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## A Phenomenological Examination of African American Men's Experiences in Community College

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Abdulhalim Faruq

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

A Phenomenological Examination of African American Men's  
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by

Abdulhalim Faruq

MS, SUNY Brockport, 1978

BA, SUNY Oneonta, 1977

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2022

## Abstract

The community college, given its accessibility and affordability, has become the institution of choice for many African American men pursuing academic, vocational, and technical advancement. However, African American men attending community colleges are less likely to graduate and persist than their European American male and female peers. Limited research exists on academic persistence among African American men attending community colleges and their academic self-efficacy. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Tinto's model of student persistence were used as the conceptual framework for this study. The research questions that guided this study focus on how African American men describe their interactions, formal and informal, with faculty and others during their initial year at a community college and the impact of these interactions on their self-efficacy and decision to persist or not persist. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, ages 18 to 70 years. The transcripts of these interviews were reviewed by the participants and then coded, using NVivo software, to identify prominent themes. Results illustrated the importance of noncognitive factors, especially connectedness, belonging, and support systems, in impacting self-efficacy and persistence. The findings suggest it is important to support positive social change by engaging stakeholders in a pedagogy that encourages professional development in cultural competence and sensitivity.

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## Dedication

Paradise lies at the feet of the mother.

—Hadith

To my mom. By His leave you were here in my beginning, throughout my life journey, and will be forever beyond. Few words can capture that which is felt in my heart. Simply stated, you have been throughout the course of my life, my personal cheering squad, mentor, advocate, and, least desired, disciplinarian. You are so much more than this son could ask for. There are fathers and then there are dads. My dad provided, sacrificed, and protected. He was there. He much like my mom, scolded, and disciplined as needed, but never failed to encourage, advocate and be a support agent. He was the dad that was needed by so many young persons. For all of my brothers from another mother, your truths and voices are found within this text. Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to my elders of yesteryear who were instrumental in providing a foundation from which this project could be undertaken.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The community college is a primary pathway into postsecondary education and jobs skills training for African American. African American adult males are four percent of those enrolled in community colleges National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021). This percentage does not reflect the percentage of African American males who complete their first year of study or persist to graduation. The depiction of the African American male as “at risk” or in a state of crisis is commonplace amongst policy makers, mass media, educators and social scientists (Carey, 2019).

The focus of this study is college persistence among African American men. In this phenomenological study I explored the lived experiences of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence. In Chapter 1, I present the introduction, the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the nature of the study, and define operational terms. The conceptual framework is based on Tinto’s (1993) theory of departure and Bandura’s (1985) self-efficacy theory. Also included in this chapter are the significance of the study, implications for social change, assumptions, limitations, scope and delimitations, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Background of the Problem**

The successful completion of a prescribed academic program is a prerequisite to social mobility and financial stability. Although a few individuals such as Curtis J. Jackson III (50 Cent) and Shawn Corey Carter (Jay-Z) have excelled in lieu of formal academic persistence, researchers have established a correlation between academic

persistence and socioeconomic stability (Burger et al., 2020). Issues of salary acquisition, career, and social placement have seemingly taken a back seat to an immediate pressing concern for African American males, minorities, and the economy of the United States, that concern being the disturbing gap in graduation rates between White American and African American males in pre-collegiate and postsecondary domains (Cintron et al., 2020; Hines et al., 2020). To maintain a strong foothold in today's knowledge driven economy, the United States must garner a well-educated workforce capable of competing with like-minded countries for limited resources and assets. As noted by Hines et al. (2020), the needs of a globalized world far exceed the skillsets garnered through a high school education. The most capable and competitive person will be the one who persists academically and technically beyond high school. African American men, as family and community leaders, must persist academically to encourage economic and social advancement and to be seated at the table of family, community, and national stability. The community college, given its accessibility and reasonable cost, has become the institution of choice for many African American men pursuing academic and technical advancement.

African American men attending community colleges are less likely to graduate and persist than their European American male peers and their European and African American female peers (Hines et al., 2020). Limited research exists on academic persistence and academic success among African American men attending community college and their academic self-efficacy. The majority of studies addressing academic persistence and academic success amongst African American male college students have



traditionally used 4 year institutions as a primary source.(Wood & Turner, 2011). Results derived from these studies often used quantitative research methods. Qualitative research on African American men has grown over the years and can be found not only in dissertations but also published scholarly publications. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), statistical research fails to capture the nuances of the human experience and may fail to account for the decidedly human side of social life. Statistical equations fail to uncover the intangibles, such as fear, pain, insecurity, the feeling of alienation, reactions to uncertainties (i.e., where do I go, how do I demystify the college process and experience), exposure to micro-aggressions, and in this case a sense of self efficacy and a willingness to persist. The narrative gives voice to the context in which the individual's interpretation of his experience has been shaped. Narrative research purports that "we live in a storied world, a world in which our actions and those of others are interpreted, contextualized and transmitted through narratives" (Taylor & Bogan, 1998, p. 25). Consequently, narratives function as a means of exchange of worldviews between individuals (Murray, 2003). Because so few college-based research projects exist on the lived experience of the African American male community college student as he interacts formally and informally with college personnel, this research seeks to fulfill address this void in the literature as it impacts college persistence.

The NCES (2020) revealed that 23.4% of Hispanic and 10.4% of African American men attained an associate degree as of 2019, while the rate of attainment for White men was 52.4%. An important question to ask is why does this persistence gap exist at the collegiate level in the United States regarding degree completion, academic

outcomes, and academic performance between African American male students and other male student populations? Although no one theory provides an exact explanation for this phenomenon, researchers offer several reasons for this problem. Sedlacek (1999) purported that noncognitive factors such as realistic self-appraisal, positive self-concept or confidence as well as racism may impact the academic end state of African American males. Kim and Sax (2007) asserted that formal and informal interactions between faculty and students in the classroom, laboratory, during office hours, or in social settings are critical in the determination of student academic outcomes. Belgrave and Allison (2010) discovered a correlation between education, employment, and social status. The collected data suggested that students who engage in collegiate study often fare better financially than do their peers who fail to persist beyond high school. Thus, it may be construed that individuals or groups failing to persist academically risk incurring constricted financial and social options. Clearly the consequences of failed attempts to successfully matriculate are costly. Even more daunting are the absence of conclusive explanations in addition to the causes and resolution of this dilemma for African American male students (Wood & Williams, 2013).

Although increases in academic attainment amongst African American males are evident, as a group, they are failing to persist academically at the postsecondary level of study. Several explanations have been offered to account for this phenomenon including the oppositional cultural model which postulates that middle class Black youth resist White middle-class values and norms critical to the achievement of academic excellence (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Berlowitz et al., 2006).

Studies over two decades ago offered the explanation that students with low self-concept and feeling culturally inferior failed to achieve academically because of the inherent inferiority of their culture, ethnicity, language, or race (Pollack, 2013; White & Parham, 1990). In addition, White and Parham (1990) argued that teachers lower their expectations of African American male students because the teachers perceive these students lack intellect or cultural sophistication (Pollack, 2013). Expectations of academic ineptness are communicated by both overt and subtle means. Regardless of how these biased expectations are expressed, African American male students who perceive the teacher as an expert and the voice of authority develop a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic ineptness, often performing at a sub-par performance level.

Postsecondary education witnessed significant changes over the past four decades. Between 1980 and 2020, the total fall enrollment of undergraduates in postsecondary education increased from 12.0 to 19.0 million (NCES, 2021a). This increase was accompanied by changes in the racial/ethnic composition and sexual characteristics (gender) of the first-year student who enrolled during this period.

The NCES (2021) reported that between 1980 and 2020, non-White student participation rose from 1.7 to 8.3 million enrollees, which illustrates that over the past 40 years, minority participation in undergraduate study has reached unprecedented heights. These changes were evident in not only the 4-year colleges and universities, but in 2-year institutions in which students, for a myriad of reasons, have begun their postsecondary study. When student enrollment at 2-year institutions are reported, race and ethnicity withstanding, between 1980 and 2020 (4.5 million and 4.9 million, respectively), show a

measured increase (NCES, 2021). Factors such as affordability, open admission, accessibility, and small classes have encouraged the enrollment of African American men in the community college.

In contrast to models that place the weight of academic failure and lack of persistence on the student, Cox (2010) suggested that student academic ineptness at the community college level may have its underpinnings in the idealized images of higher education, student behavior, and academic outcomes. Cox's research revealed that although demographic shifts in the college-going population have become a fixture in America, the academic community's expectations, and assumptions, which are rooted in a genesis of class, race, and gender exclusivity, are outdated. The American postsecondary education system was originally designed with the intent of training an elite group of White males to become leaders within industry and American society. Today's college student may be a member of a previously excluded group such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and those of the working class (Cox, 2010). Many may be the first within their family to attend college. The traditional trajectory of enrolling in college full-time at a residential college and persisting for 4 years until degree completion is no longer reflective of American postsecondary education.

Many current students are nontraditional or first-generation students. These students may be African American males, adults returning (inclusive of displaced workers) to education, or commuters who must manage job and family responsibilities that compete with school attendance and performance. In route to degree attainment, they may take a leave of absence or altogether officially separate from the institution of higher

learning to which they were admitted in order to address non-academic responsibilities (Cox, 2010).

The paths of these students toward academic persistence may be further compounded by teacher expectations and assumptions about appropriate academic performance and behaviors based on class and race values and norms that are not universally observed or realized (Cox, 2010). Consequently, faculty members may disregard or devalue the cultural relevance of their student's lived experience, and worldview. Students of color may embrace racial or social identity paradigms to maintain a sense of psychosocial integrity and belonging (Belgrave & Allison, 2019; Wilson, 2020). Failure to meet the instructor's expectations may be erroneously perceived as a lack of capability, and disregard for authority and the educational process (Cox, 2010).

Despite notable changes in college student enrollment over the past several decades, the college experience brings a multitude of challenges for both students and faculty. For most students, the college experience is an exciting time of personal, professional, and academic growth and skill development. Nonetheless, students often begin their collegiate journey with concerns about their abilities to succeed. Cox (2010) noted that the students who are the first in their family to attend college do not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how to meet those expectations when they arrive at the new institution.

Many students fear the academic process (Cox, 2010), which is inclusive of but not limited to the expectation that students are coming to the classroom already possessing the necessary foundational learning experiences and understandings allowing

for academic success. These skills include good critical thinking, problem solving and study skills; are effective at time management and finding the balance between academics and noncurricular activities; and are responsible and mature individuals (Cox, 2010). It is at this point in their academic journey that they realize that they are under-prepared for collegiate study, and confronted with unfamiliar faces and surroundings; thus, they must develop and incorporate new skill sets geared toward college success.

All too often, despite the best intentions, a tension develops within the student and instructor relationship that may adversely influence student persistence. Cox (2010) noted that students enter the classroom feeling ill prepared for collegiate study, possessing limited definitions of “real” instruction or “useful” knowledge. On the other hand, instructors expect students to be focused, academically prepared, able to adapt themselves to the method of instruction and understanding of the learning process, and ready to participate in the classroom experience (Cox, 2010). Mutual frustration, marked by a myriad of expectations by both the instructor and student can disable a learning process articulated by American society as essential for full participation.

Education has often been employed by societies as a tool to orchestrate the successful development of future generations for their societal roles and responsibilities (Parham et al., 1999). In addition, educational attainment and persistence indicated a correlation with occupational, social, and economic status (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to the NCES (2020a), full-time year around workers with a bachelor’s degree who were African American earned \$50,000, whereas their White peers earned \$60,000. Asians earned 69,500 and Hispanics earned \$49,000. Among those who completed less

than high school, Whites earned \$33,400, African Americans \$27,200, and Hispanics \$29,800 (NCES, 2020). Consequentially, student persistence and retention are associated with degree attainment and its societal correlates, occupational, social, and economic status

### **Problem Statement**

What we do know is that regardless of the cause(s) of African American male students' failure to persist, they will incur great difficulty in accomplishing the American dream.

Bush and Bush (2010) and Lokowski et al. (2004) reported that high school grade point average (GPA) and socioeconomic status were predictors of academic success for students attending 4-year learning centers. Researchers reported that the academic environment and student interactions with instructors influence African American male students' academic success.

The literature fails to underscore the significance of the impact of the discordance between faculty expectations and the perceived understanding of those expectations by the student. The faculty may walk into the classroom with an idealized notion, a traditional paradigm of the ideal learner. These expectations are based more upon the ideology of the traditional student—a student who goes to school with their parents' money and lives in dormitories—versus the reality of the diverse types of students attending college today. Some of the characteristics may include lower income commuting students, adults returning to education, and displaced workers, who might have children and full-time jobs. Little is known about how African American male

community college students experience their interactions with institutional power brokers and how their perception of those experiences may affect their academic self-efficacy.

Tinto's (1993) theory on student departure provides insight into the relationship between academic persistence and the student's perceived level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college environment. This is a key factor in student retention. The absence of research on the impact of artificial barriers, such as racism (i.e., external, internal, and institutional) and microaggressions, external obligations, and supportive campus environments for African American males attending a community college. To gain an improved understanding of the African American male educational experience, researchers must acknowledge and investigate alternate theoretical constructs, such as the oppositional cultural theory, critical race theory, or stereotype threat that are peculiar to the African American educational experience.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy. Academic persistence may be described as the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed even if the student transfers to another school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For this study, academic self-efficacy is the focus rather than general self-efficacy.

Academic self-efficacy refers to a student's confidence in their ability to conduct such academic tasks as preparing for exams and writing term papers (Barouch-Gilbert,



2016). Self-efficacy has consistently been connected to academic achievement. Exploring students' beliefs in their capabilities to perform academically might support the comprehension of improved ways of assisting academically struggling students, and eventually influence their decision to persist and maintain good academic standing.

### **Nature of the Study**

To gain an understanding of the experiences of African American male students while attending a community college as they interface with college instructors, I employed a descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The application of the phenomenological method to this study encouraged the understanding of the essence of the African American male's academic experience. The method used to investigate their academic experiences was snowball and convenience sampling for the recruit of potential participants. The population was confined to African American male students aged 18–70, who are or who have been enrolled in a community college in the northeastern United States. Fliers placed in strategic areas of the school announced the study. In addition to snowball recruiting and the posting of flyers, faculty announced the study and the criteria for participation. Lastly, I randomly selected potential participants (i.e., every third person) from a roster of individuals meeting study criteria supplied by Institutional Research. Qualitative data were collected through face-to-face audiotaped interviews with participants (Creswell, 2017, 2022). An interview format was constituted, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for emerging themes. NVivo (Version 12) software was used to

analyze, store, organize, and code collected data. A detailed discussion of the methodology is presented in Chapter 3.

### **Research Question**

To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do African American male students describe their social and academic experience in the community college setting?
2. How do students describe their formal and informal interactions with faculty?
3. How do African American male students perceive that their experiences during the first year of college influence their decision to persist or not persist?

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following operational definitions are for specific terms used in the study:

*Academic disengagement:* A minimizing of academic forward movement and disconnection from the learning environment when students perceive the academic environment as exclusive as opposed to being inviting and inclusive (Kunjufu, 1985).

*Academic persistence:* The progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed even if the student transfers to another school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 374).

*Bracketing:* When previously held assumptions, prejudices, biases are acknowledged and eliminated from consideration and the phenomenon under review is acknowledged for what it is (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27).

*Collegiate experience:* All psychosocial, academic, and administrative interactions had by African American males in formal (i.e., classroom) and informal settings associated with the college.

*Connectedness:* A feeling of belonging to an organization or group.

*Educational attainment:* The number of years of schooling completed or degrees earned (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 373).

