholarship in a study enables researchers to explore, inquire, and wonder (Zuidema, Daichendt, & Fulcher, 2019). I was able to learn more about what I was studying and use it to help others understand the importance and benefits of improving degree completion timeframes for African American students. Scholarly writing can be a means to develop and extend thinking, reflect, and advocate for change. My doctoral process has helped me to acquire understanding and respect for research and the individuals that conduct it.

Project Development

Project development takes patience, critical thinking, research, effort, and time. In higher education, a project is referred to as the development of an artifact with a special purpose that requires skills, resources, and planned activities (Havenga, 2015). Developing a project sometimes involves uncertainty, has occasional difficulties, and has a definite beginning and end (Havenga, 2015). According to Lucas and Goodman (2015), developing a project within an academic context advances a student's "knowledge on the intersection of leadership and positive organizational scholarship" (p. 139). Using the findings of this study to design a project allowed a professional development training that provides information, techniques, and best practices to support

African American students to be developed. The literature used in a project study should help to deliver a strong foundation of support to implement positive change. In higher education, a project should advance the educational cause. The benefits of developing a project include gaining an increased level of critical thinking, deeper learning, development of responsible learning, an enhanced understanding of the topic, and increased motivation (Havenga, 2015).

Leadership and Change

A good, strong leader needs to know what it takes to promote social change in a higher education institution. According to Armour (2019), educational leaders agree that it is important to build strategies that can help prepare universities for new futures. Effective leaders in education “work out which of the predicted futures is radical but ‘real’ and deserving of preparatory action” (Armour, 2019, p. 182). My leadership skills have improved tremendously, both professionally and personally, throughout my doctoral journey. Also, my experience at Walden University has helped me to better understand what a leader is and should be in higher education.

The findings from the study and professional development project indicate that change is a continual process (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018). Sometimes change can be difficult, but necessary, particularly when supporting African American students. I learned through my doctoral journey that a good leader cannot be afraid of change. At one point in the process I was afraid of changing my writing and analytical thinking styles. I later realized that I had to change my way of thinking and writing to become successful in my doctorate program and lead someday. Effective leaders sometimes take

risks that lead to systematic change processes that achieve positive outcomes (Peppers, 2016). Professionally, I have learned that being a good leader involves overcoming obstacles, setting a positive example, and continually acquiring knowledge. Leaders can achieve desired results and invoke positive change by gaining trust, acceptance, and respect from all stakeholders (Peppers, 2016). The professional development project in this study provides an opportunity for effective leaders to be developed and demonstrate change by helping to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students.

Reflections on Self as a Scholar

This doctoral journey that I have been on has encouraged me to be great in each area of my life. I have uncovered new, meaningful information that can potentially make the world a much better place. A large amount of time was spent researching current data. The creative thinking, communication, problem-solving skills, and networking abilities that I acquired through this project have helped me become a good scholar and improve as a person. This process has also taught me how to effectively collaborate with fellow scholars. Working together with other intellectuals has also helped me to focus more on my career and be open to opportunities that I never dreamed would be possible.

While on track to becoming a scholar, I gained more understanding and appreciation for the student support services department. The use of qualitative research in this study has helped me to acquire a more in-depth understanding of scholarly literature and writing. As a scholar, I feel confident in providing education and guidance to anyone attempting to gain knowledge. Overall, this doctoral journey has helped me to

gain more insight into the importance of effective student support while pursuing a college degree.

Reflections on Self as a Practitioner

As a practitioner, I am committed to remaining a lifelong learner and to supporting others in developing their competence. Although I am not a higher education faculty member, I do, however, provide education to others through my position in technology management. Through my doctoral journey, I have developed research and critical thinking skills and gained knowledge to facilitate forward-thinking, which entails planning for the future. I have also learned how important it is to use current literature that will promote learning. The facilitation of knowledge development and competence of others will keep learners aware that the world is changing, and there must be a willingness to change with it. Throughout my doctoral journey, I have developed strength in becoming an expert in the educational field as a result of quality research and current literature.

Reflections on Self as a Project Developer

Designing and developing the 3-day professional development training program has been a wonderful and rewarding experience for me. I never would have imagined that I could develop a training that would provide valuable knowledge, information, techniques, and tools for support services faculty at a university. I dreaded the thought of developing a professional development training program due to feelings of fear and incompetence. However, once I finally took some time and thought about ways that degree completion timeframes could be improved at the university, ideas for the training

started coming together. While developing the project, I had to keep in mind that the training should be innovative, motivating, exciting, and informative to keep participants from being bored. The most important lesson that I learned while developing my project was to not underestimate myself. I kept the project in my mind with constant wondering, thinking, and researching about how to help other scholars on campus to understand the points I wanted to make and help make a difference at the university.

The results of the study showed that students would appear to benefit more at the university if academic challenges were alleviated through enhanced institutional support, possibly improving degree completion timeframes. The use of current peer-reviewed literature and my study results aided in addressing student needs at the institution and developing the professional development training project. I started designing my professional development training project with my freshman college year in mind. During that time, there were several resources and services that I needed on campus but did not know that they existed. I also felt that I did not have a good rapport with my professors. Therefore, I began my project by defining academic challenges and student engagement and then presenting the data. I designed the project with the idea of benefitting the university and all stakeholders involved.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

As a technology director and member of the leadership team at my school, my main goal is to ensure that all educators have the necessary tools to help students succeed. Likewise, the student support services department at the study site must have the right techniques, services, resources, and information to assist African American students in

overcoming academic challenges and improving degree completion timeframes. When the student support services department uses the right support tools to assist students, the students can graduate college in a more-timely manner. Through interviews with African American students from the university, I learned how important it is to listen to their concerns and provide support. I was able to find a solution to the educational needs and student concerns through the participant interviews.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This project will potentially influence positive social change at the selected university due to the importance of improving degree completion timeframes for African American students. The discovery of information from participant interviews on the academic challenges that African American students face at the study site affirms the need for projects such as this. Positive social change can be accomplished through this project at the study site by increasing the student support services department's knowledge of academic challenges and implementing learnings from the training when supporting students. African American students will have the services and support needed to complete college degrees in a timelier manner. Positive social change will be apparent when students begin to have positive perceptions of and start benefitting from the support received by the student support services department. Increased graduation rates will improve the overall image of the university.

The knowledge that I gained from participant interviews and current literature will be shared with participants during the professional development training. Social change can occur if the student support services department at the university use the

project's findings when supporting and interacting with students. Student and faculty rapport will be enhanced, and degree completion timeframes will improve, which is the potential result. Social change entails positive change and growth for the betterment of the selected university community. Improvements to the student support services department will contribute positively to the overall trajectory of positive social change at the study site.

The possible future research path for this study includes voluntary surveys that freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior African American students at the university can fill out via computer. Students will be able to gain access to the optional surveys through the student support services department. Eligible participants will be allowed to use a designated computer in the student support services department to fill out the survey. The surveys will be designed to collect information about the following: student motivation, past semester attendance and grades, perception of previous support given by the student support services department, goal-setting, and suggestions for improvement. Detailed information about the surveys and voluntary participation will be available during the first thirty days of each semester. The data collected would be kept confidential and provide for more analysis of resources and services needed at the university to increase motivation and improve degree completion timeframes for African American students. The information gathered would allow the university to adjust the project as needed to meet the specific needs of African American students at the study site.

This future research could be more definitive in helping identify additional resources related to academic challenges, support systems, and improved degree completion timeframes. Additional inquiry into student goal-setting, engagement, retention, graduation, and career aspirations could improve working relationships amongst community leaders and students. A follow-up study of the professional development training's effectiveness may prove to be beneficial at the selected institution. A brief follow-up email with the same participants in the original study and current degree completion rates, compared to the previous school year, will aid in evaluating the outcomes and goals of the training. This follow-up will help to determine the success or failure of the professional development training program at the university. This review of the training should occur each following semester to allow the university to be proactive in making needed adjustments to the program, improve degree completion timeframes and student engagement, and promote positive social change.

