

2020

Retaining African American Male Sophomore Students at a Historically Black University

Gourjoine M. Wade
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Gourjoine M. Wade

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Walden University

2020

Abstract

Retaining African American Male Sophomore Students at a Historically Black University

by

Gourjoine M. Wade

MS, Walden University, 2013

BPA, Grambling State University, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Higher Education Leadership and Management

Walden University

December 2020

Abstract

Retention rate sophomore to junior year among African American male students is low at Academia State University (a pseudonym), a public Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in the Southern United States. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions of African American male students regarding what influenced their persistence to the junior year at the study site. Schlossberg's transition theory was the conceptual framework used to guide the inquiry. The research questions for this study addressed perceptions of African American male students regarding what programs, services, or experiences may improve sophomore year success. Three sophomore and three junior students enrolled during fall 2019 and spring 2020 volunteered to participate in the study. Data were collected using semistructured, recorded interviews and were analyzed thematically applying open and axial coding strategies to find emergent themes. Participants perceived that campus involvement, faculty and staff connections, family, relationships, self-motivation, and determination affected African American male sophomore year success. Based on the findings, a policy recommendations paper was developed detailing a need to increase campus involvement, community service, and service learning, enhance the freshman year experience, institute learning communities, engage students in meaningful relationships, enhance faculty and staff connections, and improve institutional support services. This project supports positive social change by improving retention rates for African American male students who persist and become HBCU graduates providing positive contributions to their communities.

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Dedication

God is the most amazing thing I have ever known and through him, I am here. I thank God for blessing me with a wonderful wife, two irreplaceable daughters, and family who adore me just as I adore them; and they mean the world to me. To my previous supervisor years ago who motivated me to continue pursuing my degree; Thank You; because your poor leadership proved that I could do and be better. To my committee chair Dr. Sydney Parent, this journey would not have been possible had it not been for your sincere counsel, distinct guidance, prompt follow-up, integrity, and support; I appreciate you!

To each instructor who I had the honor of taking your course, your contributions made a difference and you filled me with knowledge that allowed me to be here. I also want to dedicate my work to the millions of people around the world who could not finish a doctorate or see a child graduate because they were taken from us because of COVID; your memories will live on. Last but certainly not least, I dedicate this effort to my great-great grandmother “Momma” who with just a second grade education herself, instilled in me the power and importance of an education; and from behind the heavenly clouds, motivated me more than she will ever know; I am eternally grateful for the foundation you gave me.

Acknowledgments

I have never traveled a road like this before. There has never been a journey that I was more eager to finish, or doubted I ever would finish. The journey was not taken alone, and it truly took a village of supporters to arrive at my doctoral destination. My life co-pilot; best friend; and constant “you need to go write...get it done”– my wife Shara, Thank You for always being my compass toward finding my way and keeping me motivated to see the bigger picture, and to trust and believe that the Master Plan was always the Master’s Plan; I love you 3000! My two daughters Addisyn and Aubree; this journey was taken with you in mind, as your hugs and smiles during this journey meant the world to me and I love you beyond words! Thank You to my bosses, family members, students (extra shout out for the music recommendations during the data results stage!), friends, and colleagues near and far who called me Dr. Wade prematurely but had no idea how much motivation that gave me to get this done; Thank You all for the prayers, words of encouragement, and support! Lastly and oddly enough, I want to express an acknowledgement to the global pandemic raging around the world as I type this. Although I am gaining so much with the end of this doctoral journey, I recognize that so many have lost so much this year. I extend my prayers of peace, love, and comfort to every family impacted by this terrible disease. I am hopeful that my work in higher education can help guide and nurture the future researchers and scientists who can contribute to the world a gift of knowledge that will fuel the next level of cures and medicines that can heal the world for years to come.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction to the Study

Sophomore year retention, especially for African American male students, is a problem. According to Millea, Willis, Elder, and Molina (2018), 25% of African American men go on to graduate from their initial institution of enrollment, and only a third of those students will depart the same institution with a degree within 6 years. Ray, Hilton, Wood, and Hicks (2016) concluded that with an attrition rate of 66%, the highest among all racial and ethnic groups, two out of every three African American men will not complete their college degree programs.

Tobolowsky and Cox (2007) described how higher education institutions nationwide are dedicating more research and resources to combating the issue of sophomore year attrition of African American men. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of institutions reporting a need to create programs specifically designed for second-year students increased from 40 to 130 (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). As the immediate connection to the junior year and thus, closer to senior year and graduation, the sophomore year success of students has become equally if not more important than the first year.

Nationally, more than 75% of freshmen students who drop out of college do not return, and statistics such as this provide institutions with a starting point to determine what is causing the revolving door of students during the sophomore year (Turner & Thompson, 2014). The relevance and need of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to address sophomore to junior year retention presents a complex

national problem within higher education. In a 2013 report, Richards, D.A.R., and Awokoya (2012) discussed how HBCUs, when compared to non-HBCUs, serve students who have a relatively more difficult time sustaining their education all the way through to graduation.

There is a historically low rate of persistence, retention, and graduation of African American male students at HBCUs. In a survey published by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) titled “The Discouraging Trend in Graduation Rates at HBCUs” (2013), half of the 54 HBCUs surveyed had a Black student graduation rate of 33% or lower. Hilton and Reneau (2016) affirmed that African American men struggle with college completion at HBCUs. Farmer and Hope (2015) identified that there are similar statistical trends at public and private institutions where the 6-year graduation rates for African American male students is less than 40%. The sophomore to junior year retention problem of African American men at Academia State University is also a national problem that was identified by Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013), who indicated that there was an increase of African-American students failing to graduate once enrolled in colleges and universities.

The Local Problem

Academia State University (pseudonym), a public HBCU located in the Southern United States, has a low sophomore to junior year retention rate among African American male students enrolled at the institution. The local problem was identified when the President of Academia State University acknowledged in August 2015 during a speech at the Opening Faculty Institute, that there is a need to increase and improve the retention

and persistence of African American male students during the sophomore year.

Information obtained from the study site's institutional research office indicates that in 2017, Academia State University had a 37% sophomore to junior year fall to spring persistence rate for African American male students. Additionally, in 2017 the United States Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reported Academia State University had a 19% six-year graduation rate among African American male students (IPEDS, 2017).

The gap in practice is 63% of African American male students at Academia State University do not persist beyond the sophomore year and thus are not transitioning into the junior year of their academic program. The findings from this study will provide needed information about the challenges faced by sophomore male students and encourage the development of recommendations for the administration to identify which services, programs, and policies at Academia State University might improve the sophomore year retention of African American male students. Since 2011, Academia State University has seen an average annual increase of nine percent (IPEDS, 2017) of African American male students not persisting beyond the sophomore year of college. Although not limited to Academia State, this issue is at a critical level at the local institution.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of sophomore and junior year African American male students who attend Academia State University regarding their campus experiences in relation to their persistence from the sophomore to junior

year at the institution. The information that I collected may reveal campus experiences that have negatively influenced their decisions to remain enrolled at Academia State University. The identification of relevant campus experiences will support Academia State University in developing strategies for improving the retention and persistence of African American male students as they transition into their junior year. According to IPEDS, in 2016 there were 84,155 African American male students enrolled at HBCUs, a decline from 86,857 from the previous year. As the HBCU African American male student population continues to decline nationally (Palmer, 2015), the results of my study will provide research-based evidence on how HBCUs, like Academia State University, can foster a supportive educational climate that will positively enhance student retention and persistence. Although I focused on the situation at Academia State University, the problem of the retention of sophomore African American male students may inform HBCUs and potentially Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) of important aspects of overall retention and graduation.

Rationale

According to Palmer, Wood, and Arroyo (2015), HBCUs have historically dealt with the challenges of retaining and graduating African American male students beyond the first year. As of 2019, there was limited research regarding retention efforts by HBCUs related specifically to African American male students transitioning from the sophomore to junior year of college. There are research and data that support the work of colleges and universities to assist students during the first year, but little to support the second-year students, especially at HBCUs. This is especially true at Academia State

University, where at the May 2017 Board of Trustees Meeting the institution's Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management spoke about the need to improve retention among continuing students, especially sophomore year retention. Turner and Thompson (2014) researched the negative and unpleasant experiences of students during the first year of college, and how those experiences impacted their ability to return during the sophomore year. Hoffman (2014) reviewed the relationship between students and faculty during the sophomore year, and how those relationships provided positive factors and motivation that improve the likelihood of increased student engagement, motivation, retention, and persistence in college. Academia State University leaders can better assess whether or not factors listed by Hoffman, and Turner and Thompson are applicable by directly engaging with actual sophomore and junior year African American male students regarding their needs.

Gump (2007) concluded that during the second year of college, most students noted a decreased interest in school, declining grades, more absences, and an increased likelihood of dropping out of the institution, sometimes referred to on campus as the sophomore slump. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of sophomore and junior year African American male students who attend Academia State University regarding their campus experiences in relation to their persistence from the sophomore to junior year at the institution.

Definitions

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU): Institutions of higher education founded for the primary purpose of educating Black people (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006).

PWI and PWCU: As defined by Astin (1984) Predominately White institutions (PWI) or predominantly White colleges or universities refer to higher education institutions that historically had a legacy of excluding Blacks and traditionally were predominately White in racial composition.

Sophomore slump: As defined by Freedman (1956), refers to the transitional challenges both academically and socially that occur during the sophomore year of college

Sophomore student: According to the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, the sophomore student is a traditional-aged undergraduate enrolled in their second year of full-time academic work.

Significance of the Study

Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013) described the college experience for young African American male students as in need of a reconfiguration, as African American men compared to African American women, are at higher risk for dropping out of college and not matriculating in higher education. Academia State University must improve efforts to retain African American male students, specifically those students who are transitioning from their sophomore year and into the junior year. The leaders of

Academia State University can use the results of my study to achieve clarity and understanding in their efforts of addressing the needs of African American male students during the sophomore year. HBCUs are especially unique institutions of higher education, and they serve a unique student population. The contributions of HBCUs to the higher education world can only be sustained if retention and graduation rates improve. This appears to be particularly true for African American male students. During the 2016–2017 academic year, the United States Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) listed that of the 33,500 bachelor’s degrees conferred by HBCUs, a little more than a quarter of those degrees, 9,273, were awarded to African American male students (IPEDS, 2017). As federal and state appropriations for higher education continue to decrease, public colleges and universities are more dependent on enrollment–driven tuition and fees to supplement the losses. The funding gaps at HBCUs create a significant need to maintain higher enrollment at these institutions. HBCUs must maintain and increase retention rates to survive in a growing and increasingly competitive higher education marketplace of both private and public institutions.

There are 102 HBCUs located in 19 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Fifty–one of the HBCUs are public institutions and 51 are private nonprofit institutions (IPEDS, 2016). Private HBCUs are highly driven by tuition and fees and have a very high need to maintain adequate enrollment numbers. Of the public HBCUs, the loss of significant portions of public funding are making these colleges also increasingly tuition dependent. From a national perspective then, all HBCUs will greatly

benefit from higher retention rates, especially among an at-risk African American male student population. Instead of fighting for a dwindling pool of new students which overall has decreased 11%, to 292,000 students, between 2010 and 2016 (IPEDS, 2016), HBCUs, like Academia State University, must refocus efforts to improve sophomore to junior year retention. The significance of these statistics highlights the importance of identifying how to keep African American male students beyond the sophomore year of college.

Research Questions

Academia State University can improve the retention and graduation of African American male students by identifying what factors either support or inhibit student success. Arroyo and Gasman (1984) explained that many male students at HBCUs indicated they received little to no institutional support, yet overall, they felt their HBCU was supportive. The research questions address how Academia State University leaders can support African American male students based on the nature of the campus experience.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the perceptions of sophomore year African American male students attending Academia State University regarding the experiences they feel influenced their decision to move beyond the sophomore year?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the perceptions of junior year African American male students attending Academia State University regarding the experiences that influenced their success in moving beyond the sophomore year?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What programs, services, or additional factors may improve sophomore year success at Academia State University?

Review of the Literature

Todd and Booth–Bell (2017) described the view of critics that lower retention and graduation statistics from HBCUs reflect that HBCUs are ineffective in educating students, thus highlighting the significance in HBCUs improving the retention of African American male students beyond the sophomore year. According to Lundy-Wagner and Gasman (2011), there are relatively few studies about HBCUs and their students, with an essential omission of studies about African American men within the body of literature. Strayhorn (2017) confirmed Lundy–Wagner and Gasman’s observations by finding there are noticeable gaps in the current literature on Black male collegians, especially studies that separate the findings with a focus on racial climate at campuses such as HBCUs. Such omissions highlight the major themes from the literature review and how they provide support to the importance of this study.

In the first section of the literature review, I describe the conceptual framework before focusing exclusively on the various aspects of the sophomore year and the themes associated with the transition from first to second year student. In the second section of the literature review, I present economic, social, and overall obstacles and opportunities that either support or impede student success during the collegiate years. In the third section I address the developmental and emotional factors that frame sophomore year success. In the final section I examine HBCUs and the focus on student academic integration into college and toward graduation.

Literature Search Strategy

To reach saturation for my topic, I conducted the literature review by using several resources which included several online search engines such as: Google Scholar, ERIC, Thoreau, Educational Research Complete, Proquest, and SAGE. I searched multiple resources and articles to identify possible sources for this study.

In the online searches I initiated I used several key search terms and phrases which included but were not limited to: *african american retention, african american male retention, sophomore year retention, first year experience, sophomore year experience, sophomore slump, graduation data, HBCUs, HBCU retention rates among male students, HBCU sophomore year retention, HBCU male persistence, HBCU persistence, PWIs, student persistence, african american persistence, african american student transition, the forgotten year, junior retention, first to second year persistence, college attrition, sophomore year experience, and Black college experience.*

Conceptual Framework

I based the conceptual framework for this study on Schlossberg's transition theory (1989), which describes how practitioners may understand the needs of students through a structured approach that predicts, measures, and modifies how students react to change. Schlossberg's theory is central to my study and addresses how an individual obtains what he or she needs from a given source of support (e.g. the institution). The source of support may be more of a hindrance to the individual during a transition, specifically, the sophomore year transition.

Schlossberg's transition theory can be applicable to all students regardless of age, sex, color, or geographic location. In his theory, Schlossberg addresses factors that influence a person's coping abilities, as well as how individuals move through their college years. Schlossberg's theory connects directly with how the study addresses perceptions of African American male students regarding how students cope with transition and change during the sophomore year, and what Academia State University leaders can do to increase sophomore year retention.

According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), there is a basic systematic process of mastering change and the process consists of the Four S's: situation, self, support, and strategies. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) further discussed how the Four S's are meant to be considered as overlapping and in combination with an understanding of the student's perception of resources, deficits, and barriers. According to Chickering and Schlossberg (1995), situation refers to how individuals view transition and how they perceive change from the viewpoint of positive, negative, expected, unexpected, desired, or dreaded. In my study I addressed the sophomore year of college, which is considered by educators to be one of the most integral transitional years for students.

Self, as described by Chickering and Schlossberg, defines what strengths and weaknesses individuals bring to the transition, their level of optimism or resiliency, their control, and their options. Support shows how a person in transition views the sources of support available to them. The support, positive or negative in nature, could be from a variety of entities, including family, friends, fellow students, residence hall neighbors, organizations, and different offices within the institution. The final is strategies, which

Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) described as involving questions such as whether an individual will use more than one coping strategy, or can the individual creatively cope by changing the way he or she views the situation? Strategies also refer to whether or not the individual in transition is flexible and can manage his or her emotions, including how they react to the stress of the transition.

In this study, I examined opportunities to add significant contributions that will support African American male students and HBCUs because according to Carter, Locks, and Winkle-Wagner (2013), there is relatively little research that uses Schlossberg's transition theory to understand the college adjustment of students of color. African American male students, as do all college students, progress through the college experience in yearly cycles termed freshman or first year, sophomore or second year, junior or third year, and senior or fourth year.

Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) described how individuals navigate the transition process through a similar series of phases. The first phase is called *moving in*, and similar to a student leaving the comfort and support of the first year, this phase describes a person being confronted by a new transition or change. The second phase is called *moving through*, which is where day-to-day management of the change begins. The moving through phase is similar to a student processing and transitioning through the motions of their sophomore year. The third and final stage is the *moving out* phase, defined as the passing or end of the change or transition. The third phase correlates to the end of the sophomore year and how students reflect on the how, the why, and the what.

This point during the sophomore year transition is typically when a student determines if they will return to the institution or drop out.

Schlossberg's theory of transition was first initiated from a counseling practice. Research by Carter, Locks, and Winkle–Wagner (2013) indicated there are practical implications in using Schlossberg's theory as the conceptual framework, implications to better support underrepresented populations and students of color, specifically African American men. Using Schlossberg's theory of transition I addressed the intent of this study by capturing the perceptions of African American male students in their sophomore year and substantiating their knowledge, lived experiences, and individual transitions toward a foundation on how Academia State University can improve the retention of those students into the junior year and onward to graduation.

Review of the Broader Problem

Student experiences and the sophomore year. The National Resource Center for the First–Year Experience and Students in Transition (2018) defines a traditional–aged sophomore as being an 18-or 19-year–old, undergraduate, and full–time student enrolled in the second year of college. The sophomore year has been called by researchers, *the forgotten year*, and Schreiner and Tobolowsky (2018) defined sophomores as the *middle children* of higher education. Lipka (2006) wrote about the popping of the freshman year bubble and how more colleges are working to support higher education's middle children. Coghlan, Fowler, and Messel (2009) described the plight of the sophomore as the forgotten, overlooked, and sometimes invisible *middle child* who has long been acknowledged and written about as a critical transitional year.

Nelson (2018) concluded that following the completion of the first year, which is filled with support structures and institutional programming, sophomores become comparatively invisible at many institutions while they have yet to confirm a sense of campus community.

The sophomore year challenges facing students are not limited to the United States but are an international issue. Australian researchers McBurnie, Campbell, and West (2012), while working with first year students in Australia, identified through conversations early in their second-year experience that many of the students felt lost and in need of help grounding themselves while transitioning into the second year of their college careers. Although the sophomore year retention problems are international, there remains very little research and data regarding the sophomore year experiences of African American men, especially as it relates to those students who attend HBCUs.

Turner and Thompson (2014) researched the negative and unpleasant experiences of students during the first year of college, and how those experiences impacted their ability to return during the sophomore year. Nationally, more than 75% of freshmen students who drop out of college do not return, with most not returning to higher education at all. According to Sterling (2018), colleges and universities have operated with a focus on first year programs being the foundation to sustain student retention through subsequent years, yet statistics show about two-thirds of students eventually dropped out of college during the second year. A gap in research appears to exist as to the number of African American male students at HBCUs who do not complete the transition from sophomore to junior year, and what factors contribute to the phenomenon.

Hoffman (2014) reviewed the relationship between students and faculty during the sophomore year and how those relationships provided positive factors and motivation that improved the likelihood of increased student engagement, motivation, retention, and persistence in college. Gump (2007) concluded that during the sophomore slump, the term researchers have identified during the second year of college, that most students noted a decreased interest in school, declining grades, more absences, and increased likelihood of dropping out of the institution. Gump (2007) further discussed how the sophomore slump commonly occurs when second year undergraduate students struggle to adjust to college life without supportive transition initiatives and programs designed to reduce attrition rates. Harris and Wood (2013) concluded that underrepresentation of African American male college graduates presented major repercussions, such as lack of participation in clubs and organizations and lack of mentors, not only for African American students, but also their institutions.

The sophomore year collegiate experiences for African American men at HBCUs has been a limited focus even when many studies have identified the broad concerns of the second-year experience. African American students, specifically men, have been given limited attention regarding their experience during the sophomore year, and whether that year is any different from their student counterparts from other backgrounds. Kniess, Cawthon, and Havice (2015) described how the existing literature lacks studies about African American students' experience in the collegiate environment, especially during the second year when students are more at risk for leaving postsecondary institutions and being influenced by the sophomore slump.

Virtue, Wells, and Virtue (2017) pointed out that the sophomore year is important for many students as they begin making choices such as finalizing a major, confirming living arrangements, and pinpointing opportunities for study abroad experiences. The decisions and choices that students affirmed during the sophomore year contributed to the sophomore slump and were different compared to the first year of college. The transition of African American students into the sophomore year also shows an increased focus toward graduation and earning potential. According to Kniess, Cawthon, and Havice (2015), African American students formalized their majors during the sophomore year, settling on academic pursuits that provide high earning potential such as health, business, engineering, and computer science.

College transition during the sophomore year is very different and yet equally challenging, when compared to the first year. Schreiner and Pattengale (2000) defined the sophomore slump as lower GPAs, decreased campus interest, poor academic performance, and lower retention rates. Shreiner and Pattengale based the core of their work on Freedman (1956), who created the sophomore slump terminology based on his research of the various characteristics of students during their collegiate years. Freedman suggested various needs of students based on the various years and that there were different needs and challenges, especially during the second year. Ishitani (2016) concluded that student academic integration into the college environment was only effective in retaining students for the first year but was not as effective in retaining students during the second-year.

Schreiner (2018) concluded the second year is an important one in regard to college transition, and many sophomores are struggling to survive their second-year experience on campus. The struggle highlighted by Schreiner was further affirmed by Kuglitsch and Burge (2016) who identified that the sophomore year is becoming more of a target of college retention efforts as institutions are seeing nearly as much attrition occur between the sophomore and junior years as between the freshman and sophomore years. As institutions work to address the sophomore retention struggles, Blekic, Carpenter, and Cao (2017) stated that the impact on graduation rates has caused institutions to inquire about a better understanding of the sophomore population in addition to freshmen students.

As institutions such as Academia State University look for ways to improve the success and retention of sophomore students, Schaller (2005) identified that campuses who wish to attend to the needs of sophomore students must make a conscious effort to understand the challenges facing those students during the sophomore year, and providing the adequate support that will promote and support the random academic exploration of sophomores associated with the second year. Schaller (2005) also described the difficulties students face during the second year as they seek ways to not only find themselves, but also transition to becoming independent adults.

HBCUs leaders have a unique challenge in addressing and understanding the experiences of sophomores. Through their research, Naylor, Nichol, and Brown (2015) addressed how HBCUs leaders have faced challenges of being viewed as lower quality institutions, even when providing more opportunities of access, affordability, and

attainment to Black men seeking college degrees. Limited resources and a more entrenched focus on the first year have minimized the attention given to the sophomore year. Through their research, Gansemer–Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007) determined that institutional leaders must explore ways that student programs or services lessen or compound the challenges students face during the second year. In addition to a feeling of being lost, invisible, and disconnected from the campus, sophomores also missed the foundations that were established during the first year.

Schaller's (2005) work went on to produce the Sophomore transition theory which examined the developmental stages and associated identity challenges exhibited by sophomore students as they progress through their second year of college. Schaller's (2005) research is grounded in similar theories as Chickering's (1969) that are related to the psychosocial development of student reasoning. Schaller established four stages of sophomore life which include relating to themselves, their relationships with others, academic experiences, and the decisions made by sophomore students. Schaller's research was limited to a small private college and lacked the diversity associated with an HBCU, hence the significance of information gathered from Academia State University.

HBCUs and student academic integration. Considered to be the seminal research on HBCUs, Jacqueline Fleming's (1984) *Blacks in College* assessed if HBCUs or PWIs were better at educating and graduating African American college students. Fleming addressed the gender roles at HBCUs, specifically how African American men in particular fared on campus. In the end, Fleming (1984) concluded that although HBCUs are better at developing African American students, she did not provide details

pertaining to how that development relates to African American men at HBCUs. For over thirty years since Fleming's groundbreaking work, HBCUs have remained a proving ground for African American men and women.

Retention and persistence of African American students, in general, is essential to the success of HBCUs. According to Gasman, Nguyen, and Commodore (2015), Black male undergraduate students at HBCUs are indeed experiencing challenges when it comes to retention, success, and graduation. According to Hardy, Kaganda, and Aruguete (2019), although HBCUs tend to serve a lower income, less academically prepared student body than their PWI counterparts, HBCUs still show impressive student success even with a shortage of resources and funding.

Byrne (2006) noted that students who enrolled in HBCUs arrived to the campus with various social, academic, and financial barriers that had a significant impact on their preparedness for a college education. In addition to the sophomore year challenges, Brown and Sacco-Bene (2019) found that African American male students come into the college setting not just struggling academically, but also at a psychological disadvantage as well. Hardy and Kaganga (2019) noted that HBCUs may have lower than average graduation rates, but if given an equal playing field by way of resources and highly qualified students, African American students would be retained and would graduate from HBCUs at a higher average than PWIs.

Harper (2019) concluded that HBCUs outperform PWIs when comparing retention and graduation rates for African American students. Richards and Awokoya (2012) determined that if HBCUs and non-HBCUs did enroll demographically identical

populations of students, HBCUs would retain and graduate students at higher rates than their counterparts. According to Preston–Cunningham, Boyd, Elbert, Dolley, and Peck–Parrott (2016), colleges and universities have seen some improvement in enrollment for African American male students, yet early departure for those students continues to impact the ability to retain and graduate African American male students.

Kimbrough and Harper (2006) spoke to the challenges specifically faced by male students at HBCUs and how HBCU campuses have served as safe havens for African American students to grow and develop. Tobolowsky (2008) concluded that educators must be interested in the sophomore year because it is the period when students clarify their purpose, declare a major, and narrow down career options. Tobolowsky went on to state that institutional efforts have been so focused on the first–year retention of students that such efforts have made the second year a more difficult experience. Ishitani (2016) found that academic integration was only effective in retaining students for the first year but was not as effective in retaining students during the second–year.

According to Gasman, Nguyen, and Commodore (2015), the national average retention rate is 63% at HBCUs, almost 10 points lower than for non–HBCUs. Goungs (2016) concluded that while HBCUs make up 3% of all colleges and universities, the institutions have been scrutinized for low enrollment and graduation rates among African American male students, although these same institutions continue to produce 16% of Black students with bachelor's degrees. Richards and Awokoya (2012) demonstrated through their research that HBCUs are high–performing, undervalued assets in serving students and the nation by enrolling, retaining, and graduating students whom the country

needs to remain economically healthy. Shorette and Palmer (2015) found that given the low rate of persistence among Black male students at HBCUs, researchers noted a need for a more critical analysis of the HBCU student experience as a means of increasing retention.

Minor (2004) determined that HBCUs are the subject of considerable criticism within the higher education community, despite serving as an essential pipeline for moving educated African American students into the American workforce. When comparing similar workforce milestones between African American men and women, Seidman (2019) concluded that colleges can improve the low proportion of African American men who not only attain a bachelor's degree or higher, but can also increase labor force participation, business professionals, and managers. The ongoing movement of students from HBCUs is based on the network of fostering students in identifying who they are. Elion, Wang, Slaney, and French (2012) proposed that counselors who work with African American students on racial identity issues, found it is important to consider the racial composition and climate on college campuses with regard to retention.

The sophomore year experience is essential to overall student success, retention, and graduation from college. This is equally the case regarding African American students, specifically African American male students who attend HBCUs. Researchers have identified that sophomore year retention among African American students is an international challenge for higher education institutions. The challenge is evident by a gap in research about how HBCU retention can be improved for African American male students transitioning through the sophomore year, and into the junior year. Historically,

HBCUs have been a foundation for academic success among African American men. The perspectives of HBCU students about how they survived the sophomore slump and persisted toward graduation, is an opportunity for further research and study. Harper and Newman (2016) spoke to the increased attention devoted to Black male college student experiences crossing various types of institutions, yet there has been minimal focus on the academic outcomes and experiences of Black undergraduate male college students. Harper and Newman (2016) concluded that institutions must do more to improve college outcomes for Black college men, where currently only one in three are graduating within 6 years, the lowest college completion rate among racial groups and gender.

Economic and environmental challenges to student success. The environment, culture, and educational value associated with HBCUs are part of what makes these institutions so unique and essential to the American system of higher education. The sustained enrollment of African American male students has been a problem, as Pelzer (2016) concluded that there is a divergence growing between Black men and women as it relates to college enrollment and attainment. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) described how HBCUs, which are uniquely American institutions, are defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 as being any historically Black college or university that was established and accredited (or making progress toward accreditation) prior to 1964.

The HBCU campus environment is known for having a nurturing atmosphere that supports students in affirming their cultural identity. Cokley and Chapman (2008) contributed essential research regarding African American student achievement and underachievement. Cokley and Chapman focused on what is broadly characterized as

cultural identity. Furthermore, Cokley and Chapman provided evidence of African American academic achievement being directly related to student's racial identity and environment, specifically at HBCUs. Wood and Palmer (2015) concluded that HBCUs provide additional layers of complexity in determining Black male student success in college, and that HBCUs play an important part in fostering the success of Black male college students by way of promoting belonging, affirmation, Black identity, and personal growth.

Just as Cokley and Chapman identified racial identity and environmental factors as related to African American academic success, Wilson (2016) concluded that low income, high achieving students and their success in college is directly related to their abilities to persist in college beyond the first and second year. The profiles of the students identified in Wilson's research are similar to those at HBCUs, further indicating the significance of supporting African American students during the sophomore year. According to Schaller (2010), there is very limited literature and descriptive research that exists regarding the sophomore year.

The campus climate and environment at HBCUs have many factors that contribute to the success or failure of African American students in the sophomore years of college. HBCUs, regardless of size or financial strength, must be committed to sophomore year success. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) said that an institution's commitment to the welfare of students tends to influence their departure decisions, especially for those students who may be at a disadvantage and a higher risk of dropping out of college.

Anumba (2015) discussed the connection between high school dropout rates, bachelor degree attainment, and overall academic and social performance of African American male students in college. The article further discussed why African American male students have the worst college attrition rate among student subgroups, and how those statistics impact sophomore year retention. According to Strayhorn (2014), two out of every three Black men are leaving higher education without a degree in hand. Based on both male and female students, this was the highest attrition rate noted in the study.

In addition to Strayhorn's research, Ray, Hilton, Wood, and Hicks (2016) further affirmed that every two out of three African American men do not complete their journey toward receiving a bachelor's degree, which is why factors affecting the retention rates of Black male students at HBCUs deserve further examination. This statistic would lead one to believe that HBCUs are not the best institutions for African American men. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) explained that the literature on African American students at HBCUs is quite contradictory with respect to male students, stating there are multiple assertions advocating HBCUs are the best for these students, while others say the opposite based on poor achievement, low retention, and lagging degree completion. There is no definitive answer, just as there are few studies that explicitly examine African American male undergraduate enrollment, persistence, and degree completion at HBCUs.

Palmer, Wood, Dancy, and Strayhorn (2014) described how HBCUs have a high attrition rate, especially among Black men, partially due to the first-generation, low-income, Pell grant-eligible students that they serve. The issues plaguing the retention and success of African American men in college begin well before students arrive on campus.

Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009) highlighted research that showed the academic problems hindering the educational progress of Black male students begin early, impinging their ability to complete high school.

Developmental and emotional factors for sophomore success. HBCUs have embraced students with both challenging academic and social backgrounds and welcomed them on campus. This embrace has been proven as a factor that separates student success at HBCUs compared to other institutions. Cokley (2003) noted that researchers have found that African American students at predominantly white colleges and universities (PWCUs) have poorer psychosocial adjustment and psychological development compared to their counterparts at HBCUs.

Seminal research conducted about African American student success by McEwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990) identified nine developmental issues that must be addressed to understand African American college student development. These include developing racial and ethnic identity, cultural awareness, interdependence, affiliation needs, intellectual survival, spiritual development, and social responsibility.