*Informal interactions:* Informal interactions are experiences arising out of quotidian exchanges among differing members of the institution over matters not formally addressed or constrained by institutional rules and regulations; this includes a casual interaction with a school representative beyond the institution's formal settings (Tinto, 1993).

*Meaning units:* A word, discrete phrase, sentence, or series of sentences by students in the sample which portray or describe their community college experience or experiences (adapted from Giorgio, 2003).

*Microaggression assault (micro assault):* Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (Moore & Phelps, pp. 119–120).

*Microaggression insult (microinsult):* Subtle interactions that “demean a person's racial heritage and identity” (Pittman, 2012, p. 83).

*Microaggression invalidation (microinvalidation):* Interactions where a Black person's experiences or reality are invalidated. A White person accusing a Black person

of being racially hypersensitive instead of acknowledging the Black person's reaction to perceived racial oppression is an example of microinvalidation (Pittman, 2012, p. 83).

*Monoracism*: "A social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories" (Harris, 2017, p. 1056).

*Oppression*: Institutional or interpersonal actions that impede an individual or group's consideration of options, access to resources, or opportunity (Pittman, 2012).

*Power brokers*: Those individuals who influence student outcomes. This group includes institutional operatives such as faculty, staff, and administrators. Students are not excluded from this group, for they are not merely acted upon but do play a role in outcome.

*Racial microaggressions*: Subtle, sometimes blatant "put downs" of African Americans by culprits (Pittman, 2012, p. 83).

*Self-efficacy*: An individual's perception of his or her ability to initiate and successfully perform specified tasks at designated levels, expend greater effort, and persevere in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 1995).

*School climate*: Refers to the quality and character of the school environment based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

*Snowball sampling*: Individuals meeting a study's criteria for participation locate and refer other persons meeting the study's criteria for participation. Each referral increases the sample size. (Merriman, 2016)

*Special support programming*: The establishment by a learning center or governing body, such as in a state college, of a student support system designed to bolster a student's academic and social experience within the institution. Special support programming is often a part of the college's student services system.

*Thick description*: may be described as a detailed description of a phenomenon in such a way that one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people; often used in qualitative research (Merriam, 2016).

*Underrepresented population*: A population that has been historically denied equal access to the resources and benefits associated with the educational system of the United States of America.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To examine the academic underachievement of African American men who are in college, social scientists have postulated theories associated with academic persistence. Various theories were used to frame the problem and purpose of this study. The two frameworks that are most appropriate are the works of Tinto and Bandura. According to Tinto (1993), students' perceived level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college environment is the single greatest predictor of their retention. Tinto purported that the way in which the formal and informal systems of the college

impinge upon a student's experience may weigh heavily upon the student's integration into the social and academic community of the institution. Tinto maintained that academic failure might arise not from the absence of skills, but from the debilitating impact of social isolation upon a person's ability to conduct academic work. Tinto further stated, "academic climates that discourage and discriminate, however subtly, are also climates that give rise to student failure and departure" (p. 74).

Academic self-efficacy offers a theoretical framework for this study. Self-efficacy theory is rooted in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1985), which has suggested an interrelationship among an individual's behavior, the environment, and cognitive factors. Bandura's (1985) self-efficacy theory proposed that an individual establishes a perception of the ability to perform a task or manage a particular situation because of previous experiences and observations. When academic situations are considered, as noted by Bean and Eaton (2000), the student realizes their competence and grows in self-confidence and most often, "the individual will demonstrate higher aspirations for persistence, task achievement, and personal goals" (p. 52).

A student's effort to mimic the positive academic and social behaviors of others is germane to the academic success and persistence of African American male students, who, by virtue of their affiliation with academic opportunity programs and dependence on financial aid programs, are considered at risk. According to Bean and Eaton (2000), at-risk students, despite previous academic difficulties, endeavor to model or mimic the behaviors of academically successful people. Bean and Eaton suggested that, through investment and the expenditure of effort, students can achieve general success, meet

academic challenges, and accomplish their goals. Programs that focus on the aforementioned offer the student the opportunity to access tutorial assistance, counseling, and role models of like ethnicity thus providing a cultural environment more conducive to academic success.

If students believe their best efforts fail to garner positive academic outcomes and rewarding campus relationships, feelings of futility, despondency and anxiety may arise (Bandura, 1986; Wilson, 1997). Self-efficacy theory espouses two sources of perceived futility: Persons believing that their efforts may be of little consequence may simply give up, or they may be certain of their capabilities but believe their efforts are of little value in a hostile, negative, or punitive environment (Bandura, 1986; Wilson, 1997). The academic experience of at-risk African American male students, particularly as one considers the impact of formal and informal interactions with institutional systems and their agents, is consistent with Bandura's construct of perceived self-inefficacy.

Bandura and Tinto's theories argued that the academic learning environment influences the academic and psychological well-being of the student.. Both theories recognized the importance of the interaction between the student and faculty member in establishing a relevant and wholesome learning environment. A key component of self-efficacy theory is how the individual perceives and experiences the environment, as it helps to shape the individual's sense of competence and mastery. An environment rich in support enables and encourages student progress and persistence. Bandura's theory has direct application to the academic status of African American male student due to its focus on the importance of role models and the exposure to relevant and supportive

learning experiences designed to encourage and empower the learner. These theories are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because little has been written about the experience of African American male students attending 2-year community colleges. The preponderance of literature about African American male students focuses on their experiences at the 4-year collegiate level rather than in 2-year postsecondary institutions. Further research is needed about the relationship between self-efficacy and persistence as a function of the quality of interactions between this specific group of students and the instructors and other school personnel they encounter daily in a 2-year college campus environment. This research offers insight into the needs and perceptions of African American males, ages 18–70, who have been deemed academically talented and have met the criterion of a support program for high-risk students. Lastly, this research provided a lens on the functionality of a publicly funded postsecondary support system as described through the lived experiences of a group of African American community college male students. The information presented and the findings of this study provide further insight into strategies to support the academic persistence of the studied population and promote social change.

### **Implications for Social Change**

A key component of the American ethos is that all persons, regardless of race, creed, religion, or national origin, would have the opportunity to pursue, unbridled, the American dream. Inherent within the fabric of the American ethos is the belief that each



person is of value, each person matters, and with hard work, each person can succeed. The American paradigm of education is that the instructor as an agent of information also disseminates societal mores and values to their students. This paper considers the recognition of the lived experience of the African American male student a crucial element for an inclusive, thriving collegiate learning environment in which both the faculty member and student can connect. In short, as enunciated by Tinto (1993), the student who believes themselves to be connected to the institution, who believes that they fit or belong is more likely to persist than one who believes himself to be isolated or unwanted. In an era in which African American men as a cohort are experiencing well-documented episodes of violence spurring such movements as “Black Lives Matter,” the examination of the academic experience through the lens of this cohort of African American men should promote inclusion, hope, and the recognition of possibility for those involved in assuring the academic and social development of this community college enrollee.

A society imbued in a state of inclusiveness, allowing each citizen to reach their academic and personal potential, provides the nation with strength and security. To maintain a strong foothold in today’s knowledge-driven economy, the United States must field a well-educated workforce that is technology driven, technologically literate, and capable of competing with like-minded countries for limited resources and assets.

Social change can be encouraged by providing educators with an insight into the needs of African American male students in a community college with a residual effect of enhanced cultural competence. In short, this research helps to minimize the academic

achievement gap between African American male community college students and their other race and gender contemporaries. The data collected from this study could be used as a tool to promote social change by enabling community college personnel to see their role through a different and more focused cultural lens. With this understanding, they can pursue their stated mission of developing persistent and productive students. Faculty members are highly regarded for their level of expertise and experience. A faculty showing respect and positive regard for members of this cohort goes a long way to encourage academic progress, for a population familiar with exclusion as opposed to inclusion and discouragement as opposed to encouragement. Consequently, college educators will have the information to encourage administrators to initiate programs and interventions to support and encourage the academic persistence of this group, which in turn could positively impact individual students, their dependents, and their community. Simply stated, the collegiate environment can serve as a model of engagement and inclusivity for a society although marked by years of progress remains splintered in many of its essential domains. The community college client, the student, must not simply be acted upon by policy but must be engaged in the process of its development and enactment. As noted by the authors of *Learning Reconsidered*: “All institutions should establish routine ways to hear students’ voices, consult with them, explore their opinions, and document the nature and quality of their experiences as learners” (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004, p. 33).

### **Assumptions**

It is necessary to explore how the African American male student interprets his interactions with staff and faculty to understand how he derives meaning from his collegiate experience. For this study, it was assumed that student understanding of experiences within the respective home culture and the college culture may both hinder and enhance success at the community college. I also assumed that individual interviews would be an appropriate method for obtaining firsthand accounts of student experiences at the college level and that participants would be willing to share their experiences as community college students and offer truthful accounts.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was within the community college system with a focus on only three key issues: students' lived experiences in the community, student/teacher interactions, and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is delimited to academic self-efficacy rather than general self-efficacy. Specific delimitations are as follows:

- Participants were college students attending a community college in the northeastern United States who have completed at least one semester.
- Participants were African American males (ages 18–70).

### **Limitations**

The results of this study are specific to African American male students attending a tri-campus community college in the northeastern United States and may not be generalizable to all community college students. Individuals vary in their willingness to disclose personal information. Historically, African Americans, following their

interactions with governmental and mental health agencies, have experienced adverse consequences (Washington, 2006). Subsequently, it is common for African Americans to exhibit reserve and suspicion when being interviewed. Feelings of distrust and apprehension may be minimized through the employment of validity, reliability, and ethical measures associated with qualitative research.

The participants in this study represent a specific group in a specific context with the focus of the study being on the students' unique experiences in that context. Although the criteria across the state for admission into community college are consistent, differences in factors such as college location, availability of respondents, cultural values, access to financial assistance, age, employment issues, marital status, and parental duties may confound results and further impact the generalizations of the findings. Therefore, the findings may serve as a benchmark for future research study.

### **Summary**

The community college's accessibility, open enrollment, and financial feasibility have made it a key point of entry into postsecondary education and vocational training for African American men. Education has been shown to be a pathway to economic stability and social mobility. Nonetheless, opportunities for African American men lag behind those of their peers in academic achievement and persistence (Cintron, 2020). The phenomena of scholastic underachievement have been common for African American men across the academic pipeline. Kunjufu (1985) noted that this population's disengagement from the academic world starts at the fourth grade and persists through postsecondary study. Tinto (1993) purported that integration into the learning

institution's campus environment is an essential factor for student persistence. For some, the presence of artificial barriers poses a threat to academic and social movement for African American men. Tinto (1993) further indicated that a student's failure to persist may be caused not simply by a lack of preparation or ability but by "academic climates that discourage and discriminate, however subtly, are also climates that give rise to student failure and departure" (p. 74). Bandura (1997) suggested "vicarious experiences," often viewed through the lens of role modeling as a vehicle by which an individual may transverse environmental obstacles and move forward toward success. Faculty members, given their subject matter expertise, authority, and credentials, are purveyors of institutional values, customs, and the academic message providing sway over student academic self-efficacy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although research has been conducted on the importance of the campus environment and the influence of teachers on student persistence, studies documenting the lived experiences of African American men attending community college are rare. Chapter 1 of this phenomenological study, about African American men ranging in age from 18 to 70 who have completed at least one semester of study at the targeted community college, described background of the problem as it pertains to faculty influence on academic persistence and self-efficacy on the cohort, and provided a problem statement, definitions, and the potential for social change. Research related to the educational experiences of African Americans within a historical context provides a setting for the study. Additionally, the experiences of African American men within the community college/undergraduate experience, their

formal and informal interactions with college personnel and its impact on student self-efficacy are examined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 reviews the study's methodology. A phenomenological approach of narrative inquiry is described. The data collection instrumentation, data analysis methods, and methods for insuring reliability and validity are explained in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Defining the scope of the investigation is one of foremost goals established for this review. As suggested by Creswell (2017), one of the purposes of the literature review is to narrow the range of the inquiry. Although the literature on the academic achievement of African American men at the collegiate level is pervasive, this review is limited to the evaluation of studies that contributed to understanding the factors that influence the academic persistence of African American men attending community college and the impact of faculty-student interactions on African American students' academic self-efficacy. Drawing from this perspective, the literature review provides a base of knowledge to assess gaps that could be further explored through the selected research method.

Little is known about how African American male community college students experience their interactions with institutional power brokers and how their perception of those experiences may affect their academic self-efficacy. Tinto's (1993) theory on student departure provides insight into the relationship between academic persistence and the student's perceived level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college environment as a key factor in student retention. Nonetheless, there is an absence of research on the impact of artificial barriers, such as racism (i.e., external, internal, and institutional) and microaggressions, external obligations, and supportive campus environments on African American male community college students.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American male community college students regarding their academic

persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy. To accomplish this purpose, I reviewed the literature related to the following research questions:

1. How do African American male students describe their collegiate experience in the community college setting?
2. How do African American male students describe and interpret their faculty-student interaction in relation to the collegiate experience?
3. How do African American male student experiences during the first year of college influence their decision to persist or not persist?

For the literature review, I collected, organized, and evaluated the body of research that informs the discussion of the African American male academic achievement gap in such a way as to encourage insight into the causes when this cohort is compared to its peers and understanding the implications of the failure of the African American male to persist on his community is yet another important goal of the literature review.

The literature review includes an abundance of qualitative and quantitative studies that investigates faculty-student interactions, factors that contribute to the achievement gap between African American males and community college students of same or other race or gender, and analysis of how African American male community college students perceive and experience the college environment and perceive the expectations of college instructors. Cultural tension is featured as significant, given its interplay among other contributing factors in the African American community college persistence question.



In this chapter, the following focal points are addressed in support of this study's purpose and research questions: (a) the academic pursuits of African American males within the postsecondary system, in particular their experience within the community college system; (b) a discussion of teacher-student relations and (c) the impact of those relationships on the self-efficacy of the African American male student attending community college.

Next, I present a review of community college enrollment trends and theories to provide an explanation for retention and attrition problems for African American men. This section focuses on the complications relative to the nontraditional African American male community college student and his interactions with college personnel. Particularly valuable, though sparse, is the literature related to the experiences of men who are first-generation community college students, many of whom are nontraditional students. A variety of research strategies were used to conduct this review of current research and provide a setting for this study.

### **Search Strategy for the Literature Review**

I conducted a literature search using diverse sources of information. Peer-reviewed research articles, governmental reports, nonprofit studies, and statistical data from the year 2009 forward formed the basis of the literature review. Literature predating 2009 regarded as seminal to various components of this presentation was included as it serves as a foundation and source of cohesion. High Beam Research provided a search engine for a digitalized library. Additionally, the Education and Psychology databases were used to access PsycINFO, ERIC, Education Research Complete, and various online

journals. ProQuest provided access to relevant dissertations. Google Scholar and SAGE databases enabled access to peer reviewed articles. OCLC FirstSearch provided electronic access to databases and full-text and full-image articles.”

The search began with general subject terms such as *self-efficacy* and *African-American* or *Black college students*. I also conducted keyword searches using terms, in combination and singularly, such as *males*, *boys*, *educational environment*, *teacher–student interactions*, *teacher expectations*, *student expectations*, *intergenerational cultural collusion*, *hip-hop culture and the academic environment*, *organizational culture and student persistence*, *teacher attitudes*, *critical race theory*, *academic persistence*, *community college*, *college persistence*, *at-risk students*, *modeling*, *academic achievement*, *educational attainment*, *social identity*, and *identity threat*.