Conclusion

There is a need to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students at the university. My professional development training program will potentially help solve the problem of African American students graduating at a slower rate than other racial/ethnic groups at the study site. Each of the individuals that participated in the study gave helpful responses to interview questions, which aided in providing the information needed to gain a better understanding of academic challenges for African American students and improve graduation timeframes. The interview process helped me to gain a deeper understanding of how important the work of the student support services

department is at the university. I learned that members of the student support services department can positively influence the lives and careers of students forever. Through my doctoral journey, I have learned that research and knowledge are necessary for a professional development training program to be successful in improving the student support services departments' ability to support African American students.

The impact of the training will improve retention and the potential for timelier degree completion. I feel that my professional development training will be valuable to the student support services department at the university. Also, this training program will provide the student support services department with a road map of how to possibly support current and incoming African American students at the university. More research needs to be done in reference to improving degree completion timeframes for African American students. However, the professional development training program that was developed as a result of this study is a start to help other higher education institutions improve degree completion timeframes for African American students. The impact of the professional development training program will be to increase academic success.

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Appendix A: The Project

This project is comprised of a professional development training program for the student support services department at a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the U.S. The goal of this 3-day event is to train the student support services director and staff to identify the needs of African American students and provide support to help improve degree completion timeframes. The training allows participants to gain a better understanding of the academic challenges that African American students face at the study site. The information presented in this training addresses the themes that were developed during the data analysis phase of my research study, and from the literature. The professional development training program provides information to the student support services department that can help better support African American students at the university. The training also analyzes Tinto's (2004) theory that argues students' postsecondary progression is shaped by the influences of institutional variables such as interaction with peer groups, extracurricular involvement, student-faculty communication, and academic support services. The outcomes that will be focused on during this professional development training program include learning to identify needs, building a rapport, and effectively providing needed support for African American students. Each participant will learn to apply best practices for supporting students by engaging in group videos and scenario discussions.

Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will

Day 1

Understanding Academic Challenges

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slides 1-2)

Opening Welcome. The facilitator and presenters will introduce themselves and participants will receive name badges and a hardcopy of the agenda and PowerPoint presentation. Also, during this time, the facilitator will discuss the learning goals and outcomes of the professional development training program.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slides 3-9)

1. What are the perceived academic challenges faced by African American students?
 2. What is student engagement?
 3. Can the student support services department identify the needs of African American students and provide support?
-

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. ***Break*******

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 10-16)

Discussion of the duties and roles of the student support services department in supporting African American students at the university.

1. Identifying needs
2. Building a rapport
3. Providing effective support

Short discussion on effective professional development and TRIO.

Watch a short video about the boost students need to overcome obstacles. (Slide 13)

In depth discussion of student engagement.

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. ***Lunch*******

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 17-22)

Discussion on the importance of understanding educational needs and improving degree completion timeframes for African American students in a diverse society. Discussion on the effectiveness of current support services and resources provided at the university.

Discussion on additional support services needed and current ones that can be improved.

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

3:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 23-27)

Discussion about helping students succeed academically, watch a video, and conclude the session.

Materials needed for Day 1

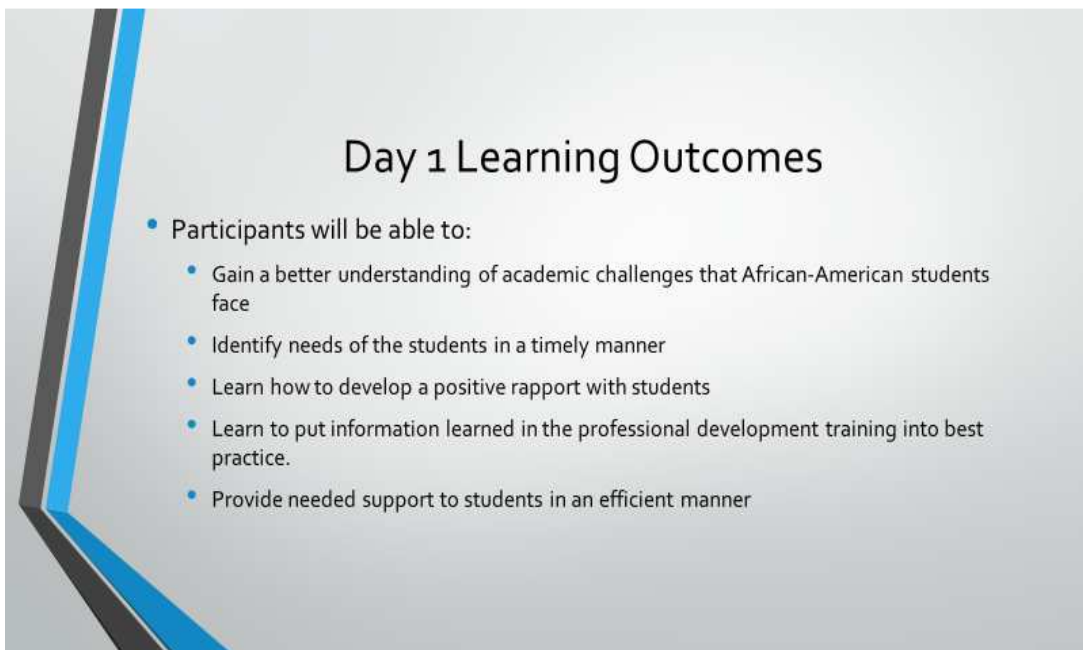
* - denotes items needed for presenter/facilitator

** - denotes items needed for participant

1. *Laptop computer
2. *Projector
3. *Projection screen
4. *Internet access
5. *Sound system
6. *Flash drive
7. *Tables and chairs
8. **Hard copies of agendas and PowerPoint presentation for Day 1
9. **Pens and pencils



Slide 1



Slide 2

What are Perceived Academic Challenges Faced by African-American Students?

Enrollment totals and year				
Categories	2010	2011	2012	2013
African-American	2,130	2,133	2,208	1,923
Hispanic	182	246	266	267
White-American	<u>9,459</u>	<u>10,026</u>	<u>10,072</u>	<u>9,995</u>
Totals of Enrollment by Year	11,771	12,405	12,546	12,185
Graduation percentages of enrollees within 4 years (Bachelor's Degree)				
Categories	2010 - 2014	2011 - 2015	2012 - 2016	2013 - 2017
African-American	10%	11%	9%	11%
Hispanic	19%	14%	16%	13%
White-American	15%	13%	13%	13%
Graduation percentages within 6 years from 2010 to 2017. (Bachelor's Degree)				
African-American				38.0%
Hispanic				41.3%
White-American				48.3%

(Office of the University Registrar, personal communication, February 26, 2019; study site catalog, February 27, 2019)

Slide 3

Academic Challenges

- What is your definition of an academic challenge?
- When viewing the data displayed on the table in the previous slide, what did you infer?
- Describe your thoughts on the various degree completion timeframes within 6 years.
- What can be done to improve degree completion timeframes for African-American students?

Slide 4

What is Student Engagement?

- This alludes to the degree of involvement and dedication that students exhibit toward their academic endeavors (Balwant, 2018).
- This may include:
 - Class participation
 - Passion
 - Studying
 - Reading
 - Commitment to learning
 - Perseverance

Slide 5

Student Engagement

- What contributes to student success and improved degree completion timeframes for African-Americans.
 - Understanding academic challenges
 - Identifying needs
 - Providing support
- According to Caruth (2018), inadequate support and resources from higher education institutions could cause declines in student engagement, causing lower degree completion rates for African-American students.