There is substantial research that highlights the success of African American male students and how they are better served at HBCUs; however, the research does not speak to the transition from sophomore to junior year. Laird, Bridges, Morelon–Quainoo, Williams, and Holmes (2007) noted that there is significant research on the African American student experience at HBCUs versus PWIs and these studies reveal a more positive experience that shows substantial gains for African American students at HBCUs. Part of what makes the experience for these students so much more positive, is

the support provided by the HBCU. Arroyo and Gasman (1984) reported many male students at HBCUs indicated they received little to no institutional support, yet overall they felt their HBCU was supportive.

In his seminal research, Tinto (2006) affirmed that relationships students form with one another on college campuses, in addition to those formed with faculty and staff, create an inclusive climate that encourages student success and facilitates retention. Astin (1984) found that sense of belonging, resilience, attitude, self-confidence, and an ability to ask for help were factors that added to a student deciding on whether they wanted to leave their institution. To assist sophomore students in identifying similar emotional attitudes that impact academic success, leaders at Academia State University can use Astin's findings.

The U.S. Department of Education (2015) found that HBCUs play an integral role in educating African Americans and in closing the gaps associated with degree attainment. Increased attention regarding the HBCU experience of African American male students has highlighted a lack of information and research about this demographic. Strayhorn (2008) reviewed the growing interest in African American male students at HBCUs, specifically focusing on multiple subgroups such as student leaders, gifted and high-achieving students, first generation students, and athletes. Palmer and Gasman (2008) found that the history and mission of HBCUs lend a natural amount of social capital to the higher education experience and therefore, HBCUs are poised to support student engagement.

The social integration of African American male students at HBCUs is only a fraction of what impacts their overall success. African American male students will be unable to persist past the first and second year of college without having the proper academic foundation to support their success. According to Harper (2012), when compared to other racial groups, African–American male students are less prepared for collegiate work. This poor academic preparation directly affects a student’s ability to move beyond the sophomore year. Hunter (2010) researched the importance of the sophomore year and how institutions have done very little to address the intellectual demands during that year of transition for students, especially for minority students.

HBCUs and educating African American male students. Retention and persistence of African American students, in general, is essential to the success of HBCUs. Lee (2012) described the important connection between retention rates and graduation rates and found that graduation rates of Black students at HBCUs is relatively lower than at PWIs. HBCUs and PWIs enroll students with various characteristics, with HBCUs historically easing admissions requirements to support more traditionally disadvantaged students with varying academic backgrounds from high school. Lee (2012) further identified that student academic performance and occupational aspirations were two factors that predicted successful social integration of African American students, particularly at HBCUs. These factors are not unique to HBCUs but are common themes as they relate to student profiles.

Byrne (2006) noted that students who enrolled in HBCUs arrived to the campuses with various social, academic, and financial barriers that had a significant impact on their

preparedness for a college education. Richards and Awokoya (2012) determined that if HBCUs and non-HBCUs enroll demographically identical populations of students, HBCUs would retain and graduate students at higher rates than their counterparts.

Kimbrough and Harper (2006) spoke to the challenges specifically faced by men at HBCUs and how HBCU campuses have served as safe havens for African American students to grow and develop. According to Gasman, Nguyen, and Commodore (2015), the national average retention rate is 63% at HBCUs, almost 10 points less than for non-HBCUs, and that the six-year graduation rate is 59%, almost double what it stands at HBCUs. Shorette and Palmer (2015) found that given the low rate of persistence among Black men at HBCUs, researchers noted a need for a more critical analysis of the HBCU student experience as a means of increasing retention.

The ongoing movement of students from HBCUs is based on the network of fostering students in self identifying who they are. Elion, Wang, Slaney and French (2012) proposed that counselors who work with African American students on racial identity issues, found it is important to consider the racial composition and climate on college campuses with regard to retention.

Implications

The findings from this study may provide Academia State University with a more profound understanding about how to prepare faculty and staff to address the low sophomore year retention rates of African American male students. After completing this project study, professional development (PD) may be created that focuses on factors reported by African American male students that had an influence on their success, or

lack thereof, during the sophomore year of college. Specifically, the PD could focus on ways faculty, staff, and administrators can support sophomore year African American male student success, retention, and eventual graduation by potentially improving or creating services and programs at Academia State University. The findings from this study may support PD that impacts social change by helping other HBCU administrators to make well informed decisions about the students they serve. The improved and successful transition of African American men from the sophomore year and toward graduation will ensure HBCU faculty and staff can produce a healthy progression of academically prepared African American male students who will make a valuable and positive contribution toward the economic, social, and political solvency of their individual communities. The study and corresponding PD may contribute to positive social change by providing critical data and evidence to higher education institutions, specifically HBCUs, regarding essential information and perspectives from students about how their institutions can best support their academic journey.

Summary

HBCUs like Academia State University are high-performing, undervalued, and essential institutions when it comes to providing educational attainment opportunities to African American male students. There is value in supporting sophomores during what researchers have termed the critical second year of college. African American male students at Academia State University are poorly retained during the sophomore year, which attributes to lower than average college participation and graduation rates for this specific group of students. Identifying the causes of poor sophomore year retention

among African American male students provided essential information to Academia State University that can improve retention and improve the services offered by the institution. Institutional officials who work in higher education have recognized the significance that retention has on academic success. Hulseburg and Twait (2016) found that Student Affairs personnel have noted the significance of the sophomore year, both in terms of retention and overall academic success. The convergence of African American male student retention and the critical nature of the sophomore year experience created the foundation of my study as highlighted in the literature review. A literature review was conducted that encompassed different aspects of African American male student retention at HBCUs during the sophomore year. Areas discussed included: student experiences during the sophomore year, HBCUs and student academic integration, economic and environmental challenges to student success, developmental and emotional factors for sophomore success, and HBCUs educating African American male students.

The purpose of Section 1 was to provide an overview of the problem, the rationale for choosing the problem which included evidence from the local setting, evidence the problem exists in professional literature, the study's significance, the conceptual framework, the review of literature, and the implications of possible future use of the research by Academia State University administration. In Section 2 the qualitative case study design methodology is discussed along with participant information, and in particular the measures taken for protection of participants' rights, confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm. Procedures for data collection and data analysis are also provided. Section 3 of the study includes the rationale for the project and

a literature review that supports the provided recommendations. Section 4 provides for a reflection regarding the strengths and limitations of the study as they pertain to the problem.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of three sophomore and three junior year African American male students regarding what influenced their persistence to the junior year at the study site. Student perceptions may be helpful for administrators working to create institutional policies and programs that are designed to retain and graduate students. In Section 2 of this study I address sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis strategies.

Research Design and Approach

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study used to explore the views and perspectives pertaining to sophomore to junior year retention, persistence, and graduation of African American male students at Academia State University. Qualitative research design is used to focus on understanding how people are interpreting their experiences. Creswell (2012) stated that qualitative research is used when there are unknown variables and thus, the researcher must gain information from participants regarding the phenomenon of the study.

By using the qualitative research methodology I had multiple opportunities to select topics that were typically constrained by some of the other research methods. I selected a qualitative research study and according to Yin (2009), the type of social event studied by the researcher should be used to assist in selecting the methodology. I used a case study design that includes individual participant interviews of enrolled Academia

State University African American male students who were classified as sophomores and juniors at the time of participation.

Justification for Using a Qualitative Case Study

Babbie (2017) defined the case study method as a means to explore, describe, and explain a specific phenomenon. Schoch (2016) further described a case study as a detailed and intensive analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within a defined time frame. There were no such data or analyses available at Academia State University. In using a qualitative case study approach, I obtained clarity and understanding of the participant and institutional characteristics that formed the perspectives of the students. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that a case study method will facilitate exploration of a phenomenon while using multiple truths and perspectives to do so.

The case study design, as described by Baxter and Jack (2008) is appropriate when the researcher wants to address contextual conditions that are perceived as relevant to the specific phenomenon being studied. In this study, I addressed participant perceptions as to what academic, social, emotional, and co-curricular opportunities and/or challenges contributed to student's ability to either remain in school or depart from the institution. By using the qualitative case study design, I was afforded an opportunity to gain a better perspective of students' insight that could transform the way institutions strategize their retention efforts. Additionally, by engaging participants by way of semistructured interviews using open-ended interview questions, I was able to further understand their needs.

In determining the best qualitative design to address my research questions, I also considered phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. Phenomenological studies are focused on identifying individual meaning as a key factor of the human experience. In identifying the perspectives of individuals for this study, that approach did not seem beneficial for my research. When comparing phenomenological research to case study, the case study design was the most effective method because according to Glesne (2011) the focus of a case study is to uncover and understand participant cognitive processing.

I did not select an ethnographic study because ethnographic studies typically investigate the individual interactions of people and small groups specific to various cultural groups and look specifically at the perceptions of participants by way of their contextual experiences. Willis (2007) found that the most distinct difference between ethnography and case studies is that ethnographic studies focus on groups that share the same culture.

I did not select grounded theory because it focuses on a theory that could emerge from the data that are collected from the research setting, which was not in alignment with the goals I established for this research study. Creswell (2013) found that researchers who used grounded theory as their research design usually did so due to lack of support from existing theories related to the problem being studied. This differs from the case study design, as the researcher identifies the problem and collects data to serve as the foundation for solving that problem.

Participants

Academia State University, an institution located in the Southern United States, was the local setting for the research study. The population that was the focus of this study was the sophomore and junior African American male students enrolled at Academia State University during the 2019–2020 academic year. Typically, according to the Academia State University 2017 Fact book, there were 322 sophomore and 239 junior African American male students enrolled during the 2017 academic year. I used purposeful sampling to identify participants for this study. As defined by Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is an effective and widely used qualitative research technique utilized in identifying information-rich cases when resources are limited.

For this study, the participants were African American male students enrolled during the 2019–2020 academic year. The participants were African American male students currently enrolled for the same academic year as sophomore students at Academia State University with ages ranging from 18 to 19 years old, and junior students at Academia State University, ages ranging from 19 to 21 years old. The sample size was six participants, with three sophomores and three juniors selected using the sampling criteria listed below. Eligibility criteria established for participants were:

1. African American male students enrolled as a full-time student for the analyzed academic year of 2019–2020.
2. Students who met the stated age requirement at the time of the study.
3. Students who were enrolled at Academia State University continuously since their freshman year.

Justification for the Number of Participants

Yin (2003) stated that a sample size of at least six participants is enough for a case study to reach data saturation if the attributes of the participants are adequately aligned with the study requirements. I reached data saturation by identifying common themes through the collection of rich data that emerged from the six interviews. Creswell (2012) and Yin (2015) further stated that when conducting qualitative research, it is more effective to have fewer participants ranging from one to 30 or 40 to allow the researcher to focus on yielding the most plentiful data from each participant.

Gaining Access to Participants

Once I received approval to proceed from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Approval #05-06-20-0349434), I also sought and received permission to conduct research at Academia State University by contacting the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to complete the Academia State University IRB application. Once approval from Academia State University IRB was received, I contacted the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management at Academic State University to identify an initial pool of potential participants as defined by the criteria, and proceeded to email potential participants the purpose of the research study.

Next, I used the respondents who expressed interest via email and formed a list of possible participants with whom I followed up via email and requested the participants' permission to be part of the study. I notified the potential participants by emailing them the informed consent form. The signed informed consent form was then received via email from each participant who agreed to be a part of the study. The information in the

informed consent form clarified the participant's potential role in the study, benefits provided to them, and stipulated that participants were under no obligation to participate. Communication between myself and the participants was by way of email, phone, text, and Zoom.

Researcher–Participant Working Relationship

According to Harvey (2017), establishing a good researcher–participant working relationship is essential, as the distinctive feature of the researcher–participant relationship is that it is a working alliance. To maintain this working alliance, I was always respectful and genuine with all participants, offering them ample time to ask questions and ease any concerns. In each communication with the participants I used best practices as a guide to establish an ethical, professional, and comfortable researcher–participant working relationship. The invitation to participate included necessary background information about myself, including my Walden University doctoral student status, research interest and intent. I explained to each participant that their participation would be confidential and that they were under no obligation to participate in the interviews. I made myself available to travel in person to Academia State University if necessary, to further foster the researcher–participant working relationship.

Measures for Protection of Participants

It was of the utmost importance to protect the ethical integrity and confidentiality of the participants, in addition to protecting their rights. I also ensured that informed consent was received from the participants. I made sure to express to each participant that no hurt or harm would come to them. Once the study participants had been identified, I

conducted an initial conversation with each participant to form an honest and authentic researcher/participant relationship that focused on their comfort, and exclusively expressed my motivation for the student, their participation, and how I would be committed to their safety and well-being.

Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identity during the study, and I assigned each participant a unique identifier as a pseudonym. Bostrom (2010) stated that aside from assurances about confidentiality regarding contact information and protecting their personal data, asking for informed consent before beginning the research process will further protect the participants.

I followed ethical guidelines and procedures as established by both Walden University and Academia State University, in addition to explicitly describing the background of the study, voluntary nature, risks or benefits, payment, privacy, and researcher contact information. I securely stored all signed consent forms in my password protected Google Drive, on a password protected computer only accessible by me. I further expressed to participants that their participation would add no harm to them beyond the typical everyday stresses someone would encounter attending a college course at the study site. Participants were also informed about their freedom to end participation at any time without fear of retribution.

Data Collection

Instrumentation

I conducted semistructured interviews by following my interview protocol (Appendix B) that included preapproved and probing questions. I designed seven

questions used to interview participants regarding their perceptions of what factors determine success during the sophomore year of college at Academia State University. The interview questions were aligned specifically with each of the three research questions and based on the relevant sources within the literature review. Conducting the interviews allowed me an opportunity to collect in-depth data that directly addressed the research questions of the study. To ensure the appropriateness and alignment of the interview questions with the research questions, I asked my doctoral committee and two trusted Academia State University officials to review the questions and provide feedback. As a past employee at Academia State University, I have long standing professional relationships with colleagues at the institution, but this did not impact or impede the quality and integrity of this research study.

Keeping Track of Data

My organizational method for keeping track of data included utilizing my password protected Google Drive account, stored on my password protected computer, to serve as a secure storage mechanism for all information gathered during the data collection process. I adhered to Walden University requirements that state all data must remain secured for 5 years and only then can the information be destroyed. I will keep a blank, unused, digital version of the interview questions safely locked away in my Google Drive.

Data Collection Strategies

I conducted semistructured interviews after each participant submitted their informed consent form and signed agreement to voluntarily participate in the study. I

used my three research questions and the conceptual framework as a guide to collect and organize my data. I conducted each interview one-on-one via the video conferencing application Zoom. Watching the interviews on Zoom allowed me to not only take purposeful notes, but to also observe the visual aspects of the participant and their verbal and nonverbal responses, reactions, and perspectives. I collected the audio recordings from each Zoom interview and securely saved the recordings per the guidance that was approved by Walden University IRB.

I closely watched and reviewed the video of each participant's interview. Based on Yin's (2014) recommendation, when interviewing individual participants, I strived to gain detailed information from observing participant behavior, attitudes, and perspectives toward the topic of study. As recommended by McNamara (2009), I also used an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to ensure proper interview procedures were used. The length of each participant's interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes, with more time provided as necessary, and they were scheduled at a time and date convenient for the participant.

Data Analysis

Once each interview was complete, I immediately reviewed and transcribed the interview verbatim using Google Documents and Otter voice-to-text dictation software (<https://otter.ai/login>). Upon completing the transcriptions, I conducted a preliminary manual analysis of the data. I used a narrative analysis approach to organize, code, and validate the transcripts of each participant interview. I used coding to identify the broad

ideas, concepts, behaviors, or phrases from the interviews and assigned codes to them (Saldana, 2015).

Once I completed the interviews, I coded, reviewed, and synthesized the data into themes. I analyzed and interpreted each theme based on the conceptual framework that guided the study and answered the research questions. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, all audio recorded interviews and associated notes are safely stored in my Google Drive and secured on my personal computer which has limited and secured, password-protected access only.