### **Relevant Theoretical Models and Contextual Framework**

Theoretical models of college student attrition identified and analyzed several variables that impact a student’s decision to remain in college or persist. Two of these widely used in studies of community college students were introduced by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975). Spady (1970) argued that students who do not share values and orientations similar to other students, do not interact socially with other students, and generally did not feel compatible with the social system of college were more likely to drop out. Spady’s (1970) initial model of college student attrition proposed that grade performance, intellectual development, normative congruence, and friendship support all influenced social integration. These factors were believed to impact student decision to drop out. Spady (1971) conducted a longitudinal study of 683 first-year undergraduates at

the University of Chicago in 1965 to test the variables of the model to explain the attrition process. Based on the findings in that study, Spady concluded that social integration and friendship support were key factors influencing whether a student dropped out or remained in school.

Building on the work of Spady (1970), Tinto's (1975) model for college student attrition continues to be the most widely recognized and tested model. Tinto believed that a student's decision to persist was related to the degree to which the student felt integrated into the social and academic life of the college. Tinto's key premise was that a student's interactions with peers and faculty contributed to both social integration and academic integration is predictive of student attrition. Tinto (1993), as later supported by the work of Tauber (1997), underscored the significance of faculty interactions as part of the collegiate environment in that expectations held by faculty members support or undermine student academic development, often referred to as self-fulfilling prophecy.

In summary, Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition simply explains what is required of students if they expect to be able to persist and graduate. Tinto believed that persistence and withdrawal behavior is a longitudinal process that is primarily influenced by how well the student fits into the structure, social and academic life, and goals of the institution. Student experiences during the first year have more influence on retention than the characteristics they bring to the university. Although Tinto's model provides insight into factors associated with collegiate persistence, a criticism of the Tinto model is that it is based on a traditional 4-year collegiate population often with minimal recognition of students of color and attending community college. Tinto's model would

be particularly helpful to address the research question that explores the experiences of the community college students in this study. A second criticism of the Tinto model is that it overlooked factors that are relevant to the lived experiences of postsecondary students of color as they interface with the campus environment and crucial elements of the learning institution formally and informally such as faculty, staff, and administrators. Consequently, frameworks strongly associated to the Tinto model have been expanded to include psychosocial reactions to racial improprieties, such as stereotyping and microaggressions, culture, and psychological processes such as self-efficacy and coping strategies (Bean & Eaton, 2001/2002; Braxton, 2001).

The assertion that additional factors beyond GPA and standardized test scores can impact student departure decisions and student success has been recognized by researchers (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Newman, et al., 2015; Sedlacek, 2004; Tinto, 2001; Woosley, 2003).

Tinto (2001), while acknowledging that students fail to persist at their institutions of enrollment for academic reasons, the fact that at least 65% of students exit their learning site for nonacademic reasons. Reasons for departure include financial concerns and adjustment problems, in addition to the institution being a poor fit for the student. In fact, researchers (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Tinto, 2001; Woosley, 2003) have found that students incurring psychosocial as well as academic challenges may depart their learning center as early as a few weeks into the semester.

The role of social integration and reciprocal determinism is linked to the concept of self-efficacy known as Bandura's social cognitive theory. Bandura (1977) believed

that a person's attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills play a significant role in how individuals perceive, behave in, and respond to different situations. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in self to organize and execute the courses of action required to cope and manage when confronted in various situations. Bandura (1984) described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel. Bandura and other researchers clearly demonstrated that self-efficacy can have an impact on everything from psychological states to behavior and motivation, impacting students' achievement academically no matter their ethnic or educational background. These contentions are expressed in Bandura's precept, reciprocal determinism that boosts that academic achievement behavior is influenced by an individual's self-beliefs (i.e., self-concept, self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, etc.) and institutional environment forming a triadic interaction (Choi, 2005).

Bandura's (1977, 1997) work seemed to suggest that students with greater self-efficacy for behaviors important to college life are more likely to experience greater success during their college experience. Researchers (Bandura, 1987; Shrunck, 1989) have concluded that students' belief that they have the capability to exercise control over their ability to achieve academic success is significant in their decision to persist toward their academic goal. Bandura's self-efficacy theory as it relates to this study means that the student has the power to produce and predict his or her academic performance and outcome. As indicated by Finney and Schraw (2003), self-efficacy is task specific, meaning that success in one area of study may not be generalized to another area of study. The belief is that students with weaker self-efficacy beliefs may choose goals that

undermine their success. Noteworthy is that students in and of themselves may not realistically possess the ability to be successful given their skill sets without support. Consequently, it is not uncommon for students to misjudge their capabilities, be it overestimation or underestimation, thus incurring consequences that may alter student progress and persistence (Pajares, 2002). Sedlacek (2004) defined realistic self-appraisal as a person's ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as they incur academic and environmental challenges. A correlation between GPA and academic persistence has been determined by researchers (Tracy & Sedlacek, 1984, 1985, 1988; Tracy et al., 1983). The goal of this effort is self-development across several domains (i.e., academic, personal, and social) and may require the student to acknowledge the need for support elements to achieve desired outcomes (LaSavoy, 2004; Wallace, 1980).

Bandura (1977, 1997) purported that four sources of information are important in self-efficacy outcomes and expectations: (a) performance accomplishments, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal and social persuasion, and (d) emotional arousal or physiological states. Performance accomplishments or master experiences are reflective of a student's past level of achievement when confronted with a skill or activity. Students who have successfully completed a task or demonstrated competence believe that they will do so when faced again with the same challenges (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Marra et al. (2009) studied women in the engineering sciences and found that persistence, career goals, and curriculum choice were prominent components of positive self-efficacy. These studies acknowledge the significance of past academic success in math and science for this cohort. Results indicate that modeling of productive behaviors and attitudes by

representative/like persons in the field, along with encouragement and support through persuasive techniques, was far more powerful in fostering a strong sense of self-efficacy for women seeking engineering studies and careers. I contend from personal experience as an African American male that while I have experienced academic success in several domains as well as the anxieties associated with stereotype threat, being in a supportive and secure environment where there is unwavering encouragement and solid role modeling is most uplifting and reassuring. For the purposes of this study, the constructs of vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion are critical actions of faculty influence on student self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), student self-efficacy is influenced through the observation and adaption of behaviors used by faculty members to establish or accomplish a prescribed goal via vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion techniques. Faculty member understanding and employment of Bandura's philosophy/theory would encourage students using social messages and cues to believe that they are capable of meeting their academic goals. The transmission of a "can do" or "can be" message to the student may done overtly or covertly and when coupled with vicarious experiences in the form of role modeling can positively impact career choices and academic pursuits for racial and ethnic minorities (Marra et al., 2009). Another component of self-efficacy, emotional arousal or physiological states has been shown to deter goal attainment in underrepresented populations when student levels of anxiety or distress are high enough to dissuade the student that because of their membership in an underrepresented group, determined by some to lack intellectual prowess, they will fail to fare well. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *stereotype threat* (Steel &

Aronson, 1995), was shown in Kellow and Jones's (2008) study assessing 641 students to negatively impact their performance on a standardized math test. Although notions of academic incompetence are fostered by social media, when negative stereotypes are promulgated by teachers at any level along the academic pipeline the impact upon student academic achievement can be devastating.

### **Impact of Student-Faculty Interactions**

Faculty–student interaction (also referred to as student engagement and faculty involvement) has been recognized in the literature as a prominent fixture in the student development and academic achievement paradigm (Astin, 1993; Chang, 2005, Tinto, 1993, 2012). Tinto (1993, 2012) cited the demeanor, attitudes, and perspectives of faculty members as a key component of the student's social and academic landscape. Faculty members have been recognized as invaluable in the student's academic and social integration framework, serving several significant roles such as adviser, instructor, role model and agent of support and guidance (Chang, 2005). Their significance in the student integration process includes interactions that are both formal and informal, not limited to contact in the classroom or office environment but in all venues in which they encounter students (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Settle, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Such exchanges within the collegiate environment, as those between faculty and student, have been cited by researchers as positive influence agents on the student belief systems of self-confidence and motivation to persist (Gipson et al., 2017), self-concept (Wang & Neihart, 2015), self-efficacy (van Dinther et al., 2011; Wang & Neihart, 2015; Wood et al., 2014; Wood & Ireland, 2014), student academic success and satisfaction (Astin, 1993; Chang, 2005,



Gipson et al., 2017). Researchers (Cole, 2010; DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012) have established a correlation between faculty–student interaction and academic success, often typified by GPA. When other variables are considered, GPA trends have been observed to be skewed (Lamport, 1993; Sedlacek, 2004; Tracy & Sedlacek, 1988). How faculty view students (Warren, 2015), the introduction of noncognitive variables and college climate (Gipson et al., 2017) can confound the relationship between faculty–student interaction and student success. In contrast to the positive impact upon student pursuits often observed in reference to faculty–student interactions, a study conducted by Cole (2010) revealed that when study data was disaggregated by race/ethnicity, student–faculty interactions were not significant for Hispanic students’ GPA and course-related faculty contact. This was not the case with African American students. Unlike the collected aggregated data, which suggested a positive correlation between minority members and faculty–student interactions, disaggregated data showed a negative relationship between African American students and their interaction with faculty. In addition, the findings associated with all the 2073 surveyed minority group members’ (i.e., African American, Asian American and Hispanic college students) academic performances reveal the adequacy or quality of their academic work was negatively affected by their interactions with faculty (Cole, 2010).

The campus environment has been recognized as a significant component of student integration into the fabric of the institution loaning itself to student academic and social outcomes (Tinto, 2001). Researchers, such as Tinto (1993, 2001); Zullig et al. (2010), and Cohen et al. (2009) described the “campus” or “school” environment as a

composite of all entities and elements that function as shareholders in the education of students regardless of academic level. The components of a healthy school environment may include but not limited to include classroom etiquette, responsive and respectful administrators, culturally sensitive staff, and faculty. Overall, there must be an atmosphere in which safety is paramount, and commitment to student learning and development is evident (Zullig et al., 2010). When key elements are in place and an appropriately engaged climate exists positive student academic and social outcomes may be achieved. According to Zullig et al., scholars historically recognized five common school domains: a. Order, safety, & discipline; b. Academic Outcomes; c. Social Relationships; d. School Facilities; and e. School Connectedness. Zullig et al. sought the input of students, in an effort to establish a meaningful definition of school climate and to create a valid and reliable student assessment tool conducted a study in 2010. For the purposes of this study, Zullig et al. interviewed 2,049 adolescent students from three school districts in a Midwestern state. The sample though predominately White, included students from several racial groupings. The results yielded a modified assessment instrument holding eight domains as opposed to the historical five domains. Noteworthy is that students spotlighted positive student-teacher relationships and school connectedness as important in the establishment of a living definition of school climate. This study is important in that its findings were derived from student input, hopefully giving stakeholders and policy makers insight into student needs and perspective. Settle (2011) conducted a study in which he examined variables believed to encourage persistence at community colleges. Participants included 183 first-generation first-time

students attending 2-year institutions who took the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98). Social capital variables, particularly student integration to the college environment, were strongly associated with persistence in students. Contact between students and faculty outside of the classroom environment was found to be critical for persistence (Settle, 2011).

The recruitment of minority persons, and their retention and persistence within nursing programs has been examined in the literature (Veal et al., 2012). A review of the literature indicates a dearth in research on the influence of campus climate and social integration on the persistence of this nursing cohort. Undergraduate level students named non-supportive campus climate, lack of faculty involvement/mentoring, feelings of isolation, alienation, marginalization, and powerlessness, and perceived discrimination are obstacles to retention and academic success. Retention for this group was bolstered by interactions with persons deemed by the students to display a genuine interest in their well-being and personal development. In response to retention and academic persistence issues for this cohort at the graduate level, data collected by Veal et al. (2012) revealed that academic persistence and retention were impacted by the student's ability to balance stressors with environmental moderators, such as faculty that was caring and culturally sensitive and peers. Stressors included not feeling connected, feeling isolated and marginalized. For this group of participants their lived experiences took place in the context of a monolithic culture. This term refers to the values, perspectives, and beliefs that exist in a predominately white educational institution where there is a dearth of diversity in the ranks of faculty, staff and students (Veal et al., 2012). These findings

supplant the notion that determinants of academic persistence and retention are limited to GPA and previous academic achievement.

Tinto purported that the way in which the formal and informal systems of the college affect a student's experience may weigh heavily upon the student's integration into the social and academic community of the institution. Tinto maintained that academic failure might arise not from the absence of skills, but from the debilitating impact of social isolation upon a person's ability to carry out academic work. Tinto further stated, "academic climates that discourage and discriminate, however subtly, are also climates that give rise to student failure and departure" (p. 74).

When students believe their best efforts fail to influence events and social circumstances that positively impact their life, feelings of futility, despondency and anxiety may arise (Bandura, 1986; Wilson, 1997).

Among the entire range of components that make up the college experience for any given student, faculty are profoundly pivotal in shaping student attitudes toward an enriched academic experience (Chen et al., 2014; Chang et al., 1981; Warren, 2015). Wood (2012) suggested that although community college is recognized for its unrestricted access to postsecondary education, that open access does not in and of itself insure student academic success. From a historical perspective, he asserts that many community colleges have with some continuing to do so maintain a philosophy that students had a "right to fail" as "opposed to a right to succeed." Wishing for the best of academic outcomes for students it has become clear that a positive correlation exists between academic success and the provision of academic support services (tutoring, and

mentoring), counseling services and positive faculty-student interaction (Cejda & Rhodes, 2004; Wood, 2012). Institutions must act “beyond a wish”, particularly when facilitating the academic growth of African American and Hispanic males (Cejda & Rhodes, 2004). Their counterproductive experiences within the educational system have been documented (Wood, 2012). Lived experiences in learning environments that are perceived as hostile, uninviting and insensitive to the learning needs of diverse populations have resulted in the reluctance of those effected to approach those who can best support their learning, academically and culturally competent and engaged faculty Cole (2010).

An absent component from our discussion on student-faculty interactions but nonetheless significant in the academic and social development of collegiate learners are the adjunct faculty. As with their full-time brethren, this group has been cited by researchers (Alshehri, 2020) as contributors to student outcomes, such as transfer to baccalaureate programs, earning a sub-baccalaureate credential (i.e., certificate) or exploration of employment options. Institutions striving to cut costs, while still providing quality service to students, hire adjunct faculty to augment vacant faculty lines. According to Alshehri (2020), adjunct faculty, also referred to as contingent faculty, make up three quarters of American professors. These professors, many of whom hold doctorate or master’s degrees, are not only part-time, but enjoy employment that lacks benefits and job security. They are further hampered by limited office hours and space, additional resources impacting student-faculty interaction. Consequently, this group of faculty may lack attachment to the institution and commitment to its students, making it

all but impossible for them to function as role models or provide ongoing guidance and encouragement (Alshehri, 2020). Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) found in their study on the interplay between social capital and the success of African American and Hispanic students that in an institution in which over three quarters of faculty are adjunct that instructor quality and career expertise was of extreme importance to students and their success. These critical characteristics were apparent in the classroom and other occasions of faculty-student interaction (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Scholars and observers (Jaeger & Eagan, 2009) conclude that the very population that adjuncts are employed to serve are negatively impacted academically because of the lack of availability and engagement at the college of part-time faculty. Part-time adjunct faculty need a firm commitment and policy that encourages their transition to full-time status. Increased opportunity for this cohort stands to benefit all institutional stakeholders. Further, community colleges and their students are well served by developing strategies that encourage faculty when encountering all students, particularly minority students, to (a) initiate and maintain contact, (b) illustrate a friendly caring demeanor, (c) be affirming and encouraging, (d) check in on student progress, and (e) listen to student concerns (Wood, 2012).