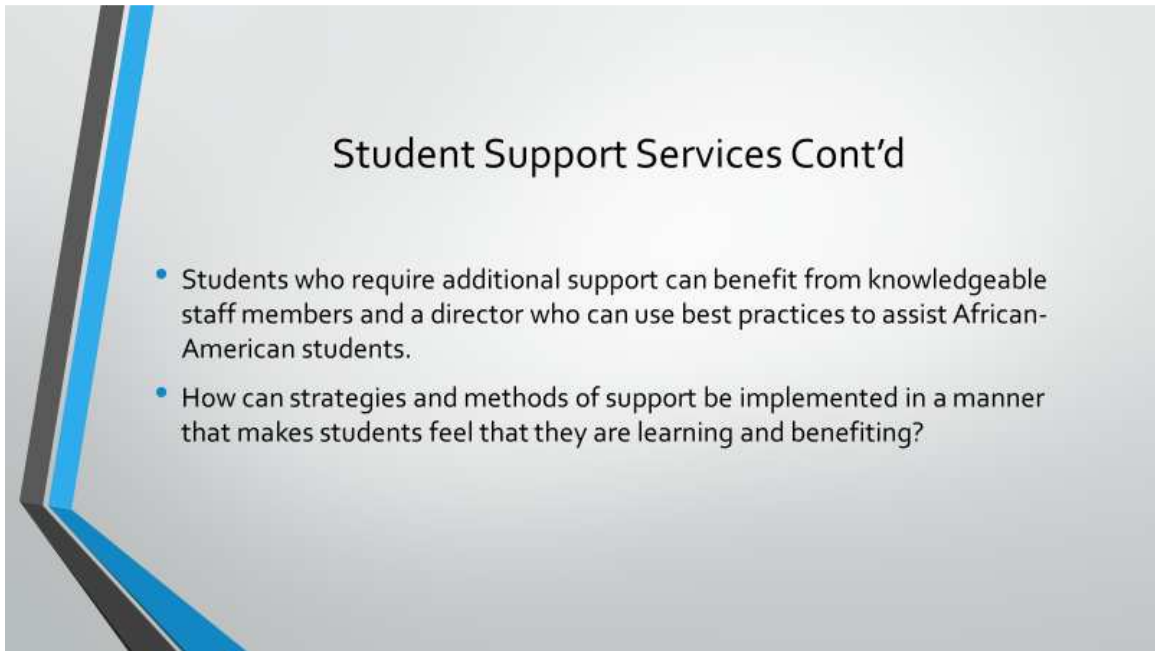
Slide 6



Slide 7



Slide 8




The slide features a light gray background with a decorative graphic on the left side consisting of overlapping black and blue lines. The title "Student Support Services Cont'd" is centered in a black sans-serif font. Below the title, there are two bullet points, each starting with a blue circular marker.

Student Support Services Cont'd

- Students who require additional support can benefit from knowledgeable staff members and a director who can use best practices to assist African-American students.
- How can strategies and methods of support be implemented in a manner that makes students feel that they are learning and benefiting?

Slide 9

Duties and roles of the student support services department.

		
<p style="text-align: center;">Identify Needs Be willing to help identify student needs</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Build a Rapport Build a positive rapport with students</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Provide Effective Support Provide needed support and resources to students</p>

Slide 10

Effective Professional Development

- Research reported that student support services in higher education need to be strengthened to improve degree completion times and career transitioning for African-American students (Arnold, 2018).
- Effective professional development for the student support services department should be long-term and focused on student learning and academic success.
- The student support services department must be properly trained and willing to identify the needs of African-Americans.
- The lack of effective university support and resources can be a huge problem for students, causing longer degree completion timeframes.

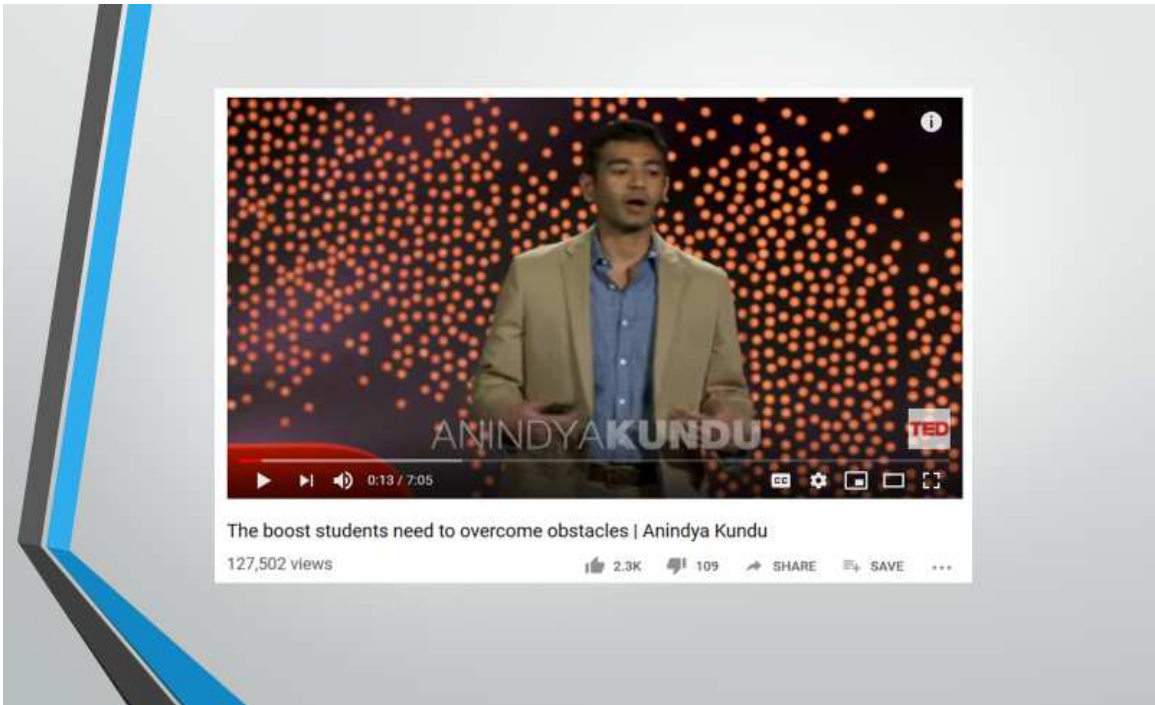
Slide 11

The slide features a light gray background with a decorative graphic on the left side consisting of a black line and a blue line forming a corner shape. The title 'TRIO' is centered at the top. Below it, there are two bullet points describing the program's funding and goals.

TRIO

- Through a grant competition made available by the U.S Department of Education Student Support Services Program, there are funds awarded to colleges and universities that provide opportunities for academic development, student assistance with basic college requirements, and student motivation toward successful degree completion (TRIO Home Page, 2019).
- One of the goals of the Student Support Services offered by the U. S. Department of Education is to increase graduation rates of students that participate. Trainings are offered via electronic and live conferences and webinars throughout the year for the director and staff of TRIO projects (TRIO Home Page, 2019).

Slide 12



Slide 13

https://youtu.be/h9deGh8_tEc

Why is Student Engagement Important?

- Student engagement correlates with degree completion timeframes.
- It addresses problems such as low achievement, boredom, and high dropout rates.
- Students are more likely to perform well and less likely to drop out.

Slide 14

Student Engagement

- According to Caruth (2018), student engagement is fundamental for student success in college. Student engagement positively correlates with improved degree completion timeframes.
- Student engagement positively correlates with improved degree completion timeframes.
- It is believed that degree completion rates are higher for African-American college students when they feel supported by the institution and are more engaged in campus activities.

Slide 15

Student Engagement Cont'd

- Higher learning institutions can increase student engagement and commitment to graduate in the following areas:
 - Personal
 - Academic
 - Social

Slide 16

Educational Needs for African-American Students in a Diverse Society

- An environment that is conducive to learning
- Respect of cultural differences
- Strategies and resources that meet the educational of students
- A culturally responsive curriculum
 - A belief that all students are capable of learning

Slide 17


Educational Needs & Engagement

- What are some ways you feel that colleges and universities can continually provide effective support services and resources and increase engagement, especially for African-American students?
- What are some ways you feel that the student support services department can aid in creating an environment in which completing a degree can become a reality for an array of students?