Trustworthiness Strategies

Once I analyzed the data from the transcribed interviews, I used member checking to establish credibility (Connelly, 2016). I emailed the transcriptions and preliminary findings to each of the respondents so they could check on the accuracy of the transcriptions and ensure that the findings accurately reflected their intentions and their perceptions as recorded in the transcripts.

In addition to using member checking to establish credibility, I also identified a peer reviewer, external to the study, who provided an unbiased, experienced, and critical analysis of the data and research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer reviewer was a student affairs practitioner and was knowledgeable about the subject, the research location, and the population of potential participants. I maintained a close collaborative working relationship with the peer reviewer.

The findings from this study could be transferable and be useful in supporting other HBCUs in addressing gaps that may exist in retaining their sophomore year African

American male students. I established transferability by accurately recording, transcribing, reviewing, and describing the research context and the assumptions that are central to the research study. This study can also be used by leaders at other HBCUs in identifying ways to help students to take a more active and engaged role and responsibility for their college retention both inside and outside of the classroom setting.

Data dependability and confirmability are essential to the trustworthiness of the study. I created an audit trail of the research process to ensure my data findings are consistent, repeatable, and verifiable by others. I maintained a reflective journal during my research gathering and utilized very detailed interview notes to add context to any environmental changes between participants. Taking interview notes and using a reflective journal adds dependability to the data, as Mack (2005) stated that in addition to documenting events and informal conversations, the researcher should note participant's body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant.

Discrepant Cases

I reviewed all of the information to identify potential discrepant cases, and no such discrepant cases emerged while analyzing the data. Patton (2002) concluded that negative cases do not fit any of the data patterns, and that discrepant or negative cases are those that do not fit the themes and patterns that were formed by way of the data. I looked for outlier categories that could potentially have led me to other conclusions, but I found none. I found no contradictory patterns or descriptions from the data analysis to counter what themes emerged from the data.

Data Analysis Results

The local problem that prompted this study was that Academia State University, a public HBCU located in the Southern United States, has a low sophomore to junior year retention rate among African American male students enrolled at the institution. In 2015, the previous President of Academia State University expressed a need to increase and improve the retention and persistence of African American male students during the sophomore year. I used purposeful sampling to identify six African American male participants; three sophomores and three juniors, who all provided their perspectives that have thus yielded data saturation necessary to answer the three research questions, which were correlated directly to the problem. I used recorded, face-to-face semistructured interviews for each of the six participants for this study. The interviews were transcribed using Otter voice-to-text dictation software, a personal laptop, Google Docs, and Google Sheets within my Google Drive. For the purposes of coding for this study, sophomores (Sophomore 1, Sophomore 2, Sophomore 3) and juniors (Junior 1, Junior 2, Junior 3) represent the students who were interviewed for this study.

Guided by Schlossberg's transition theory (1989), I addressed how practitioners may understand the needs of students through a structured approach that predicts, measures, and modifies how students react to change. In the findings of my study I included the factors that influenced how African American male students coped with transition and change, specifically during the sophomore year, while also identifying the factors which connect directly with the foundation of Schlossberg's theory. I addressed the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of sophomore year African American male students attending Academia State University regarding the experiences they feel influenced their decision to move beyond the sophomore year?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of junior year African American male students attending Academia State University regarding the experiences that influenced their success in moving beyond the sophomore year?

RQ3. What programs, services, or additional factors may improve sophomore year success at Academia State University?

Transcription and Coding

I conducted one-on-one interviews and utilized the video conferencing application Zoom. Video recording the interviews allowed me the opportunity to take purposeful notes and to observe the visual aspects of the participant, including their verbal and nonverbal responses, reactions, and perspectives. I watched and listened to each of the recordings a minimum of six times, and I read each of the interview transcripts multiple times for nearly 5 weeks. To transcribe the interviews, I used Otter voice-to-text dictation software, a personal laptop, Google Docs, and Google Sheets within my Google Drive. I organized the data collected from the interviews by reviewing and highlighting the common ideas, concepts, and key vocabulary from the interview transcripts. I then developed a list of codes and organized the codes to develop themes. When finished, I had seven themes that I analyzed and interpreted within the conceptual framework guiding this study to answer the research questions.

Themes

I utilized an initial coding method and as Saldana (2012) stated, proceeded to cut and sort quotes and expressions that formed common codes. In coding my data and creating the themes I used the four stages of coding as established by Bryman (2015) which are (1) read, (2) re-read and code, (3) review and analyze, and (4) relate to the conceptual framework. During what became a seven-week process of reviewing rich, descriptive data, I identified commonalities which led to various codes that developed into themes. I proceeded to reviewing the codes concurrently with the transcripts which allowed me to check whether the participants explicitly stated the information I coded.

I used both open and axial coding and developed 37 codes. I merged 12 codes because of similar meaning, and as the coding process progressed, the codes I used were more specific to the emerging themes in order to answer the three research questions. The coding process eventually evolved into seven themes and one subtheme that emerged from the codes: (a) campus involvement, (b) faculty and staff connections, (c) family, friends, and relationships, (d) self-motivation and determination and subtheme (d1) spirituality and faith, (e) community service and involvement, (f) freshman year experience, and (g) institutional support and services. Table 1 data include the overarching themes and one subtheme that emerged during the coding process and provided alignment to one or more of the research questions.

Table 1

List of Themes/Subthemes

Themes	Subtheme	RQ#
Theme 1: Campus involvement		1, 2
Theme 2: Faculty and staff connections		1, 2
Theme 3: Family, friends, and relationships		1, 2
Theme 4: Self-determination and motivation	Subtheme 1: Spirituality and faith	1, 2
Theme 5: Community service and involvement		3
Theme 6: Freshman year experience		3
Theme 7: Institutional support and services		3

I used direct quotes from the interviews to provide evidence that supports the findings of the study. Themes 1, 2, 3, 4, and sub-theme 1 show alignment to research questions RQ1 and RQ2. Themes 4, 5, and 7 show alignment to RQ 3. The findings I present align with the seven themes and how they correspond to the three research questions. I outline how the findings were consistent with current literature, and the relationship of the findings to Schlossburg's transition theory. I employed the processes of member checking and peer review to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. The validity strategies I used were utilized to ensure trustworthiness and reliability.

Theme 1: Campus involvement. When the sophomore participants were asked what has been the predominant motivating factor keeping them enrolled at the Academia State University during the sophomore year, campus involvement was a consistent input from each of the participants. Each participant, particularly the sophomores, credited their

ability to be involved and engaged with campus clubs and organizations as a means of ensuring they stayed connected to the campus community.

Sophomore 1 spoke passionately about how his involvement on campus “made me a better student, a more well–rounded student.” In watching the interview of each participant, there was a noticeable level of excitement from them when speaking about their campus involvement. Sophomore 1 and Sophomore 2 both spoke at length about the importance of not just being involved on campus but also how the involvement helped them to balance their increasing responsibilities and “time management” which helped them “be successful and prioritize.”

Sophomore 2 described two specific campus organizations and groups that contributed to his success during the sophomore year, saying that “As a first-generation student, the campus involvement helped me as I was involved with NAACP and served as a RA (resident assistant) and this helped me with my time management as well as my retention.” Sophomore 2 additionally spoke about his involvement being important to his overall success as a sophomore, saying “Me just being involved with the school and on campus really helped me out a lot.” Sophomore 1 had an equally compelling response to how important campus involvement was in his sophomore year retention by saying “So yes, for me personally, being involved on campus did help me and probably if I would have never joined those organizations, I probably would have not been as successful as I am now.”

Sophomore 3 spoke about a specific organization called UNITE that brought him and fellow African American male students together to be involved in service and

community on campus and stated “One organization that I know, like, helped me, you know, get where I am today is the organization called UNITE which really helped me be involved during that sophomore year.” Sophomore 3 also spoke to the importance and impact of having campus clubs and organizations as an option to enhance his involvement on campus. He stated “I think the school helps contribute to sophomore success by providing me with opportunities by putting the clubs and organizations there so that I have to choose to get involved in them to make myself a better person; a better student.”

The sophomore participants each identified the importance of campus involvement in supporting their ability to successfully navigate the sophomore year. As Sophomore 1 shared that campus involvement was a contributing factor to his “...growth during the sophomore year”, while Sophomore 2 stated that his involvement in “Residence life and having things to do in the dorms helped take my mind off of things like COVID.” Students at Academia State University did not leave the campus until after the COVID–19 Pandemic had already started. Sophomore 3 stated the “Options to be involved that were provided by the school also allowed me to improve my soft skills which also helped me during the sophomore year.” There were consistent responses from each of the participants that affirmed the importance of student involvement toward their success. Gibson and Mitchell (2017) concluded that for decades’ scholars have documented that college student involvement matters.

Theme 2: Faculty and staff connections. Just as important as the faculty connections and support, Sophomores discussed an additional layer of support that exists

from institutional staff members and administrators. Sophomore 1 spoke about the connections he made with staff in the university housing department and the Office of Student Affairs as a predominant factor that kept him enrolled during the sophomore year:

I began to talk to someone in the Housing office just having a normal conversation, and boom, they were just like would you like to work here, and we can help you stay connected. And then I guess they just saw how I carried myself in a nice way. And then so yeah, that was just a nice connection I made. And then I connected with someone in student affairs that began to help me and check up on me. I began to help them with some of their flyers and stuff like that, so it became mutual. So it was just connections like that really for me that helped me get through.

Sophomore 1 went on to say that “Communication and support from officials on campus” was important to their sophomore year success. A passionate response regarding staff connections on campus was provided by Sophomore 2 who stated quite clearly that “The school needs to focus on retention and connect with students so they don’t leave here.” Each of the sophomore participants spoke about the importance of their connections with officials on campus, and did so along the lines of resources and assistance versus just offices for university business. For example, Sophomore 3 indicated:

As far as offices that were a resource during my sophomore year that were a resource with me personally, by me going in there talking to the staff, building

relationships, and them just being really genuine, I would say Career Services staff definitely helped.

When asked for more information about why specifically Career Services staff helped him so much, he also said that "...helping me find my career path was important at that point in my life so yes, it was good to make the connection."

When reflecting on how he progressed from the sophomore year successfully, Junior 3 spoke in-depth about the positive impact of their connections with a faculty member who supported their sophomore year success:

I met a professor for public speaking and he kept me on my toes for sure. It took me four weeks to get enrolled. I had to get four signatures for teachers who would accept me into the classes. I got them but Dr. Stark (a pseudonym) was the last one I needed. The condition of his signature was that I don't fail and that I succeed not only in his class, but in the rest of my course. We formed a good connection and he gave me that support I really need.

Faculty and staff connections also supported Junior 2 during his sophomore year, but they expanded on the service aspect that was provided by the faculty and staff:

I struggled with math; math doesn't like me and I don't like math! I struggled with a remedial math class and the math faculty that I connected with referred me to the math lab to get help, and this was my sophomore year. The math lab support I received from the staff helped my grades improve, so going to that math lab that year and the people were able to help me out.

Bonding with faculty and garnering that level of support became a "...saving grace" for him as he spoke about "...having had a couple of professors who I had meaningful relationships with and that helped me." The support students received from faculty and staff also extended to administrators as Junior 3 said that another predominant factor that kept him enrolled at the institution during his sophomore year was:

The administration and not just the administrators; but those top officials in important offices who don't let you give up. Just the people being authentic people and not giving up on you and not allowing you to give up on yourself, it really made a difference for me.

All of the participants for this study identified faculty and staff connections as an essential contributor toward their sophomore year retention at Academia State University. Sinanan (2016) found that in the area of mentoring in higher education that there are links between mentoring, formal or informal, and academic success. Faculty and staff connections and support can have lasting impact on students well beyond the sophomore year.

Theme 3: Family, friends, and relationships. Each of the participants in the study spoke at great length about the importance of family, friends, and relationships in being key motivating factors that influenced their decision to persist during their sophomore year at Academia State University. Williams and Bryant (2013) found that African American students said their academic success benefited from being able to rely on extended family members for academic support. When asked about what attributed to his success during the sophomore year, Sophomore 1 said:

What really helped me get through my sophomore year was friends, and my family, especially my mom and everybody back home that were pretty far away, but you know family is important and I felt like I needed to make it for them.

When Sophomore 2 was asked about predominant motivating factors that kept him enrolled at the institution during his sophomore year, he said “I'm trying to do it for my family, because I'm a first-generation student and they need to see me win.” Engle and Tinto (2008) defined a first-generation college student as one whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree. When speaking about his first-generation status, Sophomore 2 was visibly excited about what it meant to both his family and friends. He also spoke to another essential factor of his sophomore success and stated “What also really helped me get through my sophomore year; friends.” Relationships extended beyond family bonds and into those formed in university clubs and organizations.

In expressing his affiliation with a campus organization called FOCUS (a pseudonym), Sophomore 3 spoke about how integral his “fellow brothers” were in supporting his success. When asked what lived experiences provided him with the most support and assistance in succeeding during your sophomore year, he said:

I have some brothers in FOCUS and you know what, through that relationship, they would stay on me! I contributed a lot of time to my brothers you know, they were like mentors, and even the older guys made sure that all the younger brothers were successful and would not give up.

The Junior participants in this study provided more responses and insight in regard to the importance of family, friends, and relationships as major contributing factors that influenced their sophomore year success. Asked about what he attributed to his success during the sophomore year, Junior 3 stated:

It was those connections that I made you know, through my campus organizations that I joined, and also just my friends in general. Friends and my connections made the campus a place that I could call home and made me feel like this is a place where I needed to stay.

Junior 2 spoke about “The importance of my friends, especially my girlfriend and how those relationships were motivators for me to succeed” and he went on to speak more in-depth about the support he received from his girlfriend, saying that “My girlfriend was really on me because we were in the same class; we were in school at the same time as well, and she kept me in line.” When asked about the connections made from campus organizations and clubs and the impact of those relationships, Junior 1 said:

Making connections and getting that motivation of fellow students; it was those connections that I made you know, through my campus organizations and making friends within those organizations that I joined, and also just in general, that confirmed for me that this was a place that I could call home and, you know, this is a place where I needed to stay.

Each of the participants specifically mentioned the “sense of belonging” that came from their relationships with family and friends and that by the second part of their sophomore year, it was evident that relationship building made a difference for them.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) defined a sense of belonging as an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to the college community that reflects upon the individual's mood, emotions, and attitude.

Theme 4: Self-motivation and determination. Junior participants expressed a great deal of appreciation for Academia State University helping them to develop increased self-determination during their sophomore year. When asked about challenges he faced during his sophomore year, Junior 1 said “I guess I'll say, just like the environment on campus is important, I typically would sit around not having stuff to do on campus especially on the weekends and that was a challenge.” He went on to say that “I started to remind myself about why I was in college, and thought about the friends I made and it helped me get self-motivated and determined to finish.” Speaking about the lived experiences that motivated him to succeed sophomore year, Junior 2 said:

I was thinking about dropping out at one point and just going home trying to find a job; but then I saw my grades improving and test scores improving and I was like, answering every question in class, and it was getting to that point that I was like yeah I'm ready for next semester and ready to keep doing this college thing.

He went on to say that he was determined to keep going and to finish.

When speaking about his success in moving beyond the sophomore year, Junior 3 acknowledged that “I had to focus on my academics more, not quite like my freshman year. I was like Okay, let me get motivated and that kind of set me in motion for my junior year. He went on to say that “Honestly, sophomore year I became more determined and for me that made me more focused as a student”

Subtheme 1: Faith and spirituality. When I asked the participants about their lived experiences and motivating success factors during their sophomore year, it was clear their faith also helped shape their retention during the sophomore year. Sophomore 1 spoke about how his determination and motivation was also inclusive of his Christian faith. He said:

I would say my drive, my focus, and my dedication to my future are big motivators because I want to be a criminal defense attorney; So after undergrad, I want to go to law school, get a degree there and then become an attorney. So I just kept reminding myself all sophomore year and then I began to read a spiritual book and my bible you know, because I'm a Christian. So I know I have to add that type of relationship with God also. My motivation was there but sophomore year kind of like established even more for me.