A key component of self-efficacy theory is how the individual perceives and experiences the environment, as it helps to shape the individual's sense of competence and proficiency (Bandura, 1978). An environment rich in support enables and encourages student progress and persistence (Bush & Bush, 2010). Simply stated progressive student functioning and outcomes are possible when students have experienced success at a

specific or generalized task (s) thereby believing that they are capable of mastery, have incurred support, encouragement and useful feedback from institutional sources such as faculty and when faced with adversity which may present itself as feelings of stress, anxiety, tension and/ or perceived cultural or racial bias show resilience and perseverance (Thompson & Verdino, 2019).

African American males across the academic pipeline (i.e., K-20) lag behind their peers in academic progress for reasons which include but are not limited to academic tracking and disproportionate remission to resource room and suspension (Carey, 2019; Warren, 2015); practices enabling the displacement of black male students from the classroom to the jailhouse (Alexander, 2020; Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011; Krezmien et al., 2010); deficit-based explanations for academic difficulty (Pollack, 2013; Warren, 2015) and exposure to micro aggressive utterance, low academic expectations and racism (Solorzano & Yoss, 2001; Warren, 2015; Brezinski, et al., 2018; Carey, 2019). This phenomenon has historical underpinnings which impact the African American male student from his inception into the academic arena to its highest terminal degree. When considering postsecondary study and vocational enrichment, the preponderant trend for African American males is to enroll in the community college (Wood & Williams, 2013). Despite the observation that the preponderance of African American males begin their postsecondary journey through enrollment into the community college system, a limited body of research has been undertaken by researchers on self-efficacy and its relationship to the collegiate success of this student cohort (Wood, 2014). Unfortunately, studies of self-efficacy and student-interactions at the community college featuring the lived -

experiences of the Black male student is suffice it to say non-existent. Those studies that have been examined the self-efficacy of Black males at community colleges has found a positive correlation between self-efficacy and academic success (Wood et al., 2014). Wilkins (2005) examined the experiences of six Black males (i.e., a term used in Wilkins research to connote males of African descent; the suggestion is that this study's population was not homogeneous, including other males whose perceptions may not coincide with those of the African American male). Wilkins (2005) concluded that their sense of self-efficacy was derived from a combination of family support for education, the student's sense of competence, uniqueness, self-regulation and self-worth. Student interactions with persons viewed as role models was also a factor. Bates, whose study featured 400 African American males, concluded that there was a strong relationship between self-efficacy, students' perceptions of their own academic preparation, and math anxiety.

Settle (2011) researched those variables that encourage collegiate persistence at the community college level of study. Data procured from the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Survey showed that when social capital values were considered, a strong relationship between student integration into the collegiate environment and student persistence. Student persistence was further shown to be supported by positive interactions between faculty and students.

African American men attending community colleges are less likely to graduate and persist than their Caucasian male and female peers (Newman et al., 2012).

Researchers (Hatch & Garcia, 2017) often cite accumulated factors external to the



college experience such as working, age, financial constraints, parental duties, or caretaking activities for an elder as thwarting student efforts toward persistence. These factors when combined with the lack of previous academic preparation, perceived hostile schooling experiences (K-20), and minimal support services decrease the likelihood of persistence for this group of students (Wood, 2012).

Bandura's self-efficacy theory has direct application to the academic status of African American male student because of its focus on the importance of role models and the exposure to relevant and supportive learning experiences designed to encourage and empower the learner. Bandura suggests four sources of self-efficacy which includes mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal or social persuasion and psycho-physiological stress (Bandura, 1997; Hicks & McFrazier, 2014). Simply stated, mastery experiences are those in which a person believes that he or she can accomplish a task because he or she are able to demonstrate proficient use of a skill set. When a person successfully completes a task, their sense of self-efficacy is heightened, and failure to competently negotiate a task, results in a weakened sense of self-efficacy (Hicks & McFrazier, 2014). Vicarious learning is in common terms a reference to the development of a self-belief system, such as self-efficacy through mirroring the actions of a role model, for our purposes a faculty member (McCown et al., 1996). Despite the successful employment of vicarious learning through support programming such as The Educational Opportunity Programs in New York State, Bandura (1977) purports that vicarious experiences are not as dependable a source of judging one's capabilities as are other sources of self-efficacy. Verbal or social persuasion refers to the social messages and

cues given to others to express expectations or possible behaviors. Scholars (Hicks & McFrazier, 2014) think this source not to be in and of itself a powerful source of self-efficacy. I submit that verbal or social persuasion when coupled with vicarious learning has proven useful when employed in support programming in the collegiate arena (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

A student's effort to mimic the positive academic and social behaviors of others is germane to the academic success and persistence of African American male students, who, by their affiliation with academic opportunity programs and dependence on financial aid programs, are considered at risk. According to researchers Bean and Eaton (2000), at risk students, despite previous academic difficulties, endeavor to model or mimic the behaviors of academically successful people. Bean and Eaton (2000) in their findings suggest that, through investment and the expenditure of effort, students can achieve general success, meet academic challenges, and obtain their goals. Such programs offer the student the opportunity to access tutorial assistance, counseling, and role models of like ethnicity to provide a cultural environment more conducive to academic success.

### **Introduction to the Historical Perspective**

A review of historical circumstance and its impact on the educational state of the African American male serves to promote dialogue between stakeholders, as academic persistence is influenced by the efforts of the faculty, administrators, institution, and peers along the achievement pipeline. In this review, I consider the experiences of African Americans students, in general, and their experiences within the schooling

system. The literature reviewed suggested that community colleges have increasingly become the colleges of choice for many entering postsecondary for the first time. These institutions educate 36% of all entry-level freshmen in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], 2022). The community college provides accessible academic and vocational development opportunities at a moderate cost for a diverse population, whether constrained by financial limitations, familial obligations, academic preparation or work. Characteristic populations associated with community college enrollment may include but limited to persons that are non-white, first-- time attendees and low income (Fong et al., 2017).

Many postsecondary students are leaving college before completing a degree. Despite a substantive growth in postsecondary attendance, researchers continue to be beleaguered by the high rate of student departure from the nation's institutions of higher learning (Seidman, 2005).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Center for Educational Statistics (2003), only 50% of those who enter postsecondary study persist to the completion of their baccalaureate degree (Seidman, 2005). The failure of the nation's academic centers to produce qualified persons capable of competing in an ever-expanding global and technological world can have dire consequences for America's security, economic stability and world stature (Berlowitz et al., 2006; Education Trust, 2010; Kerrey, 2007; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). As the number of students increased, more community college degrees were conferred. Students in community colleges earned 849,452

Associate degrees in 2009–2010 according to the NCES (2012). In 2010–11, 31% of all degrees were awarded to Students of Color (Knapp et al., 2012).

Despite notable gains in academic attainment, African American males lag behind White American males, White American females, African American females, Hispanic males, Hispanic females, Asian males and Asian females in academic achievement at all levels. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that in 2020, 64% of full time – first time Bachelor seeking students earned a bachelor’s degree.

When African American males were compared to others within his academic cohort the following data is revealed regarding baccalaureate recipients, White females-70%; White males-64%; African American females-50%; and African American males-39%; the overall graduation for those conferred with baccalaureate degrees in 2020 was 64%. (NCES, 2021a). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) shows the rate for 2-year degrees and higher was at 26% for African American men, 30% for African American women, 31% for Hispanic men, 37% for Hispanic women, 40% for Asian men, 49 % for Asian women, 38% for White men. 39% for White women. (NCES, 2021b).

Relative to profound differences in academic achievement, when African American males are compared to those within his cohort, explanations for these findings are as varied as they are inadequate (Butchart, 2010). Researchers (Butchart, 2010; Ogbu, 2003; Steele, 1997; Townsend-Walker, 2012) have proffered several explanations regarding the academic achievement gap.

A review of the literature offered explanations that included but were not limited to the adoption of an oppositional frame of reference as educational attainment may be perceived by students and others as “acting white”, deficit theories in which students are perceived by educators as lacking the mental capacity and or tenacity to successfully achieve academic goals. Earlier researchers as Kunjufu (1985) and Jor’dan (2019) noted that African American males along the educational pipeline may disengage from the academic process in reaction to adverse experiences such as negative stereotyping, stigmatizing behavioral mislabeling, special education placement, lowered expectations of their potential academic performance; and policies and practices that disregard their history, culture, values and sense of personhood they encounter within the school system. These sentiments are a result of their lived experience, and contrary to the belief of some does not indicate the lack of a desire to learn (Brooms. 2019).

Although these theories have been researched and presented to the academic communities, racial bias and inequities continue to prevail in the educational culture and policies of our school systems (Brooms, 2019). Across the spectrum of time the African American has encountered systemic inequities whether fostered by legislative action or encapsulated in the institutionalized policies and practices of academia and its stakeholders. Policy driven racial inequities actualized in the subjective assignment of African Americans male to special education remains pervasive in U.S. schools today (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Practices initiated in the schoolhouse when coupled with problematic student behavior have been shown to lead the student from the educational pipeline to the big house (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017).

America has come a long way when compared to the attitudes and practices of yesteryear, but practices of racial discrimination and bias have not been eradicated from its cultural fabric (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Racial micro-aggression usage and other forms of racial discrimination can impair the performance of its recipients and promote racial inequities and strife (Moore & Phelps, 2021). Sometimes perpetrators of racism are unaware of their culture/institutionalized driven behavior and subjectively engage in behaviors that factor significantly in a disastrous outcome for the African American male student. Lastly, the failure to adequately educate any segment of the American populace negatively impacts the individual, his community and society at large

Demographic projections boast a significant increase in African American and Hispanic populations this millennium. Murdock (2003) purported that by 2060, the United States will be a nation in which minorities of color are the majority. Historically, these populations have been underprepared for academic advancement, financially challenged, poorly served and impacted by episodes of racial intolerance (Kingsley et al., 2010).

Academic inequality encourages income disparities within households (Kingsley et al., 2010). The United States Census Bureau (2020) indicated that the median household income for Whites was \$71,231; for Black households, \$45,870; in Hispanic households, \$55,321 and in Asian households, \$94,903. Inequities in households over the next 50 years will produce a poorer America (Kingsley et al., 2010) and encourage unskilled and under-educated individuals toward participation in criminal activities, further weakening the family and nation (Alexander, 2020). Failure to appropriately

educate any segment of this country's citizenry adversely impacts the individual, the family, the community and the nation at large, for several generations (Sutherland, 2011, Hines, 2020).

To attain a thorough understanding about how and when African American men fall behind their peers in college completion and how factors concomitant to this process have occurred over time, I examine the lived experiences of the African American male across the educational pipeline. I begin with the societal environment in Africa that fostered and promoted educational pursuit not only for the benefit of the individual but for the society at large. Still, there has been gradual disconnect from the formal educational process which has resulted in this cohort/group lagging behind his peers in academic persistence. While some have linked the disadvantaged position of black males to their high risk of incarceration, McDaniel and DiPrete's (2009) estimates suggested that incarceration has a relatively small impact on the black gender gap and the racial gap in college completion rates for males in the United States.

The African American male has been described by scholars as an endangered species (Alexander, 2020, Salvo et al., 2019). His lived experiences are such that he has found himself undereducated and mishandled by the educational and judicial system. The academic achievement gap between African American males and their cohorts has been well documented.

### **The African American Male and Persistence**

The African American male is failing to persist academically at a rate higher than that of his contemporaries across the educational spectrum (Beale et al., 2019; Newman

et al., 2012). In order to comprehend this discrepancy, an examination of the lived experience of African American male students attending community college is necessary to understand the effects of school culture, institutionalized racism and institutional personnel upon their academic outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to have a succinct yet concise understanding of the African American's socio-academic experience from historical and cultural perspectives

### **Role of the Community College**

Many educational researchers acknowledged that community colleges are vital and serve many functions to facilitate students' ability to transfer into 4-year institutions of higher education. Wood and Williams (2013) argued that African American males are more likely to seek out postsecondary opportunities at 2-year colleges. Of the vast majority of those who opt to attend community colleges, 83% pursue their education at public community colleges. The reason many Black men attend these institutions because they perceive that they can better facilitate their social and economic mobility and later transfer into a 4-year college or university.

### **Educational Attainment and Persistence**

The determination of the African American male as one prone to academic failure has been well articulated in the academic journals as well as social media (Butchart, 2010). The importance of educational attainment has been substantiated by the research of countless scholars (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kiser & Price, 2008). Educational attainment refers to the number of years of schooling completed or degrees earned. A



relationship has been established between education attainment and academic persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Persistence is understood to be the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed. Undoubtedly persistence must be evident in order to obtain degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Notably, student departure from postsecondary institutions, often in the student's first year has become the focal point of institutional retention efforts (Braxton, 2000; Simmons, 2013).

Braxton (2000) indicated that more than a quarter of first-time 4-year college attendees and in excess of one half of community college students disengage from their collegiate studies at the conclusion of their first year of study. Regardless of cause or the consequences of student departure, its impact on the individual, the community and the society at large is well documented (Tinto, 1993).

Research regarding postsecondary student persistence has been ongoing for several decades (Nakajima et al., 2012). Academic success, often determined by GPA and educational attainment is linked to academic persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claimed that educational attainment couldn't exist without the activation of the persistence mechanism. Despite years of research and policy implementation, students continue to fail to persist. This fact is most troubling in light of the African American male's cascade into academic oblivion. When compared to his European – American peer, a comparison viewed by some (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as irrelevant given the intergenerational strides made by African-Americans following

slavery, the African – American male lags behind in academic attainment and collegiate persistence (Bush & Bush, 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013) . For example, 11.5% of Black male community college attendees depart from their institution within 1 year of admission, 49.9% leave after 3 years, and 83% leave after 6 years without actualizing their academic goal of certificate or degree attainment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004/2009). Although studies have been undertaken to better understand collegiate student persistence (Nakajima et al., 2012), the majority of these studies have used four year institutions as their data source.

A number of studies were conducted involving persistence in 2-year colleges (Bush, 2010; Nakajima, 2012; Settle, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013). Settle (2011) and Nakajima (2012) conducted more general studies on persistence whereas Bush (2010) and Wood and Williams (2012) studied persistence in 2-year college for African American men. The common thread for all four studies was the importance of faculty interaction outside the classroom. Settle (2011), for example, found that the students who persisted the most not only had friends who were going to the same colleges but also had social connections with faculty outside of class. Both variables were related with a 1.000 association of persistence year to year, an almost perfect association.

Settle (2011) addressed persistence of continuing and first-generation students. The models used for testing were social capital and socioeconomic status. The model for persistence was effective for the first-generation rather than for the continuing generation. What Settle did find was one common factor, and that was social contact with faculty

outside the classroom for every student who persisted out of a subset of a longitudinal study of more than 51,000 students.

Nakajima (2010) had 427 two-year college students complete a survey with 63 items. The survey assessed student-faculty interaction (academic integration variable), goals and self-efficacy (psychosocial variable) and financial, academics, and demographics (background variables) as well as if students were still in college the following semester. Although work hours, financial aid, and age had influences on persistence, these effects decreased in the presence of multiple variables. The strongest variable to predict persistence was cumulative GPA, which made the students persist at two times the rate of those with low GPAs. English proficiency was another factor related to persistence. Even though none of the psychosocial nor academic integration variables predicted student persistence, Nakajima found that the variables interrelated with each other.

Wood and Williams (2013) explored four different domains of variables: (a) academic variables, (b) environmental variables, (c) background variables, and (d) social variables. Their data came from a longitudinal study in public community colleges of Black men. Wood and Williams found through hierarchical logistic regression analysis that the factors most predictive of persistence were extracurricular activities, supporting peers, taking part in extramural sports, study habits, connecting with faculty, and life stress. The researchers did find that participation in extracurricular activities had a range of results for Black male students. They suggested that advisors work with students to find the right individual fit for the kind of activity would be most beneficial. The best

activity overall was intermural sports and, environmental variables predicted persistence more than other variables.