Slide 18

Services Currently Offered

- Tutoring
- Academic Advising
- Career Coaching
- Mentoring
- Workshops



Slide 19

Services Currently Offered Cont'd

- Which currently offered services at the university are being most used effectively by African-American students?
- What are your thoughts about these services that are offered to students?
 - Is there more that could be offered? If so, what more could be offered?
- In what ways do you feel that support services currently offered at the university are helping African-American students complete their degrees in an efficient timeframe?

Slide 20

Recommended Support Services Needed on Campus

- Early Alert Programs
- Encouraging Persistence
- Personal Counseling
- Student/Staff Rapport
- Charting progress toward degree completion




Recommended Support Services Needed on Campus Cont'd

- Break up into small groups of 5 to 6 people for 20 minutes from 2:40 p.m. until 3:00 p.m.
 - Each group will discuss and analyze the recommended support services needed on campus and provide feedback.
 - The groups will also provide suggestions additional services that may be needed.
 - One representative from each group will stand and give a detailed summary of what his/her group discussed and whether the group agrees with the recommended support services.

Slide 22

Academic Success for Students in Higher Education

- Qualities that can lead to improved degree completion times and academic success:
 - Highly Engaged
 - Persistent
 - Focused
 - Goal-Oriented

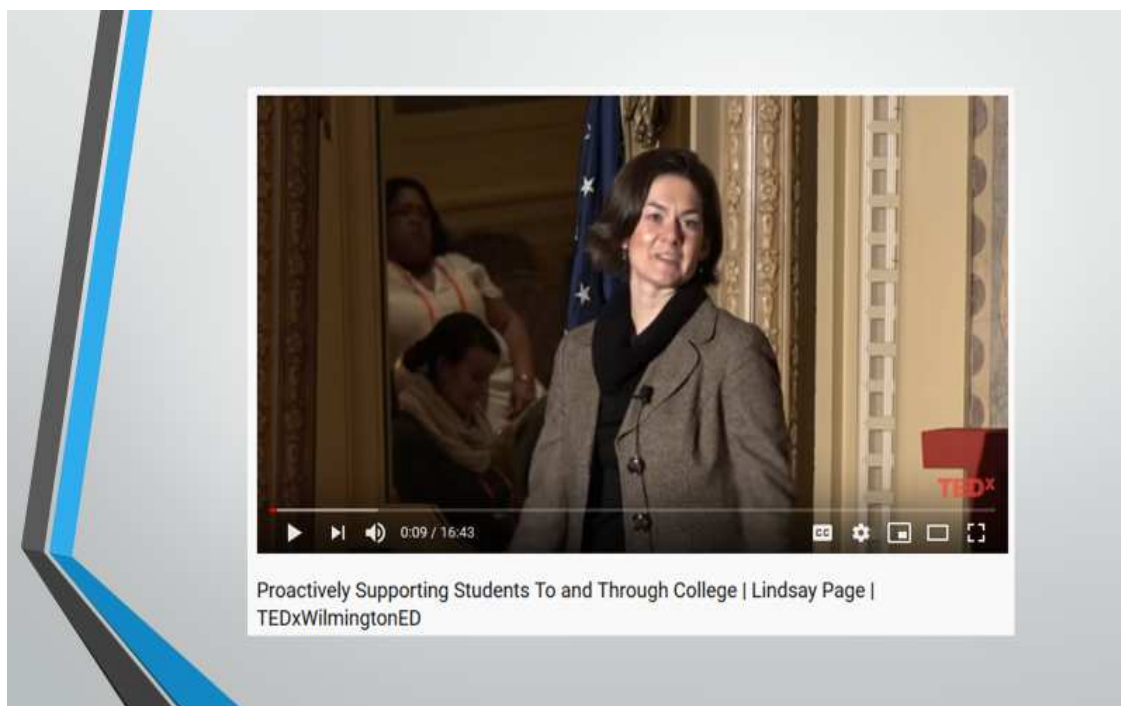


Slide 23

Academic Success

- Strategies for improving degree completion timeframes for African-American students.
 - **Minimizing academic challenges**
 - What are some academic challenges that students encounter?
 - **Reimagining support services**
 - How can support services be reimagined?
 - **Structuring academic pathways**
 - What are some ways to restructure academic?
 - **Early alert program**
 - How can Student Support Services identify needs early, develop a rapport, and provide support before a student fail academically?

Slide 24



Slide 25

<https://youtu.be/pYgENucOOQFQ>

Any Questions from Day 1?



Slide 26

References

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Slide 27

Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will

Day 2

Understanding Persistence

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slides 28-29)

Welcome Back. The facilitator will answer any questions that participants may have about training from Day 1. Also, a short review of Day 1 training will be given. Summary of Day 2 learning outcomes.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slides 30-39)

1. What is persistence?
 - a. Vincent Tinto
 2. What are goals?
 3. Why develop goals? Can the student support services department help students achieve their academic goals?
-

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. ***Break*******

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 40-46)

Discussion on the three different types of goals and how the student support services department can help students achieve their educational goals.

Watch a short video on how and why to set academic goals. (Slide 46)

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. ***Lunch*******

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 47-57)

Participants will be divided into small groups of 5 people. Everyone will be given a number between 1 and 5. All participants with the same numbers will be grouped together. Each group will collaborate on the five scenarios and provide the most effective support services and resources for the student in each of the given scenarios.

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

2:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 58-59)

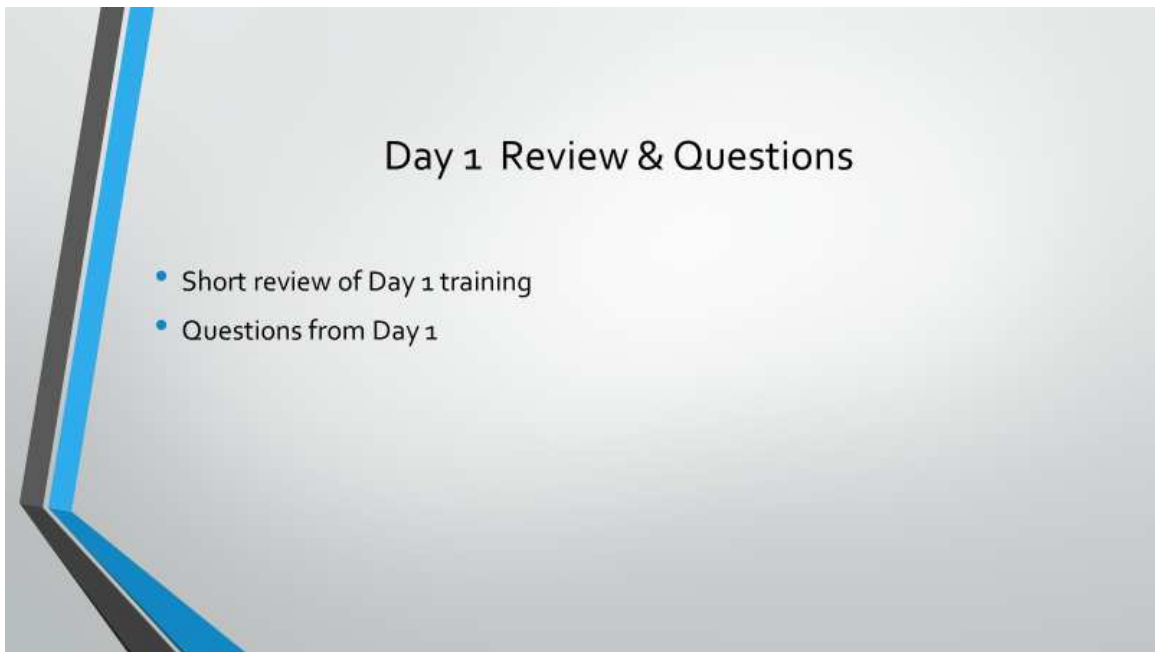
Continue working on scenarios and conclude the session.