Faith and spirituality became a topic of importance for Sophomore 3, who also spoke about his faith and spirituality:

When we all came home from school during this pandemic, I started growing a little bit more as a student because I was not just determined but I also became more spiritual ever since this pandemic happened; I became a little bit more focused, aware, strong.

Both young men highlighted the importance of their spirituality and religion as being a centerpiece to their sophomore year success. Krok (2015) viewed one of the functions of religion is to provide individuals with a sense of meaning and of purpose, through which they can form a coherent view of their lives and the world. When

Sophomore 2 was asked about lived experiences that supported his success during the sophomore year, he stated that “Once you find yourself and get motivated, I can say that right there can help you; once you find your level of self–discipline within yourself, you can make it.” According to Han, Farruggia, and Moss (2017), with minority students there is a significant relationship between motivation and retention whereas aspiration–based motivation factors like commitment to college, were more associated with retention outcomes during the second–year.

Theme 5: Community service and involvement. The Junior participants in this study spoke vividly about the experiences, services, and their perceptions about being involved in the community and on campus during their sophomore year. When asked about his level of service and involvement and if it improved his sophomore year retention, Junior 1 said “I felt like I had more things to do and more time during my sophomore year to be involved on campus” yet he went on to say that “it was important to be involved on campus so I could build my resume.”

When speaking more in depth about key factors that helped him during his sophomore year and how it contributed to his success, he also said “On top of me being on presidential scholarship to where everything is already paid for, I think the biggest factor that kept me there was campus involvement”. In speaking about holding leadership positions being another layer to his involvement, he also said “I became chapter president of the campus engineering club and a leader within the Collegiate 100.”

In describing his experiences with campus involvement from the vantage point of working with Housing & Residential Life on campus as an RA, and not by way of a

specific club or organization, Junior 2 stated “Being involved on campus, especially as an RA to do and keep me balanced and focused; yes, that involvement helped me my sophomore year.” As a member of a service organization, Junior 3 was also involved on campus:

I am a member of a community service fraternity, and when it comes to being involved on campus you've got to really weigh you know, all options and prioritize your options, but I definitely think it is more of a pro than a con to get involved during that sophomore year.

Participants described the importance of campus involvement and community service as factors that not only contributed to their sophomore year success, but should also be considered by the institution as opportunities to improve the retention of African American male students at Academia State University. Sophomore 1 expressed that he willingly looked for opportunities to not just be involved on campus, but how he could give back and be involved in the community outside of campus. He went on to say that “I did a little community service which was voluntary, and then everything that I did was just campus wide but it would have been good for the school to provide required community service so all students could benefit.”

Sophomore 1 also stated that “I did some off-campus service events which I think helped me, but that wasn't sponsored by Academia State you know. I would have liked to participate in stuff like that, but I didn't get the chance until late in my sophomore year.” Campus involvement and community service provide students with purposeful opportunities to participate and engage in learning activities on campus. Owolabi (2018)

found that engaging students in purposeful learning activities will improve retention and lead to higher graduation rates.

In speaking about the importance of community service and campus involvement Sophomore 2 said “Community service really helped me my sophomore year, but it was an off-campus organization I found by way of an old friend because I did not know of any service opportunities offered by the school.” Junior 3 explained that:

I am a member of a community service fraternity. It’s here on campus and we primarily do community service off campus as well but this was not something I was forced to join, but it has been beneficial to me personally.

Involvement and experiences outside of the classroom support student success in multiple ways. Kennedy and Wilson-Jones (2019) concluded that students who were engaged outside of class were more likely to be admitted to graduate school, have internships, and be employed.

The importance of campus involvement was affirmed by Kuh and Pike (2005) who found that increased campus involvement can also lead to improved persistence, progression, and graduation rates. Each of the young men gave great clarity and detail about their involvement being an essential motivating factor that supported their sophomore year success. Community service and involvement served as a contributing factor for persistence beyond the sophomore year, as was evident from responses from Junior participants in this study.

Theme 6: Freshman year experience. It was fascinating listening to the participants discuss what they felt Academia State University could do to improve

sophomore year retention of African American male students, especially hearing them reflect on how they would have been more prepared if the freshman year experiences would have been more robust and supportive. Sophomore 1 spoke about the relationships he intentionally made during his freshman year "...could have been more helpful if they were required to make relationships during that year to prepare you for sophomore year." He went on to say "The freshman year helped me build character and was my molding stage for growth in my sophomore year." Junior 3 expressed that:

Freshman year is what the school should be paying attention to, actually their freshman and senior year! By the time you're a sophomore or a junior you know the right people on campus, but as a freshman you don't know how to navigate the offices and speak the language so you kind of get lost so you can get left on the back burner.

Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) concluded that programs which support first-year students starting at orientation and continuing into the first semester in a seminar or "college 101" course are essential factors in supporting persistence from the first to second year as well as academic performance. Junior 1 affirmed the statements made by other participants when he said "To get Black males specifically to come back their sophomore year, the institution has to do a really good job of making their freshman year worthwhile."

Theme 7: Institutional support and services. Reflecting on the need to have more services and programs for first-year students, Junior 1 said "So I think just like freshman year gets all of the special attention, I think the school should, at the beginning

of the year, hold a forum, hold an event or seminar or whatever, just for sophomores and give them that adoration and a commitment to help students succeed.” In expressing his views about the need for role models and mentors, Sophomore 1 said “The school should check on us more and ask like do you need anything, you know, just maybe help students more by giving us male role models and mentors.”

Research by Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013) concluded that mentoring from peer students or from faculty members is an effective tool in providing the support necessary to overcome the barriers that prevent many African–American men from successfully completing college. In speaking about the importance of services and programs that can support success for fellow students, Sophomore 3 said:

The university has to promote support services and programs to students so they know those things are available. If it helped me, it can help others but they have to know what is available. The university has to present opportunities to students so they can be successful. Academia State University has been great to me and I am thankful for the opportunity.

As Junior 1 indicated, career services, campus activities, and internships were also expressed as functions the institution could enhance as ways to improve sophomore retention:

I believe that I had more responsibilities sophomore year but I still feel like on campus activities were important for students. Career services is another example of a good service for students on campus especially during that sophomore year when you start looking for internships.

Academic support programs were another topic expressed by the participants as a means of improving sophomore year retention as Junior 3 said “The Academic Center for Educational Success was definitely one of the commodities of Academia State that took the time to help make sure I was on track. This program specifically helped me get through my sophomore year, even when they were short staffed.” Finally, Sophomore 2 spoke of Housing and Residence Life as another key service or program that was supportive in improving sophomore year retention:

Living on campus in the dorm really helped me and some kids don’t get that because it’s not enough housing on campus. They need to build like more dorms and housing to improve the school a bit more actually. Providing better Wi Fi connections for all students and being focused on more staff and maybe mentors to help students and retention.

Evidence of Quality

Connelly (2016) stated that the credibility of the study, or the confidence in the truth of the study and therefore the findings, is the most important criterion, and this trustworthiness was achieved by member checking. Trustworthiness in qualitative research, as researched by Cohen and Crabtree (2006) is referred to as the extent of data confidence and the quality assurance methods of a study.

I emailed the transcriptions and preliminary findings to each of the participants so they could review the accuracy of the transcriptions and ensure that the findings accurately reflected their intentions and perceptions as recorded in the transcripts. In addition to using member checking to establish credibility, I also used a peer reviewer

who was a fellow Student Affairs practitioner, external to the study, who was able to provide an unbiased, experienced, and critical analysis of the data and research process.

The peer reviewer was someone in the Student Affairs field who provided first hand practitioner and research knowledge of the subject, the research location, and the population of all participants. I also maintained a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. I utilized detailed field notes to add context to any environmental changes observed between the participants. Taking field notes and using a reflective journal added an additional level of dependability to the data, as Mack (2005) concluded that in addition to documenting events and informal conversations, the researcher should note participant's body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant.

Summary

The problem at the local study site is Academia State University, a public HBCU located in the Southern United States, has a low sophomore to junior year retention rate among African American male students enrolled at the institution. I used a qualitative case study approach to collect data from six African American male students, by using semistructured interviews that captured student perceptions, which are important in creating institutional policies and programs that are designed to retain and graduate students.

Schlossberg's transition theory (1989) is the conceptual framework I used for this study. Schlossberg addressed how practitioners must understand the needs of students

through a structured approach that predicts, measures, and modifies perceptions of how students react to change. The research questions are related directly to Schlossberg's transition theory and addressed factors that influenced how African American male students coped with transition and change, specifically during the sophomore year.

The findings of this study were based on seven themes that include perceptions of campus involvement, institutional faculty and staff connections, influence of friends, family, and relationships, and self-motivation and determination are the predominant experiences that contributed to the success of African American male students during the sophomore year at Academia State University. By providing students with campus involvement and community service opportunities, enhancing freshman year experience programs, and improving institutional support and services, leaders at Academia State University may increase the sophomore year retention of African American male students at the institution.

Description of the Project

Based on the findings of my study, leaders at Academia State University could increase the sophomore year retention of African American male students by providing campus involvement and community service opportunities, enhancing freshman year experience programs, and improving institutional support and services. Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2010) discussed the status of Black male students in higher education and how there is an impetus for researchers to investigate the collegiate experiences of Black male students and focus on factors facilitating their retention and persistence.

Students are the main benefactor of the college experience, and institutions should embrace student feedback and insight when adapting programs, policies, and services to grow positive outcomes for students. By implementing the policy recommendations paper, Academia State University leaders can address areas of opportunities recommended by students to be discussed along with recommendations for addressing low sophomore year retention. The policy recommendation paper will incorporate current institutional best practices for student success, along with policy and programmatic recommendations based on corresponding literature, the white paper description, project goals, and implications.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Section 3 includes a description and goals of the designed project as well as the rationale of the project, a literature review, and a description of the project implementation. I also provide an explanation of how the project will be evaluated, and the implications for possible social change. Appendix A includes the policy recommendations project and will provide readers with a greater comprehension of the project genre and goals. I will propose a policy recommendations paper to Academia State University leadership and if implemented, the recommendations could help leadership reverse the low retention of African American male students during the sophomore year.

My policy recommendations paper is designed by me to focus on helping students make it through the first two years of college. Based on the results gathered from study participants, I developed a comprehensive policy recommendations paper that identified the core concepts and emergent themes that addressed the local problem. The local problem as described and analyzed in Section 1 is centered around how Academia State University has low sophomore year retention of African American male students. The goal of my project is leaders at Academia State University will receive and implement the comprehensive policy recommendations.

The recommendations can be used by the Academia State leadership team to address the problem of low sophomore year retention among African American male students. The recommendations I am proposing will include five student-centered

programmatic and operational best practices that can also be implemented at other HBCUs experiencing similar difficulties improving sophomore year retention of African American male students. The President and leadership team of Academia State are the governing officials tasked with correcting any impediments to student success at the institution, and I will present the policy recommendations paper to them.

In the following sections, I present a description of the rationale and goals for the chosen genre of the project. In the literature review I present recent and seminal research sources that align best practices and evidence-based information to address the study problems while providing concise recommendations to resolve them. In the policy recommendations paper, I address potential barriers to project implementation such as potential funding and staffing challenges, propose the implementation of a time table, and explain the roles and responsibilities of myself and others involved.

Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the perceptions of African American sophomore male students regarding increasing the sophomore year retention at Academia State University. A policy recommendation paper fits the outcomes of case study research and provides insight needed for resolving sophomore year African American male retention, the identified gap in practice at Academia State University. The findings of this study serve as the core foundation of the policy recommendations and they include: increasing campus involvement, community service, and service learning opportunities, enhancing freshman year experience programs, instituting learning communities, engaging students in meaningful relationships,

enhancing faculty and staff connections, and improving institutional support and services. The findings reflect essential aspects of how Academia State University can address the problem of low sophomore year retention among African American male students.

The policy recommendation paper is a streamlined executive document that can be easily presented to the leadership group in a timely and efficient manner. Bureau (2017) concluded that a professional development training, specifically in higher education, requires individuals to establish a plan for addressing areas needing improvement. In comparing a professional development project to the policy recommendations paper, the study findings are a foundation of a plan that I included in the policy recommendation paper to address the areas of improving sophomore year retention among African American male students. Professional development training may be more impactful if presented to department heads to implement changes after leadership has been presented with the recommendations on what changes are necessary. The ability to present my findings to the leadership group seems more appropriate for the policy recommendation paper in comparison to a professional development training. The study and corresponding policy recommendation paper may contribute to positive social change by providing critical data and evidence to higher education institutions, specifically HBCUs, regarding essential information and perspectives from Academia State University students about how their institution can best support their academic journey.

Review of the Literature

In this literature review I focused on specific and relevant peer reviewed articles from the current 5–year range of 2015 to 2020. The databases that I used to research peer reviewed published articles included ERIC Education Source, SAGE Publications, and Google Scholar. The search terms I used included *student involvement, campus involvement, community service, service learning, faculty connections, staff connections, campus partners, family influence, friends and peer relationships, first year experience, freshman year experience, freshman seminar, institutional support, campus services, self motivation, self–determination, faith, spirituality, and HBCU experience.*

Supported by the current literature, there were seven themes that emerged from the data analysis results: campus involvement, faculty and staff connections, family, friends, and relationships, self–motivation and determination and subtheme spirituality and faith, community service and involvement, freshman year experience, and institutional support and services. The policy recommendation paper will provide Academia State University leadership with research–based recommendations regarding how the institution can improve the sophomore year retention of African American male students.

Types and Purposes of Policy Recommendations Paper

White papers are also known as recommendation papers or position papers, and as Gotschall (2016) proposed, researchers could potentially prescribe answers for an issue by using position papers. The policy recommendations include suggestions provided by students regarding low sophomore year retention. Herman (2013) explained that white

papers can be used as a guide for decision makers. Those guides will contain recommendations for improvements as well as the results of analytical research. The recommendation paper is intended to expand the institution's ability to improve retention outcomes for sophomore year African American male students.

Majchrzak and Markus (2014) stated that recommendations must be created and designed from the findings with insight and deep connection to the policy problem, while balancing the need to solve the policy problem with practical considerations. Based on research from Majchrzak and Markus (2014), the policy recommendation paper is the best way to explain the recommendations to institutional stakeholders and decision makers. In the policy recommendation paper, I will be able to better explain institutional best practices for sophomore year student success, along with policy and programmatic recommendations based on the literature and my findings.

Increasing the Emphasis on Student Involvement

Ribera, Miller, and Dumford (2017) identified that students who were not involved in campus life in the fall semester tended to stay uninvolved in the spring semester. The lack of involvement during the fall semester of sophomore year gave students the perception that the institution was less supportive, that they were less likely to become integrated in the campus, and they were less likely to persist. The supportive environment created by being involved on campus also extended to the importance of student organizations during the sophomore year. Harper and Harris (2012) recognized that student organizations are common on college campuses and provide affirming support to Black men as they navigate the process of attaining a college degree.

My findings directly connected positive sophomore year outcomes in the classroom with those outside of the classroom. Astin (1999) explained that student involvement in extracurricular and cocurricular activities has a positive correlation with retention and academic success. Littleton (2002) addressed how campus activities and student involvement in organizations were direct factors that influenced Black student persistence.

Smith (2018) concluded that student involvement is one of the catalysts to educational success for students at HBCUs. Listening to the participants in my research study gave me the impression that HBCUs like Academia State University impress upon their students how essential it is for them to be involved and engaged on campus, and to ensure they put forth time and effort toward such experiences. A well-known definition of student engagement as described by Chickering and Reisser (1993) is the amount of time and level of participation students commit to purposeful activities influencing their learning and overall educational experiences. This level of time and participation for sophomore students is not limited to just simply being involved in activities and organizations on campus, but also extends to taking on leadership roles in campus organizations.