Wood and Williams (2013) emphasized that studying regularly, meeting with advisors, and having social interactions with educators are “integral to student success. The researchers advised that college professionals seek ways to make the student-faculty interactions easier including offering workshops that would give students advice on good questions to ask faculty and how to approach them and develop rapport. Wood and Williams emphasized that the responsibility for initiating such interaction should not lie only with the student but also with college faculty.

In a similar study, Bush (2010) investigated how institutional factors in 2-year colleges affected African American men’s perceptions of their experience as well as their academic achievement. Noteworthy was that compared to other subgroups, African American men were more dissatisfied with their experiences and tended not to engage in different activities that the colleges had to offer. In this study, Bush found that these students had little to no contact with faculty members when they were not working together in the classroom. Bush pointed out that community colleges, unlike their 4-year counterparts have an open enrollment policy that does not take educational background or demographics into consideration. As a result, the educators in the institution need to take more responsibility for student underachievement. The institutions should work on helping students achieve academically no matter their ethnic or educational background.

Many of the reasons that students leave college were identified as finances, poor academic performance, lack of family or social/ emotional encouragement, difficult

personal adjustment and integration into the college social and academic community, and/or simply do not fit in (David et al, 2013). For example, high school academic performance has been shown to be a constant predictor for both minority students and nonminority students. Students with lower high school GPAs have some degree of difficulty meeting the academic expectations of college.

David et al. (2013) examined the relations between community college students' reports of barriers to success and measures of their actual success in college. The results revealed that first-year college students, involvement in meaningful activities outside of classes was determined to be a crucial step, in part because the activities connected the students with their peers. Family support, interest, and encouragement also helped students persist. (Beale et al.,, 2019) Faculty support, when it is lacking, can contribute to a student's feeling of isolation (David et al., 2013; Raley, 2007).

Additionally, David et al.'s (2013) results revealed that several barriers were negatively associated with persistence. In general, many students did not persist in the community college setting because of poor college adjustment, lack of social support, and financial and transportation challenges. First-time college students often experience stress while trying to adapt to the new norms and expectations of college (Tinto, 1988). David et al., (2013) noted that most students who drop out of college simply cannot balance school and work. More research is needed to understand the pathways by which these issues and barriers hinder persistence.

The importance of encouraging faculty-student interaction in community colleges cannot be overemphasized. However, most studies found that the community college

institutions are not working hard enough to reflect this in a formal way. Nakajima (2012) and Settle (2011) in more general studies of student persistence discovered the importance of faculty-student interaction as did Bush (2010) and Wood and Williams (2013) in studies specifically involving African American male students. Whenever students seek out faculty for outside social interaction, persistence follows. Developing more formal ways to encourage these interactions is highly recommended (Bush, 2010; Nakajima, 2012; Settle, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013).

The educational disparity between the United States and other countries is glaringly apparent (Palmer et al., 2010). Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2007). Failure of the nation's academic centers to produce qualified persons capable of competing in an ever-expanding global and technological world can have dire consequences for America's economic stability, world stature and security (Berlowitz et al., 2006; Education Trust, 2010; Kerrey, 2007; Palmer et al., 2010). Given the significance of technological advancement upon a country's economy and station in the world (Lotkowski et al., 2004).

### **Supporting and Contrasting Research**

The literature review revealed that, student retention is a primary goal for higher education institutions and has been for several decades. Unfortunately, efforts to improve retention in the community college seem not to be working when it comes to African American male students. Developing formal ways to encourage persistence among this population of students was scarce at best (Bush, 2010; Nakajima, 2012; Settle, 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013). The educational disparity between the United States and other

countries is glaringly apparent. Attrition rates have endured despite spiral downward despite significant efforts to close the gap.

Although many of the studies reviewed explored student persistence, there is still some degree of ambiguity as to what constitutes the outcome of interest. The literature leads the reader to think that retention and persistence are interchangeably. Reason (2009) said this is erroneous. Retention is an organizational phenomenon where colleges and universities seek to retain students. Impressive institutional retention rates are expressed in terms of percentage of students who are retained. Institutions gain high rating which are viewed as measures of school quality. Persistence, on the other hand, is an individual phenomenon where the students persist to a goal (Reason, 2009). That is, a student's ultimate goal may (or may not) be to graduate from college. Because the student defines his or her goals, a student may successfully persist without being retained to graduation.

Another phrase used in the literature review was "educational attainment" to capture the disconnect between retention and persistence. Tinto (1987) included the term "stop out" to differentiate between students who leave permanently (dropouts). For the purposes of this study, I used primarily the term "persistence." My aim is to focus attention on a specific population of students' experiences and goal attainment rather than how the community college means of keeping students. The majority of the theorist reviewed seemed to suggest that graduation is equated with persistence.

I do not assume that any single intervention is a one size fit all for all students, nor should it be assumed that all African American men are impacted the same way

(Pascarella & Terenzini (2005). There still is a great need for persistence research that explores the experiences from the voices of those who are most likely

### **Phenomenological Methodology**

The phenomenological method was chosen for this research in order to use the participant's voice to give meaning to his lived experience as he interacts with faculty, administrators and staff at the community college, formally and informally, and to provide a generative base for further research in this area. The application of the phenomenological method to this study encourages the understanding of the essence of the individual's experience through the review and analysis of his story. In order to capture the essence of the experience of the phenomena, I have selected the narrative as the method of inquiry and the object of interpretation.

The narrative gives voice to the context in which the individual 's interpretation of their experience has been shaped. Narrative research purports that "we live in a storied world, a world in which our actions and those of others are interpreted, contextualized and transmitted through narratives. Consequently, narratives function as a means of exchange of worldviews between individuals (Murray, 2003). As it is that few research projects have been initiated that focus on the lived experience of the African American male community college student as he interacts formally and informally with college personnel, the use of the phenomenological method is appropriate.

### **Summary**

America's postsecondary African American male students are failing to persist to degree completion or the completion of vocational training. This observation has been



acknowledged by perplexed administrators and policy makers at the 2- and 4-year levels of study. An inability on the part of stakeholders to rein in this trend can have a catastrophic impact on the economic and social stability of the nation and its citizens. The accumulating effect of an undereducated and underprepared workforce compromises that country's status within the global community. The failure to integrate a population into any segment of the American academic, social and economic fabric undermines the nation's stability and growth. The African American male is a population that has been described as "in crisis" and consequently unable to fully exercise its position in American society as a contributing member of its growth and sustainment.

The African American male has been described by scholars and social onlookers as an "endangered species" (Gibbs, 1988). When compared to their Caucasian male peers the African American males' efforts to participate in all facets of American society has been derailed by a series of cumulative factors proportionately unique to the African American male population. This population's exposure to artificial barriers, such as racism, unparalleled instances of suspension from school and micro-aggression from K-24 has encouraged disengagement from the academic process and distrust of teachers and administrators.

Tinto's proposition is that a student who is integrated into the academic and social system of the college environment is likely to successfully persist toward desired academic and vocational outcomes (Tinto, 1993). Although the focal point of Tinto's research was the 4-year institution, excluding data derived from the 2-year institution, he determined that collegiate environments that were perceived by students to be lacking in

support systems, culturally insensitive and operating under a cloud of discrimination could have a deleterious impact upon the institution's ability to encourage positive academic and social outcomes for its students.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1997) proposed that "vicarious experiences", often viewed through the lens of role modeling as a vehicle by which an individual may transverse environmental obstacles and move forward toward success. Faculty members, given their subject matter expertise, authority, and credentials, are purveyors of institutional values, customs, and the academic message, subsequently providing sway over student academic self-efficacy (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Although research has been conducted on the importance of the campus environment and the influence of teachers on student persistence at the 4-year level (Tinto, 1993), studies documenting the lived experiences of African American males attending the community college are rare (Wood, 2014). Those studies that have examined the self-efficacy of Black males at community colleges have found a positive correlation between self-efficacy and academic success (Wood et al., 2014). Wilkins (2005) concluded that their sense of self-efficacy was derived from a combination of family support for education, the student's sense of competence, uniqueness, self-regulation and self-worth. Student interactions with persons viewed as role models was also a factor. Bates, concluded as a result of his study that featured 400 African American males that there was a strong relationship between self-efficacy, students' perceptions of their own academic preparation, and math anxiety.

My study addresses a gap in the literature by acknowledging the importance of the lived experiences of this population as described by their own voice. It has been determined that African American males lag behind their peers in persistence rates of achieving positive academic outcomes. This research when coupled with existent approaches encourages the development of effective interventions that improve the academic and psycho-social outcomes of African American males and similar under-represented populations.

Guided by the research questions, this study serves to advance the literature on Black men, persistence, campus climate, faculty-student interactions and community colleges. This study adds important context to the literature by filling the void on persistence predisposition for a population for which limited research exists (e.g., Wood, et al, 2014; Wilkins, 2006). This is a particularly salient contribution given that community colleges serve as the primary pathway into postsecondary education for Black men (Bush & Bush, 2010). Understanding the predictors of a disposition to disengage from the academic process by Black men can serve to bolster programming, policies, and practices designed to enhance academic and psych-social outcomes for these students. The academic community and its patrons, the students, would be well served to gain an understanding of the self-efficacy paradigm of African American males through the review of their lived experiences within the institution's environmental climate, as provided by the phenomenological methodology.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy.

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology and research design proposed for this study. I explain the criteria for participant selection and the process for the procurement of research participants. In addition, I review ethical protections, data collection, data analysis, and verification of findings.

#### **Research Methodology**

The phenomenology research method was selected to study a topic and population with a limited base of examination in scholarly literature. The qualitative method seeks to establish research underscoring the importance of understanding the lived experience of members of a sample population from their frame of reference (van Manen, 2017). Qualitative methodology allows the researcher an opportunity to capture the world of the participant as it is personally perceived and as it is experienced by the individual within a given life event (van Manen, 2017).

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), statistical research fails to capture the nuances of the human experience and may fail to account for the decidedly human side of social life. Statistical equations fail to uncover the intangibles, such as fear, pain, insecurity, the feeling of alienation, life experiences, and, in this case a sense of self-efficacy, that may shape an individual's perception of social encounters. The very natures of these variables render them difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Whereas

quantitative methodology yields numbers to categorize student behavior, qualitative methodology uses word for observations and anecdotal evidence to give meaning to the lived experiences of participants (Kuh & Andreas, 1991). Qualitative methodology gives life to the meanings inherent in the experiences of participants in the institutional setting, affording institutional personnel an opportunity to further their understanding of the students they serve (Kuh & Andreas, 1991).

### **Research Design**

The phenomenological approach was chosen for this research for its use of the participant's voice to elicit insight into the African American male community college experience. The following research questions are used to guide the research:

1. How do African American male students describe their social and academic experience in the community college setting?
2. How do students describe their formal and informal interactions with faculty?
3. How do African American male student experiences during the first year of college influence their decision to persist or not persist?

An understanding of the underpinnings associated with African American male interactions with faculty, administrators, and staff in both formal and informal settings provides a generative base for future research in this area. The application of the phenomenological method to this study encourages the understanding of the essence of the individual's experience through the review and analysis of his story. To capture the essence of the experience of the phenomena, I have employed the personal narrative as the key method of inquiry.

The narrative gives voice to the context in which the individual's interpretation of their experience has been shaped. Narrative research purports that "we live in a storied world, a world in which our actions and those of others are interpreted, contextualized, and transmitted through narratives." Consequently, narratives function as a means of exchange of worldviews between individuals (Murray, 2003). Because so few college-based research projects exist on the lived experience of African American male community college students as they interact formally and informally with college personnel, the use of the phenomenological method is both appropriate and essential.

### **Alternate Research Methods**

Creswell (2017) proposed five traditions of inquiry for qualitative research: biography, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and phenomenology. He supports the use of these traditions singularly or in combination. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of African American male students at a Western New York Community college as they interface with college personnel with special attention to the issue of student self-efficacy. When choosing one tradition over another for qualitative research, Creswell (2017) recommended the examination of the central focus of each strategy considering its purpose in expressing the intent of the proposed study. Since the focus of this study involves gaining insight into the essence of the collegiate experience of African American male special program students through a review of lived experiences within the 2-year postsecondary environment, the phenomenological approach represents the most appropriate research strategy.

The limits imposed by the foci of the remaining four traditions—biography, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study—render each less suitable as a research tool aimed at providing an understanding of the essence of the lived experiences of the subject population. The biographical tradition is not appropriate for this research due to that tradition’s focus on the life story of an individual (Creswell, 2017), as opposed to the intent of this study, which is to understand the experience of a phenomenon by an individual in a specific setting over a limited period. Interviewing is the primary source of information about the participants’ lived experience, whereas the biographical approach relies more heavily upon archived or recorded sources (Creswell, 2017). The intent of the grounded theory tradition is to generate or discover a theory (Creswell, 2013). This study does not attempt to establish a new theory; rather, its outcomes provide a measure of the applicability of established theories to the phenomenon addressed in this research. Ethnographic researchers interpret and examine the observable learned behaviors, customs, and mores of a social group or culture (Creswell, 2017). Although the sample population is African American, the focus of this research is not the study of the mores or culture of that group. Ethnography, consequently, is not most suitable method. In the case study approach, researchers study an individual or multiple individuals over time through the collection of data from multiple sources, seeking out key informants capable of providing insight into group behavior and suggesting resources to further illuminate certain behaviors of the studied group (Creswell, 1998). Whereas the phenomenological study provides insight into the individual’s perceived reality in reaction to the experienced phenomenon, the case study method is limited by an

individual or event over a specified period at a particular location (Creswell, 1998). Consequently, the case study method would not be a suitable approach for this study.

### **Participants**

The population is confined to African American males aged 18–70 who are enrolled in a Western New York State community college. Participants must have completed one semester of study to participate in this research. The number of participants chosen for interviews falls within the parameters common to the phenomenological data analysis process. Creswell (2017) recommended that the number of participants interviewed in a phenomenological research project range from five to 25. Fifteen students meeting the research criteria enrolled at a community college in the Northeast United States were recruited to participate and complete the study. The sample includes recent degree conferrals. Snowball and convenience sampling were used in this research. African American male exposure to several diabolical research efforts such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, as well as exposure to racism and misdiagnosis at the hands of medical and mental health professionals, has produced an atmosphere of distrust and reluctance to participate in research ventures. The selected sampling techniques allowed study participation information to be passed between individuals sharing common characteristics, increasing the possibility of trust and sense of security, thus minimizing a reluctance to participate in the study.

### **Participant Selection**

Central to a phenomenological study is that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2017). African American male students enrolled at



a community college located in Western New York were invited to participate in this study. Prior to the disbursement of letters of invitation to prospective participants, the Office of Institutional Research for both Walden University and the community college were petitioned for permission to recruit African American male students for this study. Enrolled individuals meeting the age, gender, and academic criteria having completed at least one semester of study at the collegiate level were invited to participate in the study via postings, face-to-face invitation, email, and or phone call. Each prospective participant received a formal letter of invitation by mail or email. I provided an explanation of the purpose of the study, the use and purpose of a demographic survey, risks associated with participation in the study, benefits of the study, and participant protections and consent.

### **Instrumentation**

Murray (2003) proposed two types of interviews, each with diverging purposes: (a) life history interviews and (b) individual (episodic) interviews. I used the individual interview in this study. The individual interview requires an in-depth review of a participant's experiences within a specific area of interest. The hallmark of this type of interview, in contrast to the life history interview, is that it is focused, structured and that it highlights the personal experiences of a participant in a select area of interest.

The focal point of the individual interviews conducted for this study is the lived experiences of African American male students studying under the auspices of a community college in relation to their interactions with college personnel and how those interactions inform self-efficacy. I used probing questions when a participant had

difficulty expressing his thoughts. The use of probing questions ensured that participant experiences relative to the research questions were addressed.