Materials needed for Day 2

* - denotes items needed for presenter/facilitator

** - denotes items needed for participant

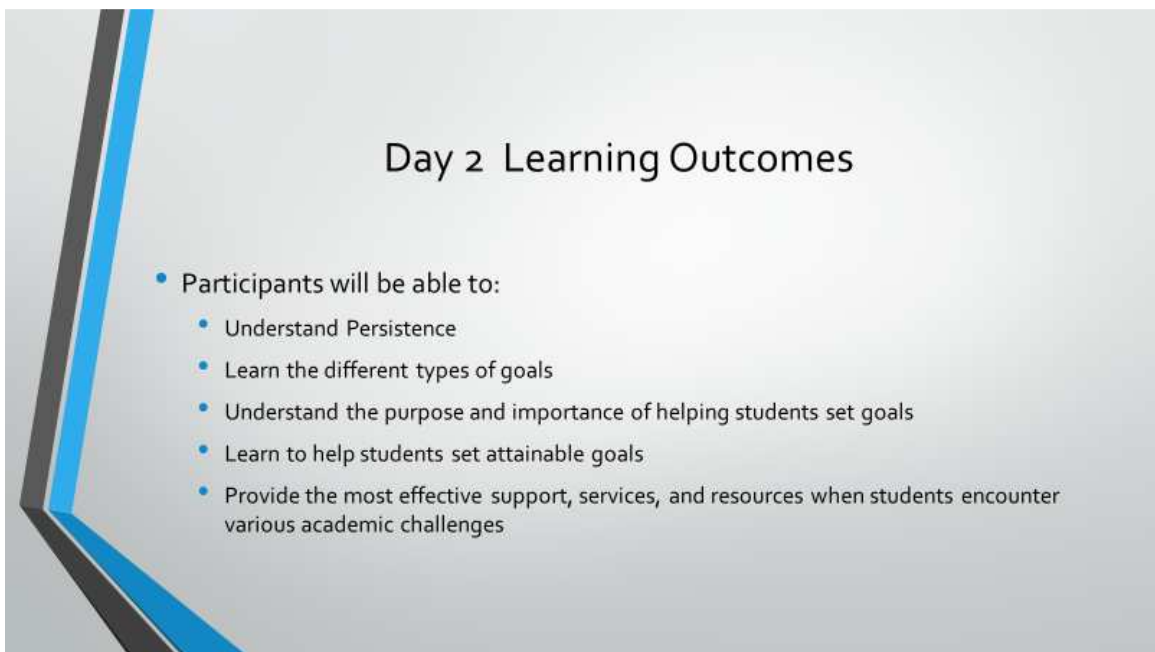
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4. *Internet access
5. *Sound system
6. *Flash drive
7. *Tables and chairs
8. **Hard copies of agendas and PowerPoint presentation for Day 2
9. **Pens and pencils



Day 1 Review & Questions

- Short review of Day 1 training
- Questions from Day 1

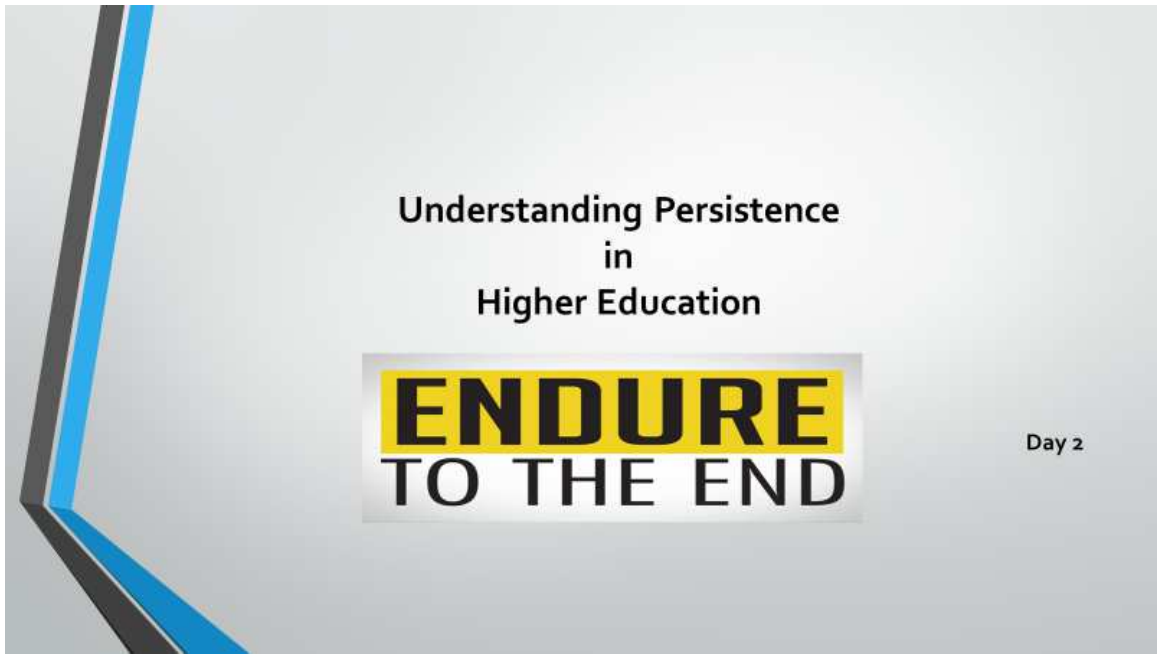
Slide 28



Day 2 Learning Outcomes

- Participants will be able to:
 - Understand Persistence
 - Learn the different types of goals
 - Understand the purpose and importance of helping students set goals
 - Learn to help students set attainable goals
 - Provide the most effective support, services, and resources when students encounter various academic challenges

Slide 29



Slide 30

What is Persistence?

- Persistence is the behavior or attitude of someone who continues to do, or try to do, something in a determined way.



PERSISTENT

Slide 31



Persistence

- Who encourages students to persist with their studies? Why?
- What are some ways that would you encourage African-American students at the university to have persistence?
- Do you think student support department faculty members should have persistence?

Slide 32

Persistence Cont'd

- Persistence has been getting more attention in higher education research. Studies have shown that colleges and universities must listen to student perspectives and implement needed resources and supports to promote greater degree completion (Lightweis, 2014). Research findings point out that student persistence plays an important role in their learning and academic success (Lightweis, 2014).

Slide 33

Vincent Tinto (2004)

➤ Developed the idea that students are more apt to engage student services and succeed when academic support services are associated with everyday credit-bearing classroom courses of learning.

1. Goals and Aspirations
2. Academic Support
3. Student Engagement

Slide 34

Tinto

- What are your thoughts on Tinto's (2004) theory?
- How well does this theory correlate with student persistence in higher education?
- What are some ways that the student support services department can improve resources and services to better aid students in their credit-bearing courses?

Slide 35

What are Goals?

- A goal is something that a person is trying to do or achieve.



Goals

- Do you think goals and persistence relate to each other? If so, how?
 - Goals and persistence relate to each other because an individual must have a “continue to try to do in a determined way” attitude to accomplish a goal. It is believed that African-American students are more persistent and can accomplish their educational goals in a more-timely manner when the higher learning institution provides efficient support and resources. Goals can be used to increase student persistency.
- Can anyone give examples of how goals can increase students’ academic persistence?