Brooms, Goodman, and Clark (2015) identified student engagement and leadership as contributors to not just how Black students experience, integrate, and persist in college, but also how their involvement in campus clubs and organizations contribute to their transition to, adjustment, and social integration in college. Clark and Brooms (2018) concluded that Black male students, and their involvement in male-centered

programming in particular, is linked to student leadership, persistence, and success, all of which were consistent with the findings from my research.

The study participants in my research study spoke about campus involvement in programs offered on campus as an avenue toward them becoming a more well-rounded student during the sophomore year. Clark and Brooms (2018) identified Black male students' engagement in student-centered programs as being valuable beyond their integration to the campus and how these programs connect with, build on, and extend their own individual and collective assets, skills, and cultural backgrounds.

Service Learning and Community Service Opportunities

Mungo (2017) suggested making service-learning a requirement in general education courses since service-learning could help students build the skills for college success along the way. Institutions, especially HBCUs like Academia State University, could see improved and increased outcomes for African American male students if they put in place early, structured, and strategically focused service learning programs that may also enhance overall student engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. Song, Marutama, and Lopez (2018) concluded that service learning is one of the intentional interventions that higher education institutions are adopting to increase students' institutional and academic engagement.

Study participants discussed the importance of service learning, and there is a connection between how community service programs can be an extension of the service learning component of the institution. According to Holzman, Horst, and Ghant (2017) successful service learning programs typically have community service embedded within

a course that includes focused reflections about the service experience. Hart Research Associates (2015) determined that in addition to the acquisition of knowledge related to their academic discipline, students' and their ability to develop soft skills such as written and oral communication, teamwork, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking, are particularly important in today's occupational climate. Developing soft skills can be beneficial to African American male students during their sophomore year and beyond.

According to Prince and Ford (2016), HBCUs are more likely than nonminority serving institutions to have a service-learning office on campus and partnerships with local communities to participate in service. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) refers to service-learning as one of several high-impact practices believed to result in favorable learning, retention, and engagement for students of many backgrounds (Kuh, 2008). Service-learning offers Black male students an ideal learning experience, and according to Hawkins-Jones and Reeves (2020), skills to help cope with interpersonal conflicts as Black male students are also challenged by stigma and stereotype threats in society and school. Hawkins-Jones and Reeves also described ways to get around said stigmas such as culturally relevant pedagogy and positive learning experiences with adults, each of which supports buy-in to the adult's education.

According to Mungo (2017), service learning has a significant effect on student GPA, as students with service-learning experiences performed better in their courses than their counterparts without service-learning experiences. Service-learning has been found to promote persistence toward graduation in undergraduate students (Mungo, 2017).

When students are integrated into the campus community, they are more likely to be retained as a result of being involved in educationally effective activities (Mungo, 2017). While exploring the role of service–learning in promoting undergraduate persistence, Reed, Rosenberg, Staham, and Rosing (2015) found that it benefitted part–time and full–time students’ persistence evenly.

Building Upon Family, Friends, and Supportive Relationships

Participants in my study also attributed their sophomore success to the supportive relationships of family and friends. The participants stated that Academia State University did not have a coordinated program, services, or activities that served as a bridge to connect these relationships together while supporting their sophomore year success. One of my policy recommendations—strengthening family, friends, and peer relationships—would allow the institution the opportunity to build upon existing relationships of family and friends and empower campus offices and departments to sponsor more programs that would strengthen these supportive relationships.

Researchers continue to note the significance of family on college aspirations for African American students and specifically for men whose college aspirations began because of the encouragement and support they received from their family (Brooms, 2016). Goings (2016) conducted a study in which the male participants acknowledged their family as an impetus for their success and findings echoed previous research as Goings’ participants discussed how they benefited from peer support as well. Peer mentors and family resource centers are great support services that improve student outcomes during the sophomore year and beyond.

According to Ricard and Pelletier (2016), parental support and involvement provide a significant boost to the morale and persistence of a student. Family support is important to students of color, specifically African American students. For African American students, the knowledge, information, inspiration and resources gained from their families (nuclear, extended, and fictive kin) serve as rationale, motivation, and support for securing postsecondary educational attainment (Carry, 2016). The participants in my study also placed high emphasis on their friends and peer groups, many of whom said the connections made them better students because someone else was rooting for them and their academic success. According to Goings and Shi (2018), support from friends was especially important for young men who used their peer groups not only to support their academic trajectory, but to help them socially and to build relationships with other students they would meet in college.

Enhancing Faculty and Staff Connections

Participants from my study spoke frequently about the importance of faculty and staff connections and how such relationships provided support and guidance during the sophomore year. The connections from faculty and staff serve as a basis for a policy recommendation that promotes intentional and increased connections and relationships between sophomore year African American male students, faculty, and staff members. According to Smith (2018), academic involvement and student–faculty interaction are other forms of student involvement, and Strayhorn (2017) identified that faculty and staff play a major role in the academic and personal achievement of African American male students.

There is literature that affirms the nature of the faculty relationships, yet Luedke (2017) concluded there is little known about student relationships with campus staff and administrators, and that students may actually spend more time with these campus stakeholders than they do with faculty. My findings add some insight to Luedke's work, as study participants focused on faculty, staff, and student connections as supporting their overall sophomore year retention at Academia State University.

According to Kuh (2008), the role of staff or administrators suggested the potential benefits of staff and administrator relationships for students, such as having someone to listen to student concerns, provide support during difficult junctures in college, enhance cultural affinity, provide encouragement, and increase commitment to the institution. The involvement of professionals on campus who take an interest in supporting their students' success makes a positive difference. The involvement of faculty and staff members with their African American students in the classroom and outside the class creates a positive relationship for African American male students in college (Hall, 2017).

When reviewing the findings, I also identified the correlation between students and their relationships with faculty and staff and how these relationships enhanced the social capital of sophomore male students at Academia State University. Increased social connectedness adds to a more holistic student experience as Luedke (2017) affirmed that the holistic and authentic social capital acquired through relationships with staff and administrators also opened the door to the accumulation of cultural capital valued in higher education, such as appreciating campus norms, deciphering academically coded

jargon, and accessing resources. There is alignment between my findings and the research that shows the study participants gained rich social capital in their relationships with staff and administrators who supported them holistically and authentically.

There is a relationship between both the importance of faculty and staff connections on sophomore student retention and the eventual persistence of students at the institution. According to Tinto (2016), the persistence of students is affected by their level of on-campus interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Each of my study participants provided responses to highlight their individual interactions with peers, faculty, and staff and how those interactions influenced a student's decision to remain enrolled at the institution. Having intentional and structured faculty and staff connections for sophomore year male students can improve not just their overall institutional satisfaction but could also provide more positive academic outcomes for students.

According to Smith (2018), students' satisfaction with institutional experiences can also be linked to student-faculty interaction, and those student-faculty interactions are imperative to student development in that these relationships lead to greater outcomes in academic skills. Tinto (2017) concluded that opportunities to establish meaningful faculty relationships are crucial in assisting students in matriculating into the educational systems of the university. Leaders at Academia State University have an essential role to play in reviewing opportunities to assist their students in successfully navigating the campus experience. That review by campus leaders should begin by validating the key policy recommendations such as strengthening peer, faculty, and staff relationships. College administrators have to engage with students and understand how their college

student experiences validate the proper strategies such as having meaningful faculty and staff relationships that are needed to assist with retention and academic achievement (Tinto, 2017).

First Year Experience, Freshman Year, and Learning Communities

Academia State University offers various services and resources to African American students at the university such as tutoring and academic advising, but participants in my study discussed the importance of having these services more readily available and accessible during the freshman year. Student participants in my study reflected about what measures the university could put in place to better support the sophomore year retention of African American male students. The participants resoundingly identified improving the sophomore year experience and supporting sophomore year students should begin with an enhanced freshman year, also known as the first-year experience (FYE).

According to Ribera, Miller, and Dumford (2017), the first-year college experience is critical to student success. It sets the tone for the rest of a student's college career. Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, and Oestreicher (2017) explored the implementation of a First-Year Experience program aimed toward the first-semester of at-risk college students that helped increase retention from semester to semester. Academia State University offers a first semester experience course for new students, but the course does not extend into the second semester. According to Schmidt and Graziano (2016), first year seminars (FYSs) have done well in addressing academic engagement; supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff; and campus involvement. In other words,

FYSs are holistic initiatives that help new students make the transition to college, and can be extremely beneficial in improving the retention of African American male students during the sophomore year.

FYE classes show positive student outcomes and such classes provide new students with early contact with the university staff, and help students establish connections with the academic and social community of the institution (Connolly et al., 2017). Freshman year experience programs can provide students with a curriculum that supports the academic outcomes and programs and activities that complement the co-curricular experience. If institutions can require that FYE students attend at least three campus activities during the semester with at least two other students from the class it can strengthen peer relationships by having students participate in out-of-class activities in a more informal way (Connolly et al., 2017).

The out of class activities provide students with another level of engagement opportunities to support sophomore year success. According to Kuh (2003), student engagement in purposeful activities, like FYE seminars, is positively related to academic success. Additionally, the FYE policy recommendation will begin the summer prior to freshman year and provide students with a head start on the college transition. According to Harper and Newman (2016), students who arrive on campus the summer prior to beginning their first college semester were better able to cope with the college transition and with potential surprises that could shape newcomers during the transition from high school to higher education.

Following their summer experiences, African American male students could also be grouped and housed together on campus in learning communities that would begin in the first year yet extend beyond it. Given the popularity of both FYE seminars and learning communities, it is not surprising that there is a great deal of variety in how these programs are conceptualized, structured, and implemented (Chism-Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). Learning communities (LCs) enroll cohorts of students in purposefully linked courses designed to promote connections between and across disciplines and beyond the classroom. Scott, Thigpen, and Bentz (2017) identified that although LCs are usually for freshmen, one study with upper division junior and senior students found some positive outcomes, particularly in student retention and academic achievement, as a result of participation in STEM LCs.

Participants in my study placed emphasis on involvement, community service, and peer relationships, and LCs would incorporate all of these support mechanisms into one centralized program. According to Fink, McShay, and Hernandez (2016), a two-semester LC would focus on topics related to developing academic success skills; discovering and exploring campus resources; encouraging leadership; and developing academic, social, and civic identity.

The Role of HBCUs in Supporting African American Male Success

The policy recommendations I will present to Academia State University leadership will address opportunities to improve the sophomore year retention of African American male students. Success for African American male students is a heavily contested and researched topic as there are factors such as engagement, academic

achievement, and lack of motivation that impact their ability to persist (Booker & Brevard, 2017). Academia State University is not unique among HBCUs in working to improve retention. Goings (2016) identified that HBCUs, whose founding mission was to educate African Americans, provided a positive campus ethos that promoted academic excellence of Black students generally and Black male students specifically. The findings from my study lay out a path for HBCUs to improve not just retention rates for Black men, but also their graduation rates.

In U.S. higher education, Harper and Harris (2012) concluded that Black undergraduate men have the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups, with only one third graduating within 6 years. Research still suggests the overall academic and social experiences of African American male students pursuing a college degree have not improved at the 4-year college and university level, as well as at the community college level (Ingram, Williams, Coaxum, Hilton, & Harrell, 2016). According to Seidman (2019), Black male college students constitute approximately 5% of the overall student population of U.S. colleges and universities.

According to Webb, Patrick, and Sulzer (2018), HBCUs constitute just 3% of the nation's institutions of higher learning, yet they graduate nearly 20% of African American students earning undergraduate degrees. Improving graduation rates among African American male students remains a critical concern for administrators at HBCUs (Johnson & McGowan, 2017). My policy recommendations are designed to incorporate all of the feedback given by the participants and substantiate them with research-based theory and practice. According to Belt, Charleston, and Hilton (2019), combined

narratives show that persistence of Black college men was inspired by supportive family, positive social interactions, mentors, stable finances, and spiritual connectedness, to name a few. Also, intrinsic factors were found to motivate Black college men: godliness, self–hope, self–discipline, optimism, and resiliency.

In an earlier study that presents evidence to support my findings, research by Albright, Hurd, and Hussain (2017) concluded that family support, mentorship, and engagement are crucial to the educational success of Black male students. Since their legal inception in 1890, HBCUs have been the gateway to higher education for Black and other racial and ethnic minority students (Gasman, Nguyen, & Commodore, 2017). The policy recommendations will connect programmatic support with opportunities to build upon the history, culture, and traditionally supportive environments that HBCUs are known for.

Having a supportive learning environment is especially essential for African American male students. Palmer, Wood, and McGowan (2014) concluded that men at HBCUs are significantly more likely than women to benefit from student–faculty interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments. Intentional programmatic interventions aside, the HBCU environment, consisting of the physical campus environment, the faculty, staff, and student population, serve as spaces where the identity of African American male students is affirmed and they are able to actualize their potential (Johnson & McGowan, 2017).

Summary

Academia State University leaders could improve the retention of African American male students during the sophomore year by increasing campus involvement, community service, and service-learning opportunities, enhancing freshman year experience programs, instituting LCs, engaging students in meaningful relationships, enhancing faculty and staff connections, and improving institutional support services. Institutions must focus on students and the essential programs and policies that make a positive impact on African American student success. Campus involvement, community service, service learning, and support services are a few examples of proven college programs that enhance positive life outcomes for African American male students. According to Moore and Flowers (2016), any proven programs and policies can be used to enhance the educational and life trajectories of African American male students.

Project Description

The policy recommendation genre can be described as a policy roadmap for institutional leaders who will provide the leaders with additional support necessary to improve sophomore year retention of African American male students at Academia State University. My research findings that informed the policy recommendation paper indicated that both sophomores and juniors at Academia State University identified considerable information about what institutional programs and support helped them to persist at the institution from sophomore to junior year. Consequently, the project will consist of a description of clarifying perceptions which institutional leadership and decision makers will review in the form of a policy recommendation paper. The design

and layout of this policy recommendation paper begins with an introduction and graphic briefing that comprises (a) an executive summary, (b) background information about the existing problem, (c) highlights of the outcome of the research findings, and (d) suggestions for improving sophomore year retention of African American male students. I also included a timeline for implementing my policy recommendations, a summary of the study findings, and a conclusion.

Another factor to consider is the title of the policy as busy institutional leaders with already packed schedules will debate the merits of dedicating additional time to more reports and busy work. Powell (2012) concluded that the title of the position paper should assist time-deprived readers in deciding if the narrative is relevant or of value in a way that is transparent and expedient. The final portion of the policy recommendations paper will consist of the evaluation section (Appendix A).

Needed Resources and Existing Support

The needed resources to implement the recommendations to improve sophomore year retention of African American male students will include stakeholder support. Stakeholder support should include institutional partners, external collaborations, and internal support from students, faculty, staff, and alumni who see value in the problem and the cure. The institutional leadership team will set the tone for how other individuals sign on to provide expertise, passion, and dedication to seeing how a collaborative spirit from the university community can help support sophomore year retention. Currently there is an existing operational structure that transcends multiple administrative, faculty, and services units at Academia State University. This structure could provide substantial

support and resources of existing people, programs, and budgeted funding to embrace the policy recommendations within this project.