### **Data Collection**

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (#05-31-18-0010965), a list of students who met criteria for the study was obtained from the institution. I then sent a letter of invitation, my contact information, and the consent form to participants who met the criteria via email, postal mail, and /or telephone. Students who were interested in participating and who met the study's criteria were asked to contact me. Once contacted by participants, I explained the purpose of the study and asked participants to take part in an in-person interview about their social and academic experiences. Participants were informed that the information they shared, including their names, would remain confidential. Those who agreed to participate were given a date and time to interview.

When participants arrived for the scheduled interview, I explained the informed consent and gave participants the opportunity to ask additional questions. A brief description of the role of the researcher was also provided. Participants were assured that the risks associated with this study are minimal and that participation in the study would not compromise the participant's status as a student. After the participant signed the consent, he was required to select a pseudonym that would be used throughout the interview and analysis of the data. Each participant was given a copy of the signed consent form, and I retained a copy of the signed document to be stored in a secured cabinet. The interviews subsequently took place in a secured room or office. A handheld

Philips Voice Tracer and a Microsoft Surface Pro tablet were used while I interviewed each participant. The interviewing process ranged from 30 to 90 minutes.

All data and transcripts are stored on a password-secured computer in a secured cabinet in my home. Additionally, birth names and corresponding pseudonyms are stored in the secured cabinet. Study contents will be stored for a period of 3 years beyond the completion of the study and thereafter shredded or deleted from the hard drive.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher in this study, I collected, analyzed, and reported data. I gained the permission of the institution's human subjects review board to ensure compliance with institutional rules safeguarding the rights and well-being of participants. Students selected as participants are those for whom I have not engaged in an advisory capacity, do not maintain a personal or work relationship, or act in a supervisory capacity.

The primary task of the researcher is to extract information relevant to the lived experience of each participant. Murray (2003) suggested that the researcher, in order to encourage the sharing of accurate information from respondents, assume a supportive and empathetic posture. For this study, the researcher is responsible for adhering to the research questions, honoring the men by maintaining the integrity of their experiences and presenting their stories completely, honestly, and clearly. I am an African American male nonteaching faculty member at the community college where the study took place. I also have had a plethora of life experiences that have helped to shape my perceptions and worldview. As the researcher, I strove to bracket any preconceived ideas so they did not affect my interpretations of the experiences of African-American male students

participating in the study. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), it was essential to the interviewing process that I assume a posture of neutrality regarding the subject's knowledge and/or events relative to their lived experience. Arguments or debates between the respondent and myself over differences of perspective relative to lived experiences had to be avoided at all costs. Finally, crucial to the carrying out of my responsibilities as researcher was a willingness to consider the feedback of my committee and heed the comments of the peer reviewer.

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

Participants were made aware of key parameters of this study, including but not limited to their rights to do the following:

- withdraw from the study at any point; receiving an explanation of the purpose and parameters of the study is available for all parties
- have their confidentiality protected
- be informed that participation is voluntary
- be made aware of the minimal risks associated with participation
- elect to decline to answer a question

The participants in this study are African American male community college students. Interviews, unless otherwise determined, took place in a private room on the XCC campus (pseudonym). The consent form was discussed and included but was not limited to the following: the amount of time required, where interviewing would take place, and permission for the use of recording devices. Participants were free to terminate their participation at any time.

Participants were required to select a pseudonym that was used throughout the analysis and reporting of the study. Each participant was asked to read and to sign a consent form.

Questioning participants about their lived experience may be construed by African American participants as invasive and not in the individual's best interest. Given this population's history of distrust of healthcare providers, it was crucial that all efforts toward the reassurance and maintenance of confidentiality be undertaken.

Participants in this research remain free from retribution by instructors, administrators, and check to staff members.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process began after data were collected, transcribed, and organized. Upon completion of the interviews and transcriptions, I read and reread the transcripts and subsequently coded the data. The phenomenological theoretical framework was the systematic form of data analysis used. The phenomenological theoretical framework encourages examiners to review the meaning of experiences for individuals (Creswell, 2017). Creswell (2017) stated, "phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings" (p. 52). Although several authors have established procedures for the analysis of collected data,

The phenomenological process is a holistic one. As such, transcribed verbal data must be read in its entirety. The goal of the phenomenological perspective is to determine the meaning of experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2000). My task as the researcher is to

discern which sententious statement captures the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole. The researcher's review of the text as a unified body and the assignment of meaning to the transcribed text, which by its nature is a subjective application, constitute the holistic or sententious approach (van Manen, 2017).

Salient to the next step in the analysis process is the reduction of data into manageable units of psychologically sensitive expressions called meaning units. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) suggested that the researcher reread the data several times, highlighting and annotating varying themes. Giorgi and Giorgi also noted that it is not essential that each researcher establish identical meaning units to ensure procedural validity.

The final step in data analysis was to articulate the participant's language as it relates to the studied phenomenon in a psychologically explicit form. The articulation of the psychological meaning of the lived experience of the participants in a psychologically sensitive lexicon is crucial for the analysis of data relevant to the studied phenomenon.

NVivo software was used to analyze, store, organize, and code collected data. The use of the NVivo software allows for the collecting, sorting and analysis of non-numerical data obtained from the interview transcripts, in a password secured but easily accessible resource for the researcher. NVivo was used to discover and classify trends, themes and patterns derived from the data. It facilitated me in identifying direct quotations to support my conclusion. This software discourages errors in data collection and manipulation of large quantities of data often associated with researcher use of

manual analysis. NVivo helped me support research findings and tell research stories through descriptive visualizations.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research generally refers to the concepts of validity and reliability as established in quantitative research (Merriam, 2016). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative researchers seek trustworthiness based on four criteria: credibility (internal validity); transferability (external validity/generalizability); dependability (reliability); and confirmability. (Suter, 2012).

#### **Credibility**

Ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following provisions may be made by researchers to promote confidence that they have accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny: To ensure credibility, I discussed the research process and findings with experienced qualitative methodologists involved in the research. The aim is to ensure that the rigor of the qualitative process and the findings reflect the accuracy of the data (Suter, 2012). I used triangulation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016), as a method-appropriate strategy to support the credibility of my data. Triangulation uses collected data from varied sources that (are relevant to the same phenomena) have experienced the same phenomena. In the case of this study, data was collected from interviewing African American males attending community college who were 18 plus years of age, with a myriad of life experience, who experienced the same phenomena. Lastly, I used member checking to decrease the possibility of misinterpreting interviewee responses.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the concern that the results of the study can be applied to a wider population. Since the findings of a qualitative study are specific to a small number of individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations. I seek transferability by providing rich detailed descriptions of the interview data. This allows the readers to have a proper understanding and enable them to compare the research report with those that emerged in their research.

**Dependability**

In addressing the issue of dependability, the researcher employs techniques to show that, if the work were repeated, in the same context, using the same methods and similar participants, similar results should be obtained (Merriam, 2016). I achieved dependability by using audit trails to provide details of data collection and rationale for important decisions. In addition, I kept a journal throughout the study.

**Confirmability**

In confirmability, steps must be taken to help ensure that the researcher's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the preferences and perceptions of the researcher (Tufford & Newman, 2010). A key criterion for confirmability is the extent to which the researcher admits his or her own predisposition. Confirmability in this study was achieved through bracketing, that is throughout the interview process, I strove to set aside my personal biases, assumptions, and personal beliefs.



### **Summary**

The phenomenological method of narrative inquiry was chosen for this study as a means of providing voice to African American males in community college and understanding how their lived experiences influenced completion of their educational goals. This chapter described the proposed methodology, sampling method, and criteria for participation in the study. Method for data collection, data analysis, data verification, and ethical protection of the participants were also described. The chapter concluded with a discussion of issues of trustworthiness and the means of addressing each one.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do African American male students describe their social and academic experience in the community college setting?
2. How do African American male students describe their formal and informal interactions with faculty and staff?
3. How do African American male students' experiences during the first year of college influence their decision to persist or not persist?

In this chapter I provide an overview of the research methodology and provide insight into the qualitative data processes used to examine the research questions. In this chapter, I also provide the findings yielded using coded themes depicting the lived experiences of each of the study participants as communicated during the interview process.

### **Setting**

African American male students enrolled at a community college located in Western New York were invited to participate in this study. Interviews were conducted in a campus office space that insured privacy and confidentiality during the interview process. Face-to-face interviews with participants were conducted beginning in July of 2018 and concluding in October of 2018.

## **Demographics**

Each participant completed a demographic worksheet verifying presupposed criteria required for participation in this research project. All the participants were enrolled at the same community college during the interview period. Each student participant had completed at least one semester of collegiate study and met all inclusion criteria. Student participants willingly signed an informed consent form and agreed to participate. Participants were informed that they could opt out of answering interview questions if they chose. One participant, Young “C,” took advantage of that option, declining to answer one question. Each participant provided a pseudonym that insured anonymity and project integrity. The student-selected pseudonym will be the identifier of choice for the remainder of this study when referring to a participant. Table 1 provides a demographic breakdown of the 15 African American male community college students who participated in this study. The ages ranged between 19 and 70. The average number of semesters of attendance is 3.2. This table includes those participants who stopped out or spent periods of attendance at other institutions. Three students indicated attendance at other institutions or having “stopped out” for varied time periods.

**Table 1***Participant Demographic Variables*

| Participant                | Age | Number of semesters |
|----------------------------|-----|---------------------|
| Young “C”                  | 19  | 2                   |
| Pretty Tony                | 19  | 1                   |
| Walter <sup>a</sup>        | 21  | 4                   |
| James                      | 22  | 3                   |
| The Sous Chef <sup>a</sup> | 23  | 4                   |
| Moe                        | 24  | 6                   |
| Caesar                     | 24  | 2                   |
| Brandon <sup>b</sup>       | 35  | 3                   |
| Bird                       | 38  | 3                   |
| King                       | 45  | 3                   |
| Unc                        | 52  | 3                   |
| Jep                        | 52  | 3                   |
| Zeke                       | 62  | 4                   |
| Papi <sup>a</sup>          | 65  | 6                   |
| The Voice                  | 70  | 2                   |

<sup>a</sup> Represents participant that attended other institutions

<sup>b</sup> Represents participant the stopped out

### **Data Collection**

The data collection for this study consisted of interviews with 15 African American male community college students. The population is confined to African American males aged 18–70 who are enrolled in a New York State community college. Participants had to have completed one semester of study to participate in this research. The number of participants chosen falls within the parameters common to the phenomenological data analysis process. Creswell (2013) recommended that the number of participants interviewed in a phenomenological research project range from five to 25. Snowball and convenience sampling were used in this research. These sampling techniques allow study participation information to be passed between individuals

sharing common characteristics, increasing the possibility of trust, sense of security and thusly minimizing a reluctance to participate in the study.

In the data collection process, I conducted face-to-face interviews to capture the lived experiences of the participants. An interview protocol was utilized; however, I employed probing questions when a participant response needed further clarification. The sessions lasted anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes. I recorded information during the interview by using two devices, the handheld Philips Voice Tracer and a Microsoft Surface Pro tablet. These interviews were initially transcribed using NVivo Transcribe, a machine-based transcription software. A review and cleanup of the initial transcriptions was done. This transcription strategy minimized personal biases and interpretations during transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to store, organize, code, and facilitate analysis of the data. NVivo software allows for the collecting, sorting and analysis of nonnumerical data obtained from the interview transcripts, in a password-secured but easily accessible resource for the researcher. An NVivo project file was created, and each interview was imported into the file. Next, I opened and read each transcript. As I read, I created codes based on the ideas and experiences shared and described by each man. Direct quotes from the transcript were coded to support the ideas or experiences identified. Ideas and experiences that were similar in nature were coded to the same nodes. After all the transcripts had been read, I did a second reading so that initial transcripts could be reviewed in light of later developed codes and additional

information that may have been overlooked during the initial reading could be added.

Initial codes are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Initial Codes from Transcripts*

| Code   | Files coded | Total references |
|--|-------------|------------------|
| Mindset  | 9           | 41               |
| Perseverance   | 8           | 17               |
| Doubt by others lack of confidence, prove them wrong | 5           | 6                |
| Empowerment (feeling empowered)                      | 5           | 10               |
| I can make it I can do it                            | 13          | 64               |
| Exposure to a college like environment               | 6           | 15               |
| Mentoring, role models, someone who looks like me    | 9           | 37               |
| Military affiliation                                 | 5           | 11               |
| Feeling connected or belonging                       | 2           | 7                |
| Feeling unaccepted or unwanted                       | 6           | 9                |
| Disenfranchisement                                   | 7           | 29               |
| Felt supported in middle school or high school       | 2           | 4                |
| Felt underprepared for collegiate study              | 10          | 38               |
| Feeling invisible or marginalized                    | 9           | 40               |
| Feeling recognized and respected                     | 11          | 49               |
| Learning style                                       | 1           | 4                |
| Doubt, lack of confidence in ability                 | 4           | 4                |
| Motivated to inspire my children and others          | 3           | 5                |
| Family support                                       | 13          | 50               |
| Financial stability                                  | 4           | 7                |
| Microaggressions                                     | 10          | 23               |
| Resilience   | 4           | 8                |
| Spiritual connection as a support source             | 2           | 4                |
| Support from peers                                   | 7           | 18               |
| Support from school system                           | 11          | 34               |
| Trauma and loss                                      | 9           | 30               |
| Unrealistic or uninformed expectations               | 7           | 17               |
| Work   | 2           | 2                |

During the next step of the analysis, the codes and their supporting content were reviewed to identify those most prevalent across the participants and those which could

be collapsed into each other. Once this was completed, codes were grouped by similarity into broader themes. The final structure is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Final Code Structure*

| Major theme   | Subthemes  |
|---|--|
| Non-cognitive factors                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma and loss</li> <li>• Unrealistic or uninformed expectations</li> <li>• Underprepared for collegiate study</li> <li>• Support from their college instructors</li> <li>• Support from school system</li> <li>• Support from family</li> </ul> |
| Formal and informal interactions with faculty and peers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making connections</li> <li>• Feeling recognized and respected</li> </ul>   |
| Disenfranchisement                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Microaggressions</li> <li>• Cultural Sensitivity</li> <li>• Role models</li> </ul>  |
| Connectedness and belonging                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindset</li> <li>• Familial support translated into self-efficacy</li> </ul>  |

These themes were mapped onto the research questions. Table 4 shows the connections between the research questions and the themes.

**Table 4***Connections Between Research Questions and Major Themes*

| Research question   | Column A   |
|---|--|
| How do African American male students describe their social and academic experience in the community college setting?                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and informal interactions with faculty and peers</li> <li>• Disenfranchisement</li> <li>• Connectedness and belonging</li> </ul> |
| How do African American male students describe their formal and informal interactions with faculty and staff?                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal and informal interactions with faculty and peers</li> </ul>  |
| How do African American male students' experiences during the first year of college influence their decision to persist or not persist? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-cognitive factors</li> <li>• Academic/personal self-efficacy</li> </ul>   |

**Evidence of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

Ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure credibility, I discussed the research process and findings with experienced qualitative methodologists involved in the research. The aim was to ensure that the rigor of the qualitative process and the findings reflect the data accurately (Suter, 2012). I used triangulation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016), as a method-appropriate strategy to support the credibility of my data. Triangulation uses collected data from varied sources (relevant to the same phenomena) that have experienced the same phenomena. In this study, I compared the data collected from African American males attending community college who are 18 plus years of age with reported experiences of others beyond this campus environment as well as my own lived



experience. Lastly, I used member checking to decrease the possibility of misinterpreting interviewee responses.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the concern that the results of the study can be applied to a wider population. Since the findings of a qualitative study are specific to a small number of individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations. I sought transferability by providing rich detailed descriptions of the interview data. This allows the readers to have a proper understanding and enable them to compare the research report with those that emerged in their research

### **Dependability**

In addressing the issue of dependability, researchers employ techniques to show that, if the work were repeated, in the same context, using the same methods and similar participants, similar results should be obtained (Merriam, 2016). I achieved dependability by keeping an ongoing log of ideas or concepts derived during reviews and coding of the data.