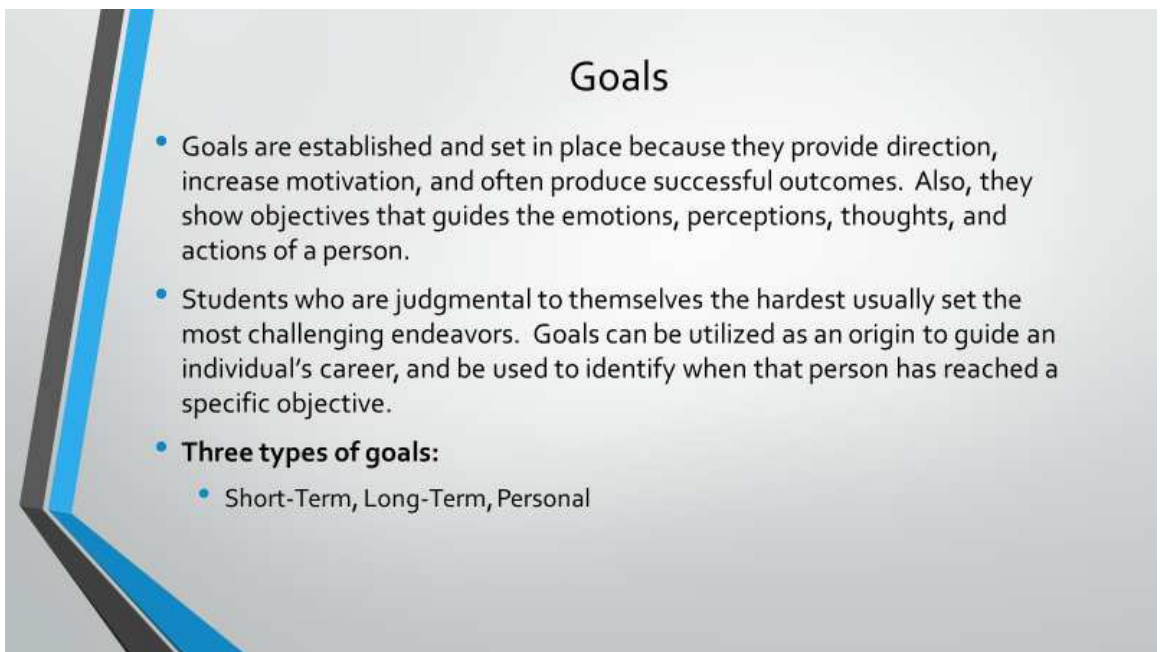
Slide 37



Why should students set goals?

- Helps keep academic endeavors on track
- Helps students to be productive and successful
- Gives directions students directions for life
- Provides motivation

Slide 38



Goals

- Goals are established and set in place because they provide direction, increase motivation, and often produce successful outcomes. Also, they show objectives that guides the emotions, perceptions, thoughts, and actions of a person.
- Students who are judgmental to themselves the hardest usually set the most challenging endeavors. Goals can be utilized as an origin to guide an individual's career, and be used to identify when that person has reached a specific objective.
- **Three types of goals:**
 - Short-Term, Long-Term, Personal

Slide 39

The slide features a light gray background with a decorative graphic on the left side consisting of overlapping black and blue lines. The title "Short-Term Goals" is centered in a black sans-serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list of four items, each preceded by a blue circular marker.

Short-Term Goals

- Making a passing grade in a current class
- Finding a good academic advisor
- Joining a campus club
- Finding a job

Slide 40The slide features a light gray background with a decorative graphic on the left side consisting of overlapping black and blue lines. The title "Short-Term Goals Cont'd" is centered in a black sans-serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list of three items, each preceded by a blue circular marker. The second item includes a sub-bulleted question.

Short-Term Goals Cont'd

- A short-term goal is something that someone wants to accomplish in the near future, usually within twelve months or less.
 - Can someone please give some examples of short-term goals?
- Setting short-term goals that are feasible and attainable is very important to the success of the person that is learning. Short-term goals also allows progress to be recognized swiftly, usually between 3 months and 1 year.
- How can Student Support Services help African-American students develop measurable short-term goals? Academic goals?

Slide 41

Long-Term Goals

- Gain experience in a leadership role
- Earn a doctorate degree

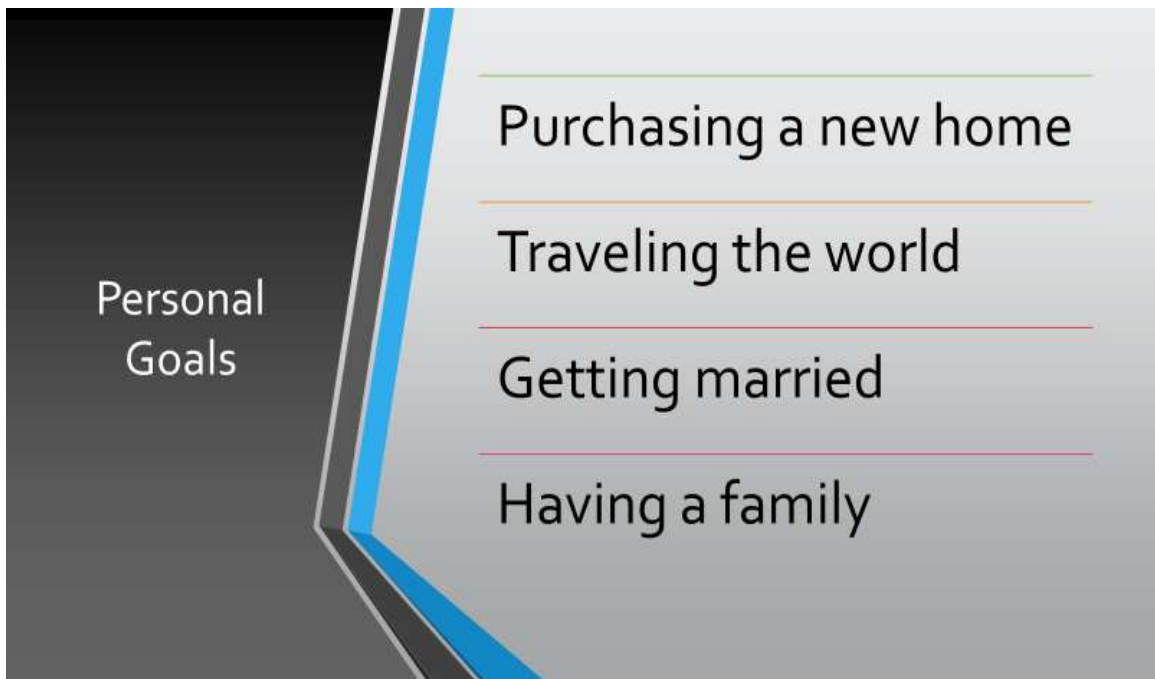


Slide 42

Long-Term Goals Cont'd

- Can anyone share some good examples of long-term goals?
 - Maybe some that you have set?
- It is also very beneficial for learners to set long-term goals, which is usually very important to their success. Long-term goals can sometimes take a longer span of time to achieve, normally between four to ten years.
- How can the student support services department help African-American students develop measurable long-term goals?