There will also be a need to identify financial resources and outside sponsors to support the implementation of this policy recommendations paper. According to Wekullo and Musobo (2020), public institutions have increased their dependence on philanthropy and alumni as sources of funding, while also using collaboration with external parties to obtain resources. If the institution cannot identify existing internal funding sources as a solution for limited resources, there may be funding opportunities and partnerships with external entities that could help fund any increased staffing or programmatic needs.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

Funding any new programs or services always presents challenges to colleges and universities and serves as a clear and potential barrier to the policy recommendations. The immediate charge would be for the institution to find feasible strategies to reallocate existing staff and budget resources to support the policy recommendations. Insufficient staffing can be solved by reassigning existing staff or offices to absorb additional duties and responsibilities that are aligned with the policy recommendations. HBCUs like Academia State University are unfortunately all too familiar with using limited, existing budgets and staffing across the campus to support new programs or services. Jones (2016) identified trends that show public HBCUs receiving less funding than public PWIs, yet HBCUs like Academia State University have found ways to do more with less. Wekullo and Musobo (2020) identified that a decline in state support, strict government

budget guidelines, and the influence of funding allocations to public higher education have strained institutional budgets.

Academia State University has a financial benefit in improving retention rates. According to Millea, Wills, Elder, and Molina (2018), students who leave college before they complete their degrees can cost universities thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition revenue and replacement recruiting costs. There are solutions that could resolve financial barriers to implementing the policy recommendations. These solutions are found within the policy recommendations and could improve retention, specifically for African American male students during the sophomore year. The funds that institutions have to spend on recruiting new students can be diverted toward retaining current students. Having financial and staffing support across the campus community will provide the necessary resources and support that Academia State University needs to implement the policy recommendations.

Project Implementation and Timetable

Once I receive the final project approval, I will forward the policy recommendations paper and implementation plan to the President of Academia State University. The initial communication will also include a request to share the policy recommendations with the President's leadership team and to coordinate a formal presentation at a time that is convenient for the leadership team. Following the initial meeting and conversation with the President, I would work collaboratively with the leadership team to establish guidelines for implementation of each recommendation. I will address with the leadership team goals, outcomes, and specific aspects of the policy

recommendations. The final action and implementation of the policy recommendations I estimate to be mid–Spring 2021 as the initial start with full phase one completion for Fall Term 2021, and fully adopted by Spring Term 2022.

Roles and Responsibilities of Myself and Others Involved

Teamwork and collaboration will be essential throughout the planning and implementation phases of the policy recommendations. As the chief advocate of the recommendations in the policy paper I will take the lead in collaborating with key Academia State University stakeholders who will include leadership, faculty, staff, advisors, and student leaders. This collaboration will be necessary to minimize additional work or stress on the President and leadership team while also ensuring consistent communication, planning, and coordination of the recommendations for adoption and implementation. According to research by Kezar and Holcombe (2017), campus leaders face the challenge of implementing more changes than ever, in a shifting social, political, and economic landscape, shaped by complexity. My role will be to minimize complexities and provide for a seamless implementation process for the policy recommendations.

Project Evaluation Plan

I will conduct a formative evaluation with designated staff officials within Student Affairs prior to the implementation of the project. A formative evaluation will help identify the feasibility of the project and collect essential feedback from university officials with understanding of the project implications. The goal of the evaluation of my project is to find areas for improvement within the policy recommendation paper so that

valuable feedback can be provided to Academia State University leadership in their overall efforts of improving sophomore year retention among African American male students at the institution. The key institutional stakeholders include the president, leadership team, and department heads. According to Russ–Eft and Preskill (2009), the evaluation process is one of ongoing formative feedback, which includes staff conducting a periodic review of long–term progress of major program goals and aims. Ongoing formative evaluation will require collaboration and engagement between myself, Student Affairs officials, and the institution’s leadership team. A survey will be used as the evaluation instrument (see Appendix C) and the survey will be conducted with Student Affairs officials to evaluate the project.

Project Implications

According to Wolf, Perkins, Butler–Barnes, and Walker (2017), higher education leaders must avoid the negative consequences of attrition, such as decreased upward mobility and minimal economic success that have implications for society in general. Academia State University leaders will have a more profound understanding about how to prepare faculty and staff to address the low sophomore year retention rates of African American male students. In having a better understanding and appreciation for the struggles that sophomore year students have battled to overcome, the institution’s embrace and implementation of the policy recommendations could close the gaps of attrition and retention among a key demographic of students.

The local impact of full implementation of the policy recommendations paper would provide the Academia State University campus and adjoining local community

with a more robust community service program that connects students with real life opportunities to become engaged citizens serving a greater good. In addition, opening opportunities for external partners such as parents and family members to become more connected to the local economy by way of increased programming and services on campus can allow for economic engines to further support the community. The positive social change impact of the policy recommendations could have both local and national implications by helping other HBCU administrators to make well informed decisions about the students they serve.

The success of the HBCU enterprise as a producer of a diverse and educated workforce is tied directly to the success of the students served by the nation's HBCUs. The improved and successful transition of African American men from the sophomore year and toward graduation will ensure HBCU leadership, faculty, and staff can continue to produce a healthy pipeline of academically prepared African American male students who will make a valuable and positive contribution toward the economic, social, and political solvency of their individual communities. Local, state, and federal leaders and stakeholders could be well positioned to provide additional funding and resources to HBCUs if the institution can implement the policy recommendations and receive a successful return on the investment by benefiting from increased sophomore year retention of African American male students. Additionally, the implications of these policy recommendations will contribute to positive social change by providing best practices to higher education institutions, specifically HBCUs, regarding perspectives from students about how their institutions can best support their academic journey.

Conclusion

In Section 3 of this study I presented the policy recommendations paper as the selected project genre, which includes a summation of the findings of the study, review of the literature, project goals, potential solutions, and implications for best practices, project timeline for implementation, evaluation methods for the project, and a reaffirmation of my commitment to work closely with the Academia State University stakeholders to ensure full implementation of the project. The project's potential influence on social change will enhance Academia State University and other HBCUs' opportunities to improve the sophomore year retention of African American male students. Section 4 will include my personal reflections and conclusions, project strengths and limitations, and recommendations for alternative approaches. In the implications and applications section I address future directions for additional research related to the findings of the study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In Section 4, I present my reflections and conclusions pertaining to my project study. In this section I present recommendations for future research in retaining sophomore year African American male students at HBCUs, in addition to providing implications and applications for social change. Section 4 also includes my perspectives regarding qualities of leadership and change as a doctoral researcher, doctoral scholar, and practitioner within the field of higher education. Section 4 provides recommendations for continued research on African American male sophomore year retention and how such research can impact positive social change.

In this qualitative case study I address the problem, which is that Academia State University, a public HBCU located in the Southern United States, has a low sophomore to junior year retention rate among African American male students enrolled at the institution. Schlossberg's transition theory, which predicts, measures, and modifies how students react to change, is the conceptual framework I used to guide the inquiry. The three research questions address perceptions and lived experiences that influenced sophomore African American male students and their retention at Academia State University.

I purposefully selected 6 students, classified either as sophomore or junior status between the ages of 18 and 21 years old during the Fall 2019 to Spring 2020 academic year, to participate in this study. I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data from the participants. Section 4 of my doctoral study will also

include insights about my project strengths and limitations, how I developed the project, scholarship, and my perspectives regarding leadership and change.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

I designed the policy recommendations paper (see Appendix A) based on the findings and direct input from student participants, creating a comprehensive project that provides clear and measurable guidance that can positively support African American male retention during the sophomore year. An immediate strength of this project is that it provides Academia State University with opportunities to use student feedback directly to improve institutional outcomes. The institution can positively enhance the experiences of African American male students by providing intentional institutional relationships, engaging students in meaningful programs and campus activities, creating service-learning opportunities, and reimagining the freshman year experience. The project is supported by evidenced-based best practices and scholarly literature that also strengthens the policy recommendations paper. Another strength of the project is the potential for the leadership team to provide improved financial outcomes for the institution by reversing the tide of low sophomore year retention among African American male students.

Limitations

One limitation of the project is institutional leaders and stakeholders may view the recommendations in a negative manner or as a poor reflection on the current work taking place at Academia State University that focuses on sophomore retention. Another limitation would be difficulty adjusting staffing and budgetary priorities toward the

project implementation and thus, possibly creating an adverse impact on areas supporting other core functions of the institution. The project will require faculty, staff, and administrators to alter their current practices and methods of instruction, service delivery, and interaction with all students to ensure a more focused objective that aligns with the policy recommendations.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach to resolving the problem would have been creating and presenting a professional development training to unit directors at Academia State University, based on the specific experiences highlighted by the study participants. Although the professional development training would work directly with frontline unit directors and leaders who would ultimately be responsible for implementing the recommended solutions, having leadership buy-in and consent from administrators provides a more efficient route for the policy recommendations.

Another alternative approach would have been to obtain lived experiences from current African American male students at the institution who are classified as seniors. The additional perspective from seniors may have given supplementary views about how the impact of the sophomore year extends closer toward the end of a student's journey. Lastly, another possible alternative approach to answer the problem of sophomore year retention would have been to incorporate an expanded participant pool that includes another HBCU as a research site for data collection to compare the perspectives and lived experiences of their sophomore year African American male students. The comparative

data could have created a framework to support multiple institutions with the findings of the larger study.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

When I started this doctoral project study, I was determined to create a final product that would enhance the view and value that colleagues and collaborators had in regard to African American male students and their significance to the field of higher education. As a higher education practitioner and researcher, I wanted the contributions of my findings to bring awareness to the overall experiences, challenges, and opportunities that HBCUs afford to African American male students, especially during the sophomore year. Although the process and journey have been quite interesting and challenging at times, the development of this study has enhanced my appreciation for academic study and the high-level learning gained from the project development and doctoral study.

Project Development

As I developed the policy recommendations paper into my project genre, the main themes that emerged from the study findings were adapted into the recommendations designed to support students. By creating the recommendations paper I focus on challenges to long term success and matriculation of African American male students at the study site. Throughout the development of the project I examined the most appropriate and effective avenues to support the local problem and that would assist Academia State University in improving the sophomore year retention of African

American male students. I created the policy recommendations paper as an opportunity to influence institutional leadership toward new and improved practices, policies, programs, and services that can support sophomore student success and to provide more fiscal and economic growth to the institution.

Leadership and Change

Good leaders must be change agents, and change requires leaders who are flexible, engaged, and have a keen ability to rally their teams around the common challenges and opportunities impacting the campus community. Kezar and Holcombe (2017) described campus leaders as those who face the challenge of implementing more changes now than ever before, in a shifting social, political, and economic landscape where shared approaches to leadership may capitalize on the need to move the institution forward. As a campus leader, I see the power of doctoral education being a key toward institutional change. Pursuing a doctoral degree in itself is a means of highlighting leadership and change. By earning the doctoral degree, I am determined to be an advocate for positive social change and on the front lines of higher education's ongoing opportunity to open doors for African Americans, especially at HBCUs.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

As a scholar I am hopeful that my work will support the academy and their efforts to add voice to the countless number of students who need advocacy to learn their individual crafts and contribute valuable research and conversation toward the larger body of higher education. I have learned that having a scholarly voice is healthy and powerfully necessary, and will ensure that African American scholars such as myself

continue to be in the rooms where decisions happen and at tables where leaders are identifying ways to better support students through learning and research. As a scholar I found that no subject is without further inquiry and investigation if it has the potential to increase educational access for those who were never intended to have it. I am forever thankful to colleagues and academic mentors who have proven that in this space, our work matters.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a student affairs practitioner I have always had an appreciation and respect for the work being done in the field by countless individuals who have mastered their craft of providing services, support, experiences, and opportunities at various institutions, especially HBCUs. In the 5 years since beginning my doctoral journey, the knowledge I have learned about the ills afflicting African American male students has equipped me with the knowledge and skills necessary to be a better practitioner. As a decision maker, there is no greater information than first-hand data and analysis from the very individuals who you lead and whom your decisions will have such an immense impact upon. As a practitioner I am better at doing the work necessary to bring about change in this field because of my doctoral journey and I have gained the wisdom of understanding how theory and practice based decisions can positively change the lives of the students I serve.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Prior to the doctoral process I did not consider myself to be a project developer. Being a scholar practitioner, however, gave me a suitable foundation to move forward in

identifying the appropriate methods to develop a project that would give individuals the information necessary to help students. I wanted to develop a project that would add to the body of literary work that supported the needs of sophomore year African American male students. I chose to select a series of policy recommendations that would support African American male sophomore students in their efforts to attain a college degree. The final recommendations contain solutions and opportunities to help change the lives of students who are seeking a college degree to provide a better life for themselves and those who have supported them along the way.

Reflections on the Importance of the Work

I reflect on being a first-generation college student at an HBCU and being in awe of the people who dedicated so much time, patience, and support toward ensuring that I could navigate the obstacles and challenges of being in a space that did not quite feel like it was for me. This is what I thought about when conducting interviews for my study. I thought about the faculty and staff who never gave up or the afterhours programs and services that gave me the extra push necessary to survive my own sophomore year experience. These reflections informed my appreciation for the final doctoral work and accompanying project that will help students in similar ways that I know helped me.

The policy recommendations paper will provide Academia State University with a plan on how to give students the extra help needed to get over the finish line. HBCUs are so important to providing African Americans with educational opportunities that allow students to excel and succeed in every field of human endeavor, and that opportunity should not end at the sophomore year. The work put into this project was important,

intense, and emotional but having lived a similar HBCU story as some of the very students I hope to help by producing this doctoral study: the research matters, the policy recommendations paper matters, the students matter, and HBCUs matter.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications

This project can potentially impact positive social change by increasing the pipeline of African American male students who are persisting beyond their sophomore year and becoming college graduates who will be substantial contributors for positive social change in the communities they call home. For me, social change looks like more African American teachers and leaders in the classroom and the boardroom. Positive social change that will include more college educated African American fathers, sons, and brothers in our communities, places of employment, and anchoring homes and families across the nation.

This study can also positively impact social change by establishing more positive role models for young people that are proud graduates of HBCUs while showing how such historic institutions like Academia State University add to the fabric of American education and society by producing leaders, innovators, and scholars. I am hopeful that the project can inform practice and implementation at other HBCUs as opportunities to support their students on the individual journey toward a college degree.

Applications

Each institution of higher education should be grounded in the philosophy that every student who steps foot on that campus will be given the tools, resources, support,

and love necessary to one day leave that institution as a graduate and alumnus. By improving the learning and out of classroom experiences of African American male students during the sophomore year, Academia State University can support students in overcoming any obstacles that may stand in the way of their success at the institution.

If the policy recommendations provided in the project are implemented and put forth for practice and policy, no matter how one defines their American Dream, it can regardless be achieved by the young African American male students who navigate sophomore year and beyond. Higher education and HBCUs specifically can build upon the recommendations of this study and use them to empower and engage young people to dream big, think bigger, and achieve the impossible but only if institutions are willing to apply new ways of improving access and dismantling obstacles that could lead toward the success of their students.

Directions for Future Research

HBCUs are not all the same and there remains an opportunity for future scholars to press forward with comparative studies and research that look at other aspects of the HBCU experience such as the junior and senior year and how they impact African American male retention and eventual graduation. When I started working on this doctoral study, I reviewed many scholarly works that focused on retention of African American students at HBCUs, especially women. However, I did not see much research that had a macro focus on African American women and their sophomore year experience. Future research could add to the total body of work regarding retention at HBCUs, if scholars could identify whether or not there are similar influences to support

the success of African American male students and their retention during the sophomore year, comparative to African American women during the same transitional year of college, especially at HBCUs. There could be opportunity for future research and investigative inquiry at Academia State University and other HBCUs with a focus on African American women.

Conclusion

The sophomore year, also known as the forgotten year, is a critical juncture of decision, reflection, and opportunity for so many students, especially African American male students at Academia State University. According to Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2010), the status of Black male students in higher education has served as an impetus for researchers to investigate the collegiate experiences of Black male collegians and focus on factors facilitating their retention and persistence. My focus on those factors are what informed my desire to study the problem of sophomore year retention and to use my findings as a foundation to provide a policy recommendations paper that could be implemented as a tool to reverse the low sophomore year retention at Academia State University.