### **Confirmability**

For confirmability, steps must be taken to help ensure that the researcher's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the preferences and perceptions of the researcher (Tufford & Newman, 2010). A key criterion for confirmability is the extent to which the researcher admits their own predisposition. Throughout the interview process, I used follow-up questions to verify

that the ideas expressed were what the participants were expressing and not an interpretation based on my experience and any socially mediated assumptions.

## **Results**

In this section, each of the identified themes is reviewed using a sampling of participant quotes to provide a meaningful context.

### **Theme 1: Noncognitive Factors**

Noncognitive factors are variables that are not of an empirical nature that may influence student performance, achievement, and behavior within a socialcultural context as well as school and classroom context.

Noncognitive factors can play a crucial role in shaping a student's disposition toward academics and willingness to persevere to desired or projected outcomes. It is conceivable that in the designing of policies, interacting with students and facilitating a healthy learning environment, experiential factors or noncognitive factors may be overlooked or devalued by academic and societal power brokers and the students that they serve.

#### ***Trauma and Loss***

Some students expressed the impact of trauma and loss, whether experienced by themselves or others during their academic experience. These episodes encouraged students to find the fortitude to pursue their academic goals. King expressed this very clearly when he said, "I dabbled and dabbled in the streets. You know, the 'easy life' and then I got shot. That was a BIG WAKE UP CALL." He went on to say,

I decided to make a career change. I laid up in the hospital for 11 days. I thought about everything. It hit me that my life had been spared. So, it was time to do something different. I never thought that something like this would happen.

Another participant, Pretty Tony, shared,

I made it through all this. I made it through funerals. I made it through harsh times. I remember almost losing my mom because she hurt herself at the gym and everything. She was in the hospital, and I was told that she could have died. I've gone through worse. I've gone through hell and back at least four times.

These experiences caused them to see that there are options, some bad and some better, and encouraged them to choose better options and make the choice to continue their academic studies which did not entail some of the dire consequences of previous choices.

Trauma and loss not only impact externally but internally as well. Zeke explained it this way:

I went through a period let's say 4 or 5 years ago where I wasn't feeling confident. I went through domestic issues that were a challenge. It shook me up. In trying to cope with the trauma associated with my domestic situation, I experienced a loss of self-esteem, asking a lot of questions of myself. So, it's been within this last I'd say probably 3 or 4 years that I embarked on regaining control over my life.

### ***Unrealistic or Uninformed Expectations***

Some of the men expressed a misguided conception of what was included in the collegiate experience. James expressed it this way:

It was kind of overwhelming because I started to get a little, you know, feel for it in EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] but it still wasn't even to the same spectrum of what college is really supposed to be. So, my view on college was, you party on Saturday or Friday. You study on Sundays and study throughout the week. You take a bunch of tests that are hard. So that's what I assumed college to be.

The picture that many of these men had of college was based on media images, especially movies. Because of these expectations, the reality of college made it difficult for these students to successfully transition to college. Moe specifically referenced movies that shaped his impression:

To be honest college wasn't really in the plans, so I didn't really have one. My image of college was based on movies like American Pie, type stuff. My perception was also influenced by the football games I saw on TV. That was my perception prior to enrolling in college.

Other movies such as Animal House also painted an unrealistic picture for some of these men. Pretty Tony shared,

Movie wise, frat parties and sororities, kids being drunk and waking up on the campus grass and finally, the nerds. You have your people who are just down with everybody, your sports people, you have people who just don't talk at all; take classes, pass and go home.

This made college feel overwhelming at first.

Some thought college was just a continuation of high school. Walter described his initial view this way: “Before college I had a pessimistic view of college. I thought It was just going to be a larger scale high school.” Pretty Tony quickly realized that he was not in high school anymore:

Then I walk into my first class. I got out and I’m like ‘What in God’s name just happened.’ Then I go to another class. This is like my first few days. Like for the first few days I’m like what did I just do. Oh man this is obviously different than high school. I’m like, OK this is totally different.

### *Underprepared for Collegiate Study*

Several students described themselves as being underprepared for collegiate study. they were caught by surprise by the degree of discipline and rigor associated with collegiate study in comparison to what they experienced during their secondary education. Interviewed students attributed their lack of preparation for advanced study to poor advisement, failure to enroll in appropriate coursework and the absence of skill sets needed for successful academic advancement during postsecondary study.

Bird asserted that his lack of preparation was linked to his failure to take core courses that were not linked to a particular major but established a foundation for most college majors. He stated,

While I was in high school, I thought I was very, very prepared. When I got to RIT, I was like “Wow”. A lot of things that I should have taken to help prepare for RIT, I didn’t take because at my high school I was more focused on Aquatic

Ecology. I chose Ecology because I wanted to be more in touch with nature instead of being stuck in classroom.

Being unaware of the rigor associated with collegiate study as well as missing basic information essential for success in the college classroom plagued both Brandon and James. Brandon expressed it this way,

I wasn't prepared for the actual amount of work that you have to do in college in order to you know be on the level of their expectations. I wasn't prepared for it and I knew that ahead of time and I kinda waved the white flag. I was like Yeah, I'm done

James simply stated, "My high school experience didn't prepare me for college." He added how his participation in sports contributed to this,

I felt like I was misguided. My family is really big on sports and in high school they didn't really give me the information I needed to know about college. They just wanted me to pass because they wanted me to play the next game. my football coach would get upset when I would stay after because I needed to learn what I was missing in class.

### ***Support From Their College Instructors***

Deriving positive satisfaction from interactions with professors was almost unanimously articulated by participants. This was a foundational piece upon which their academic success was built. Brandon talked about this in terms of one of his instructors,

I'm here for a reason and that reason is to get my degree. Last semester I was taking anatomy II lab and after every class I was always asking my professors

questions. I ended up getting a B and you know there's some things that you know I could have done better, but she told me after the semester was over, "You earned your grade the hard way". "You got the hardest "B" I've ever seen anyone ever get" and that meant a lot to me that I put in the hard work, and it was noticed. I didn't get an "A" but I got a "B" instead. She said that she wished me nothing but the best. I Appreciate it

James talked about it in more general terms,

They care enough to speak with you an extra 15 minutes. I have one professor who will meet me outside of class past office hours. I've met with this professor in the middle of the summer. I wasn't taking any courses at the time, and he sat with me and printed out a business plan for me, reviewed the format of it. He gave me advice, but he's African American. So, I wonder if he would he have done this if he wasn't. But you know I'm thankful for the help. It's crazy because when I think about it, he's like that with all of the students no matter what race they are.

Jeep shared that he felt encouraged by his instructors. He knew that he could reach out to them when he needed, "As of yet I haven't had to go to them during office hours. I talked to them during class. If I don't talk to them during class if I have a question, I do send an e-mail." There were always alternative ways of interaction.

King tied this together when he shared, "My instructors are willing to talk to the student if the student is willing to talk with them. They know a lot about construction. The biggest thing is that they have a lot of contacts in the community and are capable of setting you up. This program was a good choice for me."

### *Support From School System*

Students confirmed the importance of their K-12 experience as significant building blocks for future academic endeavors. Teachers and counselors were often found to be encouraging, even though there were instances where needed information was not disseminated. Pretty Tony addressed this, “But these teachers literally wanted me to pass, and they were not going to stop until I was up where I needed to be. They were not stopping, they were relentless.”

Encouragement by instructors of like race was noteworthy, but not a limiting factor, for most, in as much as some encouragement was typical of private and Catholic school systems. Papi talked about this when he said,

There’s an absence of racial balance amongst the teaching staff. Most were good teachers and were all paid well. They were all concerned, but I could say we just didn’t see a lot of black role models.

In some cases, participation and excellence in sports superseded academic development. Pretty Tony talked about this, “Both coaches and principals left me alone because I was on the football team, and they saw me as an asset.”

Parental involvement was significant and often tempered school problems such as resolution of discipline or teacher-student relationship issues. Zeke expressed it this way, “I’d say 16 or 17 out of 20 [teachers] seemed to be encouraging and more than anything I recognize the fact that it had to do with the fact that I had a parent that was actively involved in my education and wouldn’t allow anything that looked like a discrepancy.”



A few mentioned implied deficit issues but it was not always overt. Young Cee explained it this way,

There are a couple that seem like they don't care or seem like they're just there for the paycheck. When I ask a question sometimes, I feel like they seem to be bothered, it's like "I've already answered this question, you should have known this, but I'll answer it again for you."

### *Support From Family*

Familial support was shown by participants to be of great value. Conscientious parents and extended family helped shape participant perspectives on the importance of education and academic achievement. As each of the participants talked about their educational experiences, the important role of family was mentioned. For most of them the foundation of their success in education was found in the home. Bird stated this directly, "I said I was lucky because I had that home foundation. But what we know is that most of us don't have that home foundation."

With the foundation in place, these men were taught that education was a tool that could help them succeed throughout life. Their parents, and sometimes extended family members reinforced the idea that education was important. Bird described it this way,

My sister went back to school, and she got about two or three degrees. My youngest brother got two degrees. The brother right under me; I think he went to Alfred State University and needed a few courses to finish. He didn't finish. He went to trade school and got his construction credential. So, everybody within the

nucleus of the family and the extended family valued education. We have doctors and lawyers in the family.

Not only did the students find verbal support they also saw those around them as role models. Moe talks about his mom as a role model,

It's really my family, especially the example set by my mom. She doesn't even work in her field. She wanted to get that degree just to set an example. So, I feel like I kind of owe it to her to at least get my bachelor's degree.

### **Theme 2: Formal and Informal Interactions with Faculty and Peers**

Being able to interact with the instructors was important to these men. The participants shared that they could interact with their instructors both during and after class time. The exchanges could be face to face or via email. Bird's comment reflected a common thread about the instructors,

She sees the growth within you and within herself she's happy. Like I say wow, that's a boss teacher, she was born to do this, you know. I mean she just makes it feel good. This is hard subject matter. She's not going to lie and say it's easy. She chops it down and says we can do this.

A few students wanted to be able to interact with their professors outside of the classroom by they also wanted to respect the professor's personal time and found it to be an imposition or personally inconvenient to approach instructors after class, however they found alternative modes to reach their goals. Brandon talked about this when he said,

Outside a classroom I'm usually more like get down to business, you know. I'm there to ask him a question, they're there to help. It was like we're both there for a

reason I mean that's like them coming to me while I'm eating or going to my car and begin to ask me questions about my class. On top of that, I've got to go home and do other things so I will never approach them in that setting Yeah, I don't want to interrupt them while they're, you know, like I say eating or going to their car. To me that's just rude. So, in a hallway if they're in the same building as I am which most of them are, I'll ask, "Excuse me sir/ma'am do you have time? "If they say yes, then I'll express my concern.

The role of the instructors or advisors is critical during the first year. King shared this when he said, "So I think that an advisor for everybody but especially for us coming in so that we can start off on the right foot because once you start doing bad and start failing that's when someone is prone to want to quit." He later added, "You should be better prepared. Somebody should be there to help us. The first year an advisor should be available to make sure that things are going in the right direction."

### ***Making Connections***

The students want to feel that the instructors are working with them, that they are invested in seeing them succeed. King described one of his instructors in this way,

I have one, Mr. J. I always listen to him when he talks. I know that he's familiar with interacting with people of color because he works with another minority in Construction, that I went to school with. He pushes me and tells me the in's and outs of Construction. So, he's encouraging me not to be afraid. It's a big playing field out there in Construction and they don't really play fair. His attitude is "I made it, and so can you".

Pretty Tony spoke about one of his instructors taking the time to notice that something had changed for him and asking about it.

One of my professors started wondering what 's going on with me because I always showed up every day for school. I never missed a day. Next thing you know I'm not here for two weeks. And I just pop up. So, my professor asked what had happened and I told him about my accident.

Sous Chef summed it up this way, "They really don't blow me off. They see me often and they always know that I need help because they know what I'm going through and they know about my situation,"

### ***Feeling Recognized and Respected***

For these men feeling that they were respected was important. This helps build their confidence and can be a building block to their success. Bird shared, "First, they view me as somebody with a sound mind so they kind of always respect my ideas and I do follow up." Instructors who spent time with them showed these men that they were valued and respected. Papi shared a specific experience,

I spoke with Dr. W yesterday about the Men of Merit. I sat in with him for about an hour and he said yeah, we can help you with your veteran's upgrade and your discharge status. So, you know there's other resources that I can tap into which are also a motivation for me. I also found several scholarships that I might be eligible for money. He was saying if it's not me, I can put you in touch with someone that can put you in the right direction.

Walter put it simply, “If I come to a professor with a need or concern, they’ll attempt to resolve it or send me to someone who can.”

### **Theme 3: Disenfranchisement**

Although these men had experiences where they felt respected, at times in their life they also felt disenfranchised. They expressed a feeling that they were not provided with the skills they needed to be successful. At times they were made to feel that they were not worthy of the investment of time. King plainly stated it,

I believe we’re pushed aside. When I came to XCC the first time I wasn’t ready for college. Being older now and seeing these young black males coming in, they’re not ready, not like the white students. So, the classes we take that first year they’ve already taken them. So, it’s like a breeze to them. So, we’re really pushed through, and they know we’re not prepared.

Sometimes this was done in an overt way. Brandon told of a situation involving his English teacher,

We’ll call him Mr. H because I remember his name began with a “H”. He taught English in seventh and eighth grade and we were reading something, and I just didn’t like reading. So, he kind of said like, because I was on the basketball team, “well at least you can read a play book” and kind of left it at that. So, I was like “Yeah I can, but not without thinking, I was just like “whatever. “ I didn’t do well in his class, and I didn’t like him.

James summed it up when he said, “I felt like nobody really cared at my school. I felt like I never had a teacher who actually cared.”

A lack of role-models also contributed to this feeling. Papi pointed out, “Even in my college experience, I still don’t see a lot of black role models. You might have one black gym teacher. In all of those years, I only had one black teacher.” He also shared, “There’s an absence of racial balance amongst the teaching staff. Most were good teachers and were all paid well. They were all concerned, but I could say we just didn’t see a lot of black role models.”

#### **Theme 4: Connectedness and Belonging**

Students’ sense of inclusion was not limited to interaction with instructors but included participation in meetings, classroom discussion, tutorials, peer interactions and seeking and receiving additional support. Instances of positive inclusion are across the academic pipeline. Walter started to describe it in this way, “I’m referring to contact with other students. It is not on the level of racism, so much as who I choose to interact with and who chooses to interact with me which I don’t really see as an issue.” Later he added, “I determine who I will interact with in terms of what I need from certain people. If I want to have a relationship that’s goal oriented, I’ll see people who are primarily working on schoolwork on campus rather than people who are playing games.” Bird addressed this very specifically,

At RIT, I was involved in cultural activities. I was a member of the Caribbean Student Association (CSA) and the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). When I returned to the academic arena via XCC, I joined the American Public Works Association (APWA) and the National Society of Leaders (NSL). In my heart I had a dream of having my own village. Engineering would give me the

skills to do so and being a part of APWA would give me the skills to do so.

APWA's efforts have to do with city life. They deal with such things as the roadways, traffic lights and highways and everything that it takes for a community to run. I believe having all these skills would help me get to that goal.

#### **Theme 5: Academic/Personal Self-Efficacy**

Having the ability to successfully meet challenges and possessing the ability to successfully complete assigned tasks was equally recognized by study participants. Unc expressed it this way, "When you're willing to settle for less that means you don't want to move ahead, you don't have the expectation of moving to bettering yourself. Bettering myself is one thing I've always worked toward." It was not uncommon for participants to attribute a sense of self efficacy to family members, support from their instructors, and possessing a strong sense of personal motivation. Unc talked about this in terms of his father,

Growing up I was one of those who wanted to be adventurous, and my father was the type of person who made it clear that I was going to do something positive. He made it clear that I wasn't going to venture onto the wrong path. Either I was going to work or go to school. So, I chose to be around people that had businesses. I looked at them as mentors. They taught me how to work on cars. That opened the door for me to work on cars and that kept me out of trouble. Then I started having employment I started doing the same thing. I started finding companies where I could BE MY OWN BOSS.

Sometimes the family was the motivator for the participant and sometimes the participant wanted to be the motivator for the family. Pretty Tony blended these both together,

Not a lot of people in my family graduated from high school. I'm number five this millennium. I am number five that graduated from high school. Out of both my dad and my mom's side, I'll be number three that graduated college with any type of degree; be it associates, bachelor, advanced or anything. I'll be number 3. So, I want to show my peers, and my younger brothers and sisters, cousins and nieces and nephews what they can accomplish. It's like" you see where I was, and you saw what I was doing. You see I'm doing this, we're all in the same boat." What I'm doing, you can do it too, but only if you want it."

### ***Personal Belief***

Many of these men found within themselves a belief that they could be successful. This becomes a key factor in keeping them moving forward in their academic career. Brandon was very direct in expressing this, "I don't need a lot of encouragement and affirmation. It's good to have, but I don't need it. I'm a very driven and very confident." He went on to say, "I don't need a lot of encouragement and affirmation. It's good to have, but I don't need it. I'm a very driven and very confident." Moe echoed this feeling, but did acknowledge that doubt can creep in, but not for long, "I'm always confident, initially. At certain points that might waiver but I'm always confident that I could learn anything."



### *Mindset*

Even with a personal belief, there had to be a mindset focused on success and the strategies and habits that would lead to achievement. Most of these men talked about creating a focus on success. Papi laid the foundation for this when he said, “The objective is to understand the information and show competence in your computations. Confidence in your ability to successfully complete assigned tasks is very important.” Later he talked about a specific point in his academic career when he said, “I said I’m not quitting; I’m not a quitter. I’m putting in the time because I want to pass these tests. I might not do well on the quizzes, but by the time I get to the test I’ll be ready.” For Jeep, his focus was born out of his time in the military,

I learned a lot during my time in the military. I guess it did kind of prepare me for coming to college to be kind of disciplined to study. I did lose a little bit of it, coming home from the military back to civilian life. In the military I was trained to be strictly disciplined to do my job, get it done and do it right the first time. In the end he summed it up by saying, “My focus is better now. I’m like a dog with a bone sometimes, if I really want something; I’m staying with it.”

### *Familial Support Translated into Self-efficacy*

As discussed earlier, familial support was an important factor in the lives of these men. For many of these men these experiences translated into a higher level of self-efficacy, a belief that they could be successful if they persevered. This went beyond just their academic pursuits, it extended to their lives in general. Poppy expressed this way,

“They toughened me. So, when I got to somewhere I didn’t recognize, unfamiliar terrain, I could navigate and succeed.” Unc encapsulated these ideas when he shared,

Either I was going to work or go to school. So, I chose to be around people that had businesses. I looked at them as mentors. They taught me how to work on cars. That opened the door for me to work on cars and that kept me out of trouble. Then I started having employment I started doing the same thing. I started finding companies where I could BE MY OWN BOSS. So, I got involved in a cleaning business. The janitorial work gave me a work opportunity until I found something better. I’m also the type of person, that just doesn’t settle for less. When you’re willing to settle for less that means you don’t want to move ahead, you don’t have the expectation of moving to bettering yourself. Bettering myself is one thing I’ve always worked toward.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the research methodology and provide insight into the qualitative data processes used to examine the research questions. The responses of the 15 participants were recorded without prejudice or bias. In some cases, participants encountered difficulties understanding the question, consequentially questions were reinterpreted for them to elicit the most comprehensive response. I also provided the findings yielded using coded themes depicting the lived experiences of each of the study participants as communicated during the interview process. These themes included the role non-cognitive factors play in shaping the way these men approached and interpreted their college experience, the importance of both formal and informal

interactions with faculty and peers, experiencing feelings of both disenfranchisement and belonging, and the importance of self-efficacy in their ability to persevere.

In Chapter 5, I will connect the findings of my study with the relevant literature. I will discuss the implications of the results of this study and discuss how 2-year learning institutions, such as community college, may apply the findings in helping this population persist academically and socially through the acknowledgement of their lived experiences. At the end of this study, there will be suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose and nature of this descriptive phenomenological was to explore the lived experience of African American male community college students regarding their academic persistence, formal and informal interactions with their instructors, and self-efficacy. In my analysis of the data, I identified several key themes:

- the role of non-cognitive factors
- the importance of formal and informal interactions with faculty and peers
- feelings of disenfranchisement
- the importance of connectedness and belonging
- academic/personal self-efficacy

In this chapter, I will explain the significant findings that materialized in the study and compare the findings to those of the literature review in Chapter 2. This chapter will also include a summary of the results, a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations, and clinical implications of the findings of the study. The implications for future research are also explained in this chapter.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The experiences of these men are not unlike those discussed in the literature. For many, the foundation of their college experience began with the family. “The literature substantiates the assertion that family support positively influences student success and is influential in child development and academic achievement” (Rall, 2021). Factors identified in the literature and reflected in participant comments include family structure, parental education, parenting style, physical discipline (Lee, 2018; Marchane et al., 2019;

Muller, 2018; Rall, 2021). A study from Varner et al., (2018) concluded that students whose parents were involved and/or vigilant had higher levels of self-regulation and engagement in school, as well as developing a positive ethnic identity despite encountering microaggressions (Varner et al., 2018).

Although many of these men had either unrealistic or uninformed expectations or felt underprepared for college, they were able to persevere and, in some cases, recognize that they were able to “make it.” Other factors, particularly noncognitive factors, such as life experience, familial support, community support systems, and support from instructors and mentors, helped them develop a resilience that allowed them to overcome the deficit view that society often holds in terms of African American males. Wint et al. (2022) discussed that the deficit view held in much of the literature was in fact ill-informed and showed how situations such as those shared by the participants in this study could counter a deficit view. (Wint et al., 2021)

According to Kunjufu (1985), early schooling experiences can dissuade students from the learning process and continuing their education. He pointed out that, by fourth or fifth grade, African American boys may not be challenged or, because of personal traits, may be reprimanded to disciplinary actions and begin to intellectually check out of the learning process. However, in this study, there were a number of participants who had advocates (i.e., parents, loved ones, and concerned others) were able to intervene and mitigate many of the negative experience Kunjufu described and helped them to persist and attend to their academic regime. According to Owusu-Agyeman (2021), students develop a sense of belonging when they are part of a supportive, culturally diverse

campus, a place where they feel recognized and respected. The interactions with the faculty discussed earlier supported this. The participants in Owusu-Agyeman's study felt that having a more diverse faculty would have also improved their sense of belonging. . The participants in this study shared a similar feeling and supported the need for diversity across the campus.

Self-efficacy was a major contributing factor to the success of these students. For some of these men, it was a natural part of who they are. For others, it grew out of life experience from familial support, instructor support, mentoring, or military experience (Peaslee, 2018).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Sampling constraints and the institution's three separate campus locations forced the sample to be drawn from one of the three campuses and therefore focused the study on a particular segment of a larger population, limiting access to students who only frequented one of the other campuses. The composition of the participant cohort was reflective of the African American male population at a particular community college. The results are reflective of the population that I interviewed and may not be applicable to other racial or gender subgroups. African American men attending community college are not reflective of a homogeneous cohort. They may vary in age, regional origin, and other demographic particulars that may impact their verbal expression. Additional prompting was sometimes needed to assist the participants in clearly expressing their ideas.

## Recommendations

The documented lived experiences of the African American male community college students chronicled in this study indicates a hearty group of learners who, despite varying degrees of challenge, have the ability and tenacity to achieve success within their academic world. Sources of support, encouragement, and empowerment were varied in frequency and degree throughout the participant's life. Interventions need to be considered long before these learners reach the collegiate level. Several of the participants expressed the benefit of mentoring throughout their academic journey. Mondisa and Adams (2022) also noted this as a critical factor in persistence. Another example shared by the participants was the importance of a faculty reflective of the students they serve. This may be achieved through the hiring of a diverse group of professionals capable of connecting positively with the students.

Traditional methods for evaluating the likelihood of success, such as SAT or ACT scores or GPA, do not adequately assess the external factors crucial to success as in the life experiences of these students (Hines et al., 2019). Some of these traditional methods may also contain culturally insensitive components or be designed for a certain segment of the population of which these students are often not a part (Hines et al., 2019). Questions about the SAT's usefulness as a predictor of college success has led to the adoption of test-optional policies by many universities (Manhattan Review, 2022).

An option that should be adopted by all colleges is the inclusion of noncognitive factors, which are often discounted during the college selection process but more often

than not are high value factors in the student's life. Additionally, the learning process may be enriched through the incorporation of pedagogical skillsets at the instructor level.

Instructors at the community college level, although possessing content area expertise, could benefit from professional development in instructional methods and strategies, as well as interpersonal skills. This can be achieved through a tiered curriculum that focuses on foundations of learning and teaching for postsecondary students, with a predominate theme being the pedagogy of inclusion, diversity, and equity (Bentle-Edwards et al., 2020; Puppo, 2019). There are institutions that have implemented programs designed to improve teaching and learning across the faculty, such as Merrimack College's, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CTEL) in North Andover, Massachusetts, where seminars and multisession workshops are used to support instructional improvement methods, enhance a college-wide climate of excellence in teaching and learning through implementing programs and activities that enrich and improve teaching and learning, and promote active learning strategies and pedagogy as tools for teaching and learning innovation.

## **Implications**

### **Positive Social Change**

The implications for positive social change as a result of this study are providing insight into the challenges and supports identified by African American males in a community college with an emphasis on cultural competence. Instructors need to be able to view the learning experiences through the various cultural lenses of their students to provide the greatest likelihood for the success of the students. In short, this research helps



elucidate the experiences of African American male community college students who have identified their challenges and supports that they believe have helped them persist. The data collected from this study could be used as a tool to promote social change by enabling community college personnel to see their role through a different and more focused cultural lens.

With this understanding, community colleges can pursue their stated mission of developing persistent and productive students. It must be emphasized that faculty members are highly regarded for their level of expertise and experience. A faculty member who shows respect and positive regard for his students goes a long way to encourage academic progress, for a population familiar with exclusion as opposed to inclusion and discouragement as opposed to encouragement. Consequently, college educators will have the information to encourage administrators to initiate programs and interventions to support and encourage the academic persistence of this group, which in turn could positively impact individual students, their dependents, and their community.

Although difficult to measure, the simple act of participating in this study may have had a positive impact on these men. A number of them shared that this experience made them feel listened to, some for the first time. They felt valued, and this could encourage them to do something they might not ever have dreamed of.

### **Methodological Implications**

A qualitative phenomenological study was the best way to elicit the lived experience of the African American male students in attendance at a northeastern community college.

The application of the phenomenological method of this study encourages the understanding of the essence of the individuals' experience through the review and analysis of their stories and provides a generative base for further research in this area. Furthermore, this approach was well received by the participants because they identified the fact that someone was asking them to talk about what they had experienced, and they were able to fully express their ideas in their own words and broke from the preconceived ways that this group is often portrayed.

### **Conclusion**

The gap in graduation and persistence rates between European American and African American males in pre-collegiate and postsecondary domains has been well established in the scholarly literature and social media. Nonetheless, stakeholders remain befuddled by this observation. My research was undertaken to demystify the conundrum associated with the African American males' struggle to persist—in short, their efforts to meet their academic and or vocational goals. The community college has been chosen as a tool of advancement by many within this group because it is cost effective, community focused, and provides admission through “open access.” When open access is considered, new enrollees will often avoid the limitations and biases associated with the SAT and ACT examinations. In addition, community colleges have been shown to provide an array of options for those encountering life altering noncognitive barriers such as the recognition of student responsibilities (e.g., childcare, work, and parental care) and/or barriers such as microaggressions, motivation, lack of suitable pre-enrollment preparation, unrealistic expectations, and motivation. My research shows that when this

group of students was equipped with a system of support on and off campus, such as a supportive family unit, a safe and supportive learning environment, accessible, caring, and competent instructors, mentorship, tutoring and those accepting of alternate worldviews, they showed resilience and persistence.

This is important because, for the United States to maintain a strong foothold in today's knowledge-driven economy, it must garner a well-educated workforce capable of competing with likeminded countries for limited resources and assets. As noted by Hines et al. (2020), the needs of a globalized world far exceed the skillsets garnered through a high school education. The most capable and competitive person will be the one who persists academically and technically beyond high school. African American males, as family and community leaders, must persist academically to encourage economic and social advancement and to be seated at the table of family, community, and national stability.

The community college, given its accessibility and reasonable cost, has become the institution of choice for many African American men pursuing academic and technical advancement. When provided with needed support systems and an opportunity to express an often-muted voice in the establishment of programming and policies that impact their population and other stakeholders, with the community college as a vehicle of change, African American men can increase their chances of persevering and establishing themselves as a recognizable contributor to their own well-being, as well as that of their family, community, and nation.

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## Appendix A: Demographic Survey

**Please answer the following questions.**

Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Semesters completed in school \_\_\_\_\_;

Number of credits as of today \_\_\_\_\_

Have you graduated \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what year did you graduate \_\_\_\_\_

What degree did you earn \_\_\_\_\_ What was your major \_\_\_\_\_

Did you transfer to or from another school \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe yourself? You may include but not be limited to demographic information such as gender, age.....
2. Would you consider yourself to be highly driven, laid back, motivated (a little, a lot), a person in need of encouragement, a self-starter, seeker of affirmation of ability
3. What is the highest degree you have earned?
4. How would you describe your experiences from k-college?
5. How prepared do you believe you were for collegiate study?
6. What would you say about the study skills that you had upon entering college?
7. Would you describe your picture or perception of college before you started your collegiate study?
8. How would you describe your experience at this institution? Please explain
9. Do you talk to your professors after class or see them during office hours?
10. What do you see as your greatest strength in being able to persevere in your education? Please explain.
11. What would you change in the process to facilitate more African Americans obtaining educational success?
12. How would you describe your interactions with your professors? Do you feel well received? Are they friendly, caring or seemingly bothered or uncomfortable or about “the paycheck”?



13. Several qualities are often associated with successful educators: Sensitivity to others, being on time, availability/ approachable, caring, observe published office hours, articulate and impassioned about their subject matter, etc. Which of those qualities best describe your instructors?
14. Do you think your professor is knowledgeable about the subject they are teaching?
15. Does my professor facilitate participation in the classroom and allow for expression of student opinions which may differ from the instructor?
16. What are my interactions like when I encounter my professors outside of the classroom?
17. Prior to your enrolling in XCC how confident were you in your ability to succeed in college?
18. Since enrolling in XCC how confident are you in your ability to succeed in college?
19. Did your high school and instructors prepare you for success in college?
20. Since enrolling in XCC have your professors prepared you to be successful in college? Describe in detail.....
21. Given your interaction with institutional faculty in and outside of the classroom would you enroll at XCC all over again?