Slide 43

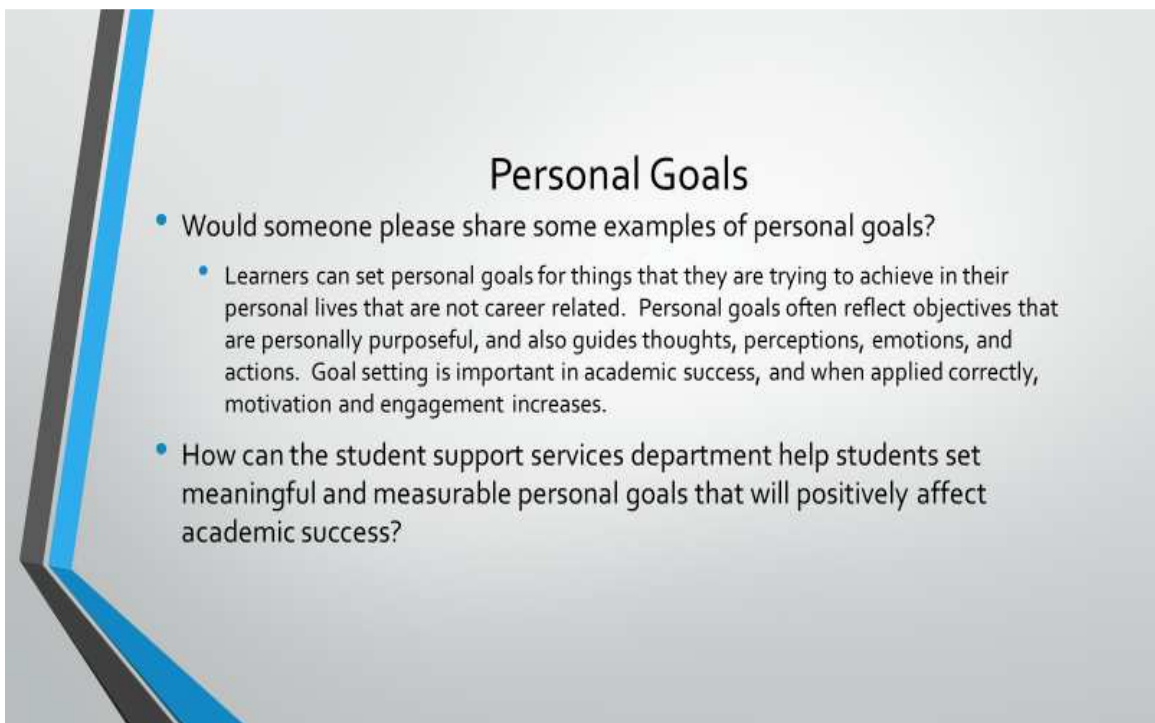


Personal Goals

- Purchasing a new home
- Traveling the world
- Getting married
- Having a family

This slide features a dark grey background on the left with the text 'Personal Goals' in white. On the right, a light grey background contains four horizontal lines, each followed by a goal: 'Purchasing a new home' (green line), 'Traveling the world' (orange line), 'Getting married' (red line), and 'Having a family' (pink line). A blue and black decorative border is on the left side.

Slide 44



Personal Goals

- Would someone please share some examples of personal goals?
 - Learners can set personal goals for things that they are trying to achieve in their personal lives that are not career related. Personal goals often reflect objectives that are personally purposeful, and also guides thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and actions. Goal setting is important in academic success, and when applied correctly, motivation and engagement increases.
- How can the student support services department help students set meaningful and measurable personal goals that will positively affect academic success?

This slide has a light grey background with a blue and black decorative border on the left. The title 'Personal Goals' is centered at the top. Below it are two bullet points. The first bullet point is a question, and the second is a question about the student support services department's role. The text is in a dark grey font.

Slide 45



Slide 46

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=TX8cZvZPDgE>

Group Scenarios

- Participants will be divided into small groups of five. Groups will be established by each participant counting off 1-5 consecutively. Each of the groups will be given a scenario to work on collaboratively to provide the best professional practice, resource, or support service for the student. Each scenario and recommended solution will be shared with the entire group once the allotted time to work expires. Participants will be given the opportunity to comment on scenarios from other groups and give feedback on the best professional practice, resource, or support service they would give the student.

Slide 47

Scenario 1

- John is an active student in a one of Example 1's psychology class, and appears to be a hard worker. After failing his first major assignment in the class, John comes to Student Support Services to get advice on how he can improve. The director gives you the task of assisting John. After receiving assistance from you, John still fails his second major assignment in Example 1's class even though he attempted to complete the assignment the proper way. You eventually realize that John doesn't appear to have the necessary skills to pass Example 1's class.

Slide 48

Scenario 1 Question

- As a student support services staff member, how would you support John in the scenario above? In what ways would you feel confident that your recommendation and support will benefit him?

Slide 49

Scenario 2

- It is the fifth week of an eight-week term in Example 2's college algebra class, and so far, Jane has only attended about half of her scheduled class meetings. As a student support services staff member, you would like to have a conversation with her about it, but she will not return emails, calls, or keep her scheduled appointments with you. Example 2 would also like to talk to her about the absences, but Jane arrives just as he starts teaching, and quickly leaves before he can catch her.

Slide 50

Scenario 2 Question

- As a student support services staff member, how would you support Jane in the scenario above? In what ways would you feel confident that your recommendation and support will benefit her?

Slide 51

Scenario 3

- Antonio is a hard-working student who seems to place too much pressure on himself to maintain a 4.0 GPA. He is getting a "B" in Example 3's class. It is the seventh week, and he is insisting that he should drop out of the class if he cannot earn an "A" in the class. He contacted the student support services department. You have been assigned the task of assisting Antonio.

Slide 52

Scenario 3 Question

- As a student support services staff member, how would you support Antonio in the scenario above? In what ways would you feel confident that your recommendation and support will benefit him?

Slide 53

Scenario 4

- Terry is an older student in his early 30s, and has just started taking college courses after a leg injury brought his professional sports career to an unexpected end. Although he loved playing sports, he is very excited about being enrolled in college, and has an understanding that in order to be successful, he has to be committed. A few weeks after starting the new semester, Terry and his wife becomes new parents. Since childcare is so expensive, Terry and his wife take turns caring for their child. Terry cares for their son during the day while his wife is at work, and she cares for the child in the evening while Terry goes to his classes. Terry and his wife are financially strained, so he takes on a part-time night job working at FedEx. Terry starts to miss class, and have a hard time getting his classwork completed in a timely manner. Although he has completed $\frac{3}{4}$ of his coursework, as the term nears the end, Terry stops attending class altogether. He then informs the student support services department that his intention is to withdraw from the university because he is no longer able to keep up in school due to having a new child and part-time job. The director assigns you the task of assisting Terry.

Slide 54

Scenario 4 Question

- As a student support services staff member, how would you support Terry in the scenario above? In what ways would you feel confident that your recommendation and support will benefit him?

Slide 55

Scenario 5

- It is midway through the semester and Angela has repeatedly asked if she could have extensions on her homework assignments in Example 5's class, but the professor refuses. Angela sends an email to the student support services department for assistance about her issue. None of her work has been substandard, but she doesn't abide by the submission timelines set forth by the teacher for all students. Even given an extension a few times in the past, Angela barely submitted the assignments by the extended deadline. It is obvious that Angela is not good with finishing her assignments on time. The director has requested that you assist Angela.

Slide 56

Scenario 5 Question

- As a student support services staff member, how would you support Angela in the scenario above? In what ways would you feel confident that your recommendation and support will benefit her?

Slide 57

Any Questions?



Slide 58

Reference

- Lightweis, S. (2014). The challenges, persistence, and success of White, working-class, first-generation college students. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 461-467. Retrieved from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/prin/csj>
- Tinto, V. (2004). Student Retention and Graduation: Facing the Truth, Living with the Consequences. Occasional Paper 1. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.http://pellinstitute.org/>

Slide 59

Improving Degree Completion Timeframes: We Can, We Will

Day 3

Understanding Persistence

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m. (Slide 60)

Welcome back to the last day of the professional development training session. The facilitator will answer any participants' questions they may have about Day 2. Also, a short overview of what was learned from Day 2 will be discussed. Discussion of learning outcomes.

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (Slides 61-64)

Participants will sit with their same group from the previous day. Discussion on applying best practices when supporting students. Watch and discuss video (Slide 64).

10:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. ***Break*******

10:45 a.m. – 12:15 a.m. (Slides 65-68)

A detailed discussion of data analysis themes. Discussion on how the themes can be used to enhance the student support services department. Also, how can the director and staff members help incorporate the themes at the university?

12:15 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. ***Lunch*******

1:15 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Slides 69-73)

Overview of the knowledge gained in professional development training. Participants will answer random questions that the facilitator asks. Watch and discuss videos (Slides 73 & 74).

3:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. ***Break*******

2:15 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. (Slides 74-75)

The facilitator will answer any questions that participants may have about professional development training. Individuals that complete the training will be required to complete a posttest over the information covered during the training and summative evaluation.

Materials needed for Day 3

* - denotes items needed for presenter/facilitator

** - denotes items needed for participant

1. *Laptop computer
2. *Projector
3. *Projection screen
4. *Internet access
5. *Sound system
6. *Flash drive
7. *Tables and chairs
8. **Hard copies of agendas and PowerPoint presentation for Day 3
9. **Pens and pencils

Review of Day 2 and Day 3 Learning Outcomes

- Participants will be able to:
 - Apply best professional practices
 - Help incorporate developed themes

Slide 60

Best Practices

- Best practices in higher education refer to a wide range of programmatic approaches, services, resources, policies, techniques, and activities used to achieve positive results in student academic behaviors or attitudes.
- It is very important that the student support services department apply best practices when supporting students. "Becoming confident and developing professionally is paramount to continue to practice with relevance using the principles of best practices and this can be achieved by various professional development activities" (Hall, 2017, p. 64).

**Slide 61**

Best Practices Cont'd

- What are your thoughts on applying best practices when supporting African-American students at the university? How important is it to apply best practices when supporting students?
- How would you know that you are using best practices when assisting students with academic challenges?
- What can leadership at the university do to ensure that members of the student support services department are using professional best practices when supporting students?


Slide 62

Suggested Best Practices



- Gain a better understanding of academic challenges
- Identify needs
- Provide academic and social support
- Encourage greater student/faculty rapport
- Communicate high expectations
- Encourage goal-setting

Slide 63



TRiO Student Support Services

Slide 64

<https://youtu.be/NGcwyixzOS4>

Emerging Themes

- Theme 1 – identifying needed support
 - Adapting to University Culture
 - Faculty Rapport



Slide 65

Emerging Themes Cont'd

- What can university leaders do to help the student support services department stay abreast of academic challenges that African-American students face while pursuing a college degree?
- What are some new ways that university leaders and the student support services department can improve institutional support at the institution?
- How can we determine if the current services and resources used at the university are effective in supporting African-American students?
- What can be done to enhance resources and services that are not effective?

Slide 66

Emerging Themes Cont'd

- Theme 2 – expanding knowledge of services currently offered
 - Institutional Support
 - Lack of Institutional Support
 - Academic Advising
 - Tutoring



Slide 67

Emerging Themes Continued

- Theme 3 – building connection to leadership
 - Identify Student Needs
 - Mentoring



Slide 68

Overview

- What are academic challenges?
 - **Academic Challenges:** In higher education, these are the academic, cultural, social, and self-efficacy difficulties that can have a disparate impact on graduation timeframes for students (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015).
- What is student engagement?
 - This alludes to the degree of involvement and dedication that students exhibit toward their academic endeavors (Balwant, 2018).
- What is persistence?
 - In higher education, this is the ability of students to continue pursuing their educational goals despite the various challenges that they encounter (Lightweis, 2014).

Slide 69

Overview Cont.

- What are the duties and roles of the student support services department?
 - The student support services department have the incredible role of giving students the resources, tools, service, and overall guidance that students need to complete a college degree in a good, timely manner.
- What services are currently offered at the university?
 - Some of the services currently offered at the university include academic advising, tutoring, and career coaching.
 - Are current services properly supporting students
- What are some recommended services needed on campus?
 - Some of the recommended services needed on campus include an early alert program to quickly identify needs, mentoring, and a system of addressing the concerns and suggestions of students.

Slide 70

Overview Cont.

- Does persistence exist in goal-attainment?
 - Yes, because students must persist to accomplish their educational goals.
- How would you encourage African-American students to set goals?
 - By long-term and short-term goals that are obtainable.
- Can the student support services department help students achieve their academic goals?
 - Yes, the student support services department can help students achieve their academic goals by gaining a better understand of academic challenges and providing effective, needed support.

Slide 71



TRiO Student Support Services at Feather River College

Slide 72

<https://youtu.be/HWo3kY6w9wY>



Student Engagement, Retention, and Success

Slide 73

<https://youtu.be/heviLnxzqnw>



Slide 74

References

- Balwant, P. T. (2018). The meaning of student engagement and disengagement in the classroom context: Lessons from organizational behavior. *Journal of Further & Higher Education*, 42(3), 389-401. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2017.1281887
- Hall, J. (2017). Developing Teaching Best Practice—Pedagogy, Preferences, and Professional Development. *International Information & Library Review*, 49(1), 59–64. doi:10.1080/10572317.2017.1270692
- Hochanadel, A., & Finamore, D. (2015). Fixed and growth mindset in education and how grit helps students persist in the face of adversity. *Journal of International Education Research*, 11(1), 47-n/a. Retrieved from <https://clutejournals.com/index.php/IJER>
- Lightweis, S. (2014). The challenges, persistence, and success of White, working-class, first-generation college students. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 461-467. Retrieved from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/prin/csj>

Slide 75

Post Test Questions

1. African American students face various academic challenges that hinder degree completion timeframes.
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. A high level of student engagement causes degree completion time to decrease.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. The role of the student support services department is to identify student needs and provide support and services that will lead to degree completion.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. The student support services department cannot help to improve degree completion timeframes for African American students.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. Developing a student/faculty rapport is not beneficial.
 - a. True

b. False

6. Mentoring was one of the recommended services needed on campus.

a. True

b. False

7. Persistence is the ability of students to continue pursuing their educational goals despite the various challenges that they face.

a. True

b. False

8. Persistence is not related to goals.

a. True

b. False

9. Goals are established and set in place because they provide direction, increase motivation, and often produce successful outcomes.

a. True

b. False

10. Vincent Tinto developed

a. True

b. False

Project Evaluation

Please place a checkmark in the box of the response that you choose.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The training content was delivered in a clear manner.				
2. Knowledge gained during the training can easily be applied.				
3. The training was interesting and exciting.				
4. Participation was encouraged throughout the training.				
5. The information presented in the training was in alignment with the learning outcomes.				
6. The information presented during the training was relevant.				
7. Adequate time was provided for participants to ask questions.				

8. All the necessary materials needed for the training was provided.				
9. I would recommend this training to others.				

In a single word, please describe your overall assessment of this professional development training _____.

*Please provide any suggestions that you feel may help improve this professional development training.

*Please provide any additional comments.

Thank You for Participating!!!!

Appendix B: Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in my study and please answer all questions as honestly and clearly as possible. Please ask if you have any specific questions that need clarifying or concerns that need to be addressed. The responses and details that you share will be completely confidential.

Greetings/Introduction – Hello, how are you today?

Interview Questions

Based on Research Question 1: How do African American students describe the academic challenges they face as they work towards graduation?

1. Thinking back to before you started your first term, what did you envision would be your biggest academic challenge and why? How did you think you would handle that challenge?
2. Thinking now to your first year, describe the first academic challenge you encountered. How did you handle that challenge?
3. Which (academic) challenges do you think have had the greatest impact in terms of your ability to graduate?

4. How have you handled these (academic) challenges? How effective were these methods?

Based on Research Question 2: What are African American students' perceptions of the institutional support services they have accessed to assist with academic challenges?

5. What institutional resources have you used to help handle your academic challenges?
6. How did you find out about these institutional resources?
7. How helpful were these institutional resources in helping you handle academic challenges?
8. Please explain ways that you felt supported by student services and ways that you did not feel supported.

Based on Research Question 3: What suggestions do African American students have for institutional leadership about ways to better help students with their academic challenges?

9. In what ways do you feel that leadership at the university can better help students with academic challenges?

10. What are some ways that leadership at the university can enhance the perception of student services? How can leadership make students more comfortable about utilizing student support services?

11. What can leadership do to make students feel more comfortable about expressing their concerns about student services?