According to Perez (2020), sophomores leave because they are not fully equipped to handle the struggles they encounter during the second year. I wanted to capture what struggles were impacting African American male sophomore students and provide policy recommendations that would help Academia State University to save them. The retention of sophomore year African American male students has the power to impact the overall operations of the institution and thus impact the critical role that HBCUs play in

educating thousands of African Americans each year. As an African American male who graduated from an HBCU and understands how the institution saved my life, the research and final policy recommendations are personal to me as a researcher, as a practitioner, and as an HBCU graduate.

Retention and persistence of students are directly connected to the financial success of colleges and universities, financial success which is mainly powered by tuition and student accessed fees. HBCUs are heavily reliant on revenue generated from tuition and fees to provide the necessary economic support for the institution. Ortega (2020) concluded that federal funding increases for HBCUs has become a topic of vehement political discussion. Financial support is imperative in the institution's need to carry forth a mission and vision for these historically valuable institutions that have cumulatively been changing and saving the lives of African American students since 1837. I remain confident that this research study will support HBCUs in recalibrating their efforts toward retaining and graduating students, in reimaging how they can improve student support efforts, and in remembering why HBCUs matter in the landscape of American higher education.

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Appendix A: The Project



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Submitted By: Gourjoine M. Wade

Executive Summary

The findings from my research create the foundation for policy recommendations that Academia State University leadership can implement to reverse the decreased retention of African American male students during the sophomore year. “Making It Through Two: Transforming the African American Male Sophomore Year Experience” are the final policy recommendations that focus on helping students make it through the first two years of college. Nelson (2018) concluded that following the completion of the first year, which is filled with support structures and institutional programming, sophomores become comparatively invisible at many institutions while they have yet to gain a sense of campus community. The findings of my study are in alignment with best practices and existing research that speaks to the proven solutions that institutions such as Academia State University can put forth to provide a more holistically successful sophomore year experience for African American male students. According to Palmer, Wood, and Arroyo (2015), HBCUs have historically dealt with the challenges of

retaining and graduating African American male students beyond the first year. In the image below are presented the five policy recommendations, followed by project background information, project goals, timeline, research highlights, and opportunities for future collaboration.



Information obtained from the study site's institutional research office indicates that in 2017, 63% of African American male students at Academia State University do not persist beyond the sophomore year and thus are not transitioning into the junior year of their academic program. Low sophomore year retention has a financial impact on the operations of the university as more resources must be dedicated toward recruiting efforts versus retaining students. As federal and state appropriations for higher education continue to decrease, public colleges and universities are more dependent on enrollment-driven tuition and fees to supplement the losses. The funding gaps create a significant need to maintain higher enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). HBCUs like Academia State University must increase retention rates to survive in a growing and increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, and the policy

recommendations as presented could be a good starting point for improving the institution's position. The final action and implementation of the policy recommendations are proposed for Spring 2021, with full adoption and implementation by Spring Term 2022.



The Policy Recommendations Paper

Submitted By: Gourjoine M. Wade

Part 1: How Did We Get Here: The Problem

63% of African American male students at Academia State University do not persist beyond the sophomore year.

Since 2011, Academia State University has seen an average annual increase of 9% (IPEDS, 2017) of African American male students not persisting beyond the sophomore year of college.

Statistics show about two-thirds of all college students eventually dropped out of college during the second year.

In the second year of college, most students noted a decreased interest in school, declining grades, more absences, and increased likelihood of dropping out.

The second year of college is an important one in regards to college transition, and many sophomores are struggling to barely survive their second year experience on campus.

Academia State University (pseudonym), a public HBCU located in the Southern United States, has a low sophomore to junior year retention rate among African American male students enrolled at the institution. The local problem was identified when the President of Academia State University acknowledged in August 2015 during a speech at the Opening Faculty Institute, a need to increase and improve the retention and persistence of African American male students during the sophomore year. Information obtained from the study site's institutional research office indicates that in 2017, Academia State had a 37% sophomore to junior year fall to spring persistence rate for African American male students. The retention issue is mission critical and the contributions of HBCUs to the higher education world can only be sustained if retention and graduation rates improve.

There is a historically low rate of persistence, retention, and graduation of African American male students at HBCUs, and Academia State University has not been immune from these challenges. Six out of every ten African American male students at Academia State University will not transition into the junior year of their academic program, creating a troubling graduation and degree attainment gap at the institution. Scholars have identified the first two years of college as being critical in determining if a student can persist through to graduation.

Research by Hilton and Reneau (2016) affirmed that African American men struggle with college completion at HBCUs. According to Farmer and Hope (2015), private nonprofit colleges and public institutions graduate four out of ten African

American male students within 6 years. The low graduation rates present additional challenges for Academia State University, as retention has budgetary implications for university operations. There is an urgency now at Academia State University in regard to supporting African American male students during the sophomore year, and providing them with the tools and resources needed to persist toward graduation.

Repairing The Problem: Project Goals



Goal One: Improving Sophomore Year Retention

Improved sophomore year retention for African American male students will be achieved by implementing the recommendations within this project. Directly aligning institutional and leadership objectives with the recommendations can resolve the retention problems while also creating lasting opportunities for student success.

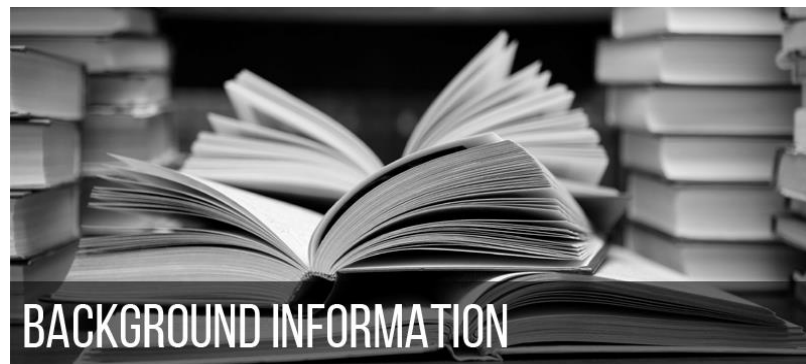
Goal Two: Enhancing Sophomore Year Programs and Services

Enhancing the programs and services currently offered to students during the sophomore year will tie directly into the first goal of improving retention for African American male students. Findings from the study have provided focused opportunities to

create new programs and enhancing existing institutional services that can help students to successfully navigate their sophomore year.

Goal Three: Improving Graduation and Retention Rates

Implementing the project recommendations will assist Academia State University in improving retention and graduation rates of African American male students. By having institutional support from leadership and the corresponding financial resources to fund substantive changes, African American male students will have a foundation for success beyond their sophomore year.



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Part 2: Methodology, Findings, and Background Information

The Methodology

The purpose my study was to explore the perceptions of African American male students regarding what influenced their persistence from sophomore to junior year at Academia State University. In Summer 2020 I had the privilege of interviewing 6 African American male students; 3 sophomores and 3 juniors, who shared their lived experiences at Academia State University during the sophomore year. The young men provided detailed and authentic feedback about their experiences, successes, and areas of

opportunity where the university could better support sophomore year retention of African American male students.

My experiences working with students have always been consistent in understanding that supporting them should be reflective of their perceptions. The feedback of student participants may be helpful for administrators working to create institutional policies and programs that are designed to retain and graduate students. The research design I used for this study was a qualitative case study focused on exploring the views and perspectives pertaining to sophomore to junior year retention, persistence, and graduation of African American male students at Academia State University.

The case study method seemed more suitable for the information I was gathering, as case studies are used to explore, describe, and explain a specific phenomenon. In this instance sophomore year retention among African American male students is the phenomenon. The qualitative case study approach provided me with clarity and understanding of the student participants and institutional characteristics that formed the perspectives of the students.

The Findings

The findings of this study were based on seven themes and concluded that perceptions of campus involvement, institutional faculty and staff connections, influence of friends, family, and relationships, and self-motivation and determination were the predominant experiences that attributed to the success of African American male students during the sophomore year at Academia State University. The findings of this study further concluded that providing students with campus involvement and community

service opportunities, enhancing freshman year experience programs, and improving institutional support and services may increase the sophomore year retention of African American male students.

The findings provide direct feedback from Academia State University students about their sophomore year transition. The feedback from Academia State University students provides an opportunity for the institution to implement the policy recommendations as presented. If and when a student determines if they will return to the institution or drop out is a turning point in reversing the low sophomore to junior year retention of African American male students.



The policy recommendations could support Academia State University in helping students to combat the sophomore slump. Perez (2020) characterized the sophomore slump as a time when at least one of the following is occurring: (a) academic deficiencies; (b) academic disengagement; (c) dissatisfaction with collegiate experience; (d) major and career indecision, and (e) developmental confusion. Perez (2020) also provided details regarding the difficulty sophomore students had with courses, financial challenges, health issues, lack of strong peer relationships, poor grades, lack of effort, and

dissatisfaction with faculty as contributing to their perceptions about surviving or thriving.

By preventing the sophomore slump, the institution can better support the retention and graduation of African American male students beyond the sophomore year of their college journey. The sophomore year collegiate experiences for African American men at HBCUs has been a limited focus even when many studies have identified the broad concerns of the second-year experience. African American students, specifically men, have been given limited attention to their experience during the sophomore year, and whether that year is any different from their student counterparts from other backgrounds.



Part 3: How Can We Fix It: The Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation 1: Increasing Campus Involvement & Community Service



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I recommend that Academia State University create within the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, a Center for Campus Involvement and Community Service that will serve as a clearinghouse for the institution's efforts to engage sophomore year African American male students in service both on campus and within the local community. Student involvement in extracurricular and co-curricular activities has a positive correlation with retention and academic success. Broome, Goodman, and Clark (2015) identified student engagement and leadership as contributors to not just how black students experience, integrate, and persist in college but how their involvement in campus clubs and organizations contribute to their transition to, adjustment to, and social integration in college. Each participant in my study, particularly the sophomores, credited their ability to be involved and engaged with campus clubs and organizations as a means of ensuring they stayed connected to the campus community.

Policy Recommendation 2: Strengthening Faculty, Staff, & Peer Relationships



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I recommend that Academia State University work to strengthen faculty, staff, and peer relationships among African American male students during the sophomore year by creating and sustaining coordinated programs, services, and activities that serve as a bridge to connecting these essential relationships together while supporting the sophomore year. This policy recommendation would allow the institution the opportunity to build up existing relationships of family and friends and empower campus offices and departments to sponsor more programs that would strengthen these supportive relationships.

The involvement of faculty and staff members with their African American students in the classroom and outside the class creates a positive relationship for African American male students in college (Hall, 2017). Just as important as the faculty connections and support, Sophomores discussed an additional layer of support that exists from institutional staff members and administrators. According to Arroyo, Palmer, Maramba, and Louis (2017), student affairs professionals at HBCUs feel a sense of moral responsibility to create empowering climates for Black student success. Intentional

relationships from mentoring to informal engagement could benefit student success during the sophomore year and thus improve the retention of African American male students at Academia State University.

Policy Recommendation 3: Enhancing The Freshman Year Experience



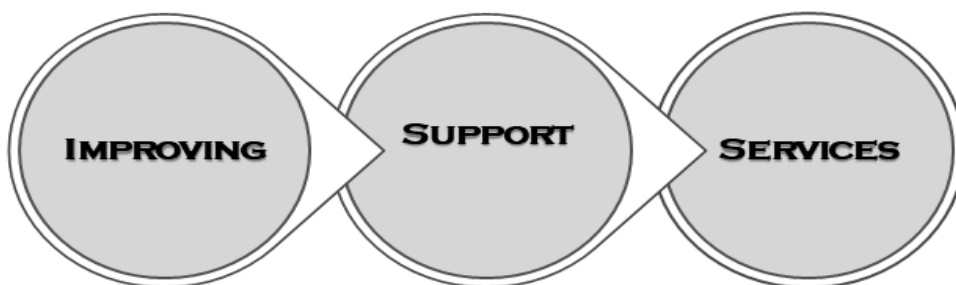
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I recommend that Academia State University create a holistic freshman year experience program that requires two semesters of first year seminar courses designed with a curriculum that supports the academic and co-curricular experiences of all students. When institutions require that FYE students attend at least three campus activities during the semester with at least two other students from the class it can strengthen peer relationships by having students participate in out-of-class activities in a more informal way (Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, & Oestreicher, 2017).

Participants in my research established early that having a good freshman year was the foundation to a great sophomore year and beyond. Sophomore 1 spoke about the relationships he intentionally made during his freshman year "...could have been more helpful if they were required to make relationships during that year to prepare you for sophomore year". He went on to say "The freshman year helped me build character and was my molding stage for growth in my sophomore year". Junior 1 affirmed the

statements made by other participants when he said “To get Black males specifically to come back their sophomore year, the institution has to do a really good job of making their freshman year worthwhile”.

Policy Recommendation 4: Improving Institutional Support Services



I recommend that Academia State University provide customer service training and review operational policies and guidelines to ensure optimum institutional support and services are provided across the campus community to support student retention. This policy recommendation will connect key offices and support staff with opportunities to build upon the history, culture, and traditionally supportive environments that HBCUs are known for in helping students.

Kuh (2008) identified the role of staff or administrators suggests the potential benefits of these relationships for students, such as having someone to listen to, and provide support during difficult junctures in college. Improving the support and services offered to sophomore students could have considerable impact on their ability to be retained during and beyond the sophomore year. Institutions like Academia State University have staff and offices that can be extended in scope and scale to provide a more strategic focus on African American male students and the sophomore year.

curriculum, creating co-curricular service-learning programs, and promoting service-learning experiences to students.

The staff engagement from student affairs practitioners is equally important as this specific group of professionals spend considerable amounts of time interacting and engaging with students, especially during the first and second year. Student affairs practitioners and faculty can challenge students to reflect on their service experience (Freeman, 2018). The importance of being involved on campus during the sophomore year adds value to the undergraduate experience for students at Academia State University.

Conclusion

This policy paper provides a substantial opportunity to positively impact the lives of African American male sophomore students at Academia State University. The policy recommendations presented are adapted from students, designed to support students, and may influence the long-term success and matriculation of the institution's core constituency, the students. The potential implications of improving sophomore year success can extend beyond student outcomes and also provide more fiscal and economic growth to the institution. The potential influence on social change that would be provided by this project will enhance Academia State University and the overall opportunities afforded by the institution to improve the sophomore year retention of African American male students.

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Appendix B: The Interview Protocol

Date: _____

Time of interview:_____

Interviewer: **Gourjoine M. Wade**

Interviewee:_____

Current Classification of interviewee: _____

Thank you for agreeing to participate today. This is an interview for a doctoral project study on the topic of Perceptions of African American Male Students on Increasing Sophomore Year Retention at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The data collected and the respondent will be held in the highest confidentiality. The interview should take about 30 to 45minutes and, with the participant's permission, will be recorded. Recording the interview is to ensure an unbiased approach by the researcher and to accurately depict the responses of the participant. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Questions

1. Please describe what type of involvement you have in student organizations or clubs here at the institution. (RQ3)
2. In what ways, if any, do you think campus involvement may or may not improve sophomore year retention? (RQ3)
3. Please describe how you can attribute your success during the sophomore year to services or programs provided by the institution . (RQ3)
4. What has been the predominant motivating factor keeping you enrolled at the institution during your sophomore year? (RQ1, RQ2)
5. What were (if any) some challenges to succeeding during your sophomore year? (RQ1, RQ2)
6. What experiences provided you with the most support and assistance in succeeding during your sophomore year? (RQ1, RQ2)
7. Please describe what the institution can do to improve sophomore retention of African American Male Students? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

Once again thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Is there anything that you

would like to add? The probes will include phrases such as, “I am not sure that I am following you, would you explain that? How did that help or hinder you? What were you thinking at the time? Tell me about it or take me through the experience.”

Appendix C: Formative Evaluation for Recommendations Paper

Name _____ Date of
Evaluation _____

Describe the challenges that might be encountered in implementing the recommendations paper:

Describe the opportunities to improve the recommendations paper:

Please evaluate the budget and staffing needs to implement the recommendations: