

2016

# Minority Initiatives and the Engagement Experiences of Black Male College Students

Charika Arthur  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Charika L. Arthur

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Review Committee

Dr. Kelly Davis, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty  
Dr. Melody Richardson, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty  
Dr. Bonnie Nastasi, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Minority Initiatives and the Engagement  
Experiences of Black Male College Students

by

Charika L. Arthur

MA, Liberty University, 2006

BS, Liberty University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

August 2016

## Abstract

Black males complete college at a lower rate than do all ethnic minority groups in the United States. Many universities have developed programs to improve educational outcomes for Black males, yet graduation rates remain low. The purpose of this study was to explore the engagement experiences of Black male college graduates who participated in the African American Male Initiative, a successful program developed by the University Systems of Georgia. The organizational learning theory was used to address how an academic institution can work collectively to adapt to changes that occur within the learning environment. Also, the anti-deficit achievement framework was used to discover the interventions that helped participants' complete college. The research questions in this study examined engagement experiences, preferred activities, motives for selecting certain activities, and the interventions that helped participants succeed. Data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth phone interviews with 6 participants. Creswell's version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method was used to move inductively from significant statements to 8 themes that emerged from interview answers. Results showed all participants attended an AAMI class twice a week and 5 out of 6 participants engaged in other campus activities (student government, fraternities, Black Student Alliance). Four interventions that helped participants graduate included: (a) learning study and leadership skills, (b) mentorship, (c) networking, and (d) building relationships with peers in the program. This study is expected to contribute to social change by informing high schools, colleges, and universities of successful methods that may help improve academic outcomes for Black male college students.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Jordan, Samiya, and London. With God, all things are possible.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Black males, who represent less than 5% of all post-secondary students, complete college degree programs at a rate lower than both genders and all ethnic minority groups in the United States (Strayhorn, 2010; Wood 2011). However, researchers have found that Black males who are involved in academic activities inside and outside the classroom are more likely to graduate, obtain internships, and compete for higher paying jobs (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Studies have also shown that the majority of Black male college students have no academic interests outside the classroom, particularly at predominantly White colleges and institutions (PWI's, Harper et al., 2011). Researchers have attributed the problem of noninvolvement to the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of Black students (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Woods, 2011). However, some educators suggest that it is the school's responsibility to identify their role in engaging college students, particularly Black males (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Some colleges have made significant strides in creating environments that foster student engagement on the campus (Harper & Quaye, 2009; USG, 2012). For example, in 2002, the University Systems of Georgia (USG) created the African American Male Initiative (AAMI) to help engage students in campus activities and resources. After implementing AAMI, USG experienced a 58.11% increase in bachelor degrees from 2003 to 2011 and a 34.80% increase in bachelor degrees from 2009 to 2015 (USG, 2016).

Although, USG experienced noteworthy improvements in their graduation rates, there is no record of the direct AAMI interventions that helped students succeed (Board of Regents USG, 2012). This study sought to understand the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from USG's AAMI institutions, and to explore the AAMI interventions that helped participants graduate from college. Therefore, this study was needed to inform educational institutions of certain methods that may help improve academic outcomes for Black male college students. Increasing graduation rates would help more Black males obtain competitive jobs, which would improve the economy, and help the United States compete on a more global.

Chapter 1 identifies the research problem, the significance of the study, and the methods used to explore and answer the research questions.

### **Background**

For the past decade, researchers have studied the factors that have contributed to low college completion rates among Black males (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2010; Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood, 2013). Studies have shown that Black males who attend college have more challenges to conquer than attaining a degree, particularly at PWIs. They must overcome racism, collegiate maladjustment, and stereotypes of cognitive inferiority that are often portrayed in the media (Harper & Davis III, 2012; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Wood, 2011). Educators have addressed their challenges with a deficit approach, emphasizing the disadvantages the population has faced academically. Though this type of research is essential in understanding the challenges Black males have encountered, it amplifies

failure instead of achievement, and has caused greater challenges for Black male college students (Harper, 2010).

For example, high-achieving Black students often expressed the need to prove their academic merit because faculty and students stereotyped them as being accepted into college due to athletic ability or because of affirmative action (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Black males who attended Ivy League institutions felt that their college was more antagonistic toward Black males than students of other ethnic backgrounds (Harper et al., 2011). Thus, Black students may feel unwelcomed and isolated on campus in such environments (Harper et al., 2011; Harper & Davis III, 2012; USG, 2012).

Tinto (2000) found that students leave undergraduate studies because they feel disconnected from peers, professors, and administrators. When students actively participate in academically focused activities in class and on campus, which is defined as engagement (Kuh et al., 2007), they tend to be more committed to their educational institution (Tinto, 2000). Thus, for Black males who are engaged, the commitment level to their college is likely to increase. There is a lack of qualitative research on the engagement experiences of Black male college students (Strayhorn, 2010). Likewise, there is a lack of research on the efforts of institutions in helping Black male undergraduates become involved in engagement activities (Foster, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

Black males only represent 4.3% of all undergraduate students in the United States (Strayhorn, 2010), impacting the populations' chances of obtaining a competitive job (Palmer et al., 2010). College students are more likely to earn a degree when they are involved on campus, connecting with faculty members (academic integration), and interacting with peers (social integration; Reid, 2013). For Black males, engaging in campus activities has more of a positive impact on college completion rates than for White males and Black females (Reid, 2013). Researchers have shown that Black males who are engaged in educationally focused activities increased their ability to overcome challenges in college, despite academic under preparedness, low economic status, and coping with racially hostile environments (Harper, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Palmer et al., 2009).

USG has experienced success in engaging Black male college students on campus through a system-wide AAMI, and has seen a significant increase in graduation and enrollment rates after they began implementing the initiative in 2002 (USG, 2012). Exploring the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI schools could provide valuable information for other educational institutions that are in need of improving the educational outcomes of Black males. There is a knowledge gap in understanding Black male engagement preferences on campus and the motives for choosing certain campus activities (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Thus, gaining insights into the experiences of graduates from AAMI institutions is expected to add to the literature on student engagement.



### **Purpose of the Study**

This study had three purposes: (a) to explore the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from colleges and universities within USG and were involved in AAMI programs; (b) to discover if there are preferences for particular campus activities and the motives behind choosing certain activities., and (c) to add to the literature on using an anti-deficit approach to understanding how Black male college students achieve academic success through institutional initiatives such as AAMI. Other studies look only at why Black male college students experience failure.

### **Research Questions**

This study was based on the following four guiding questions:

1. What are the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI Institutions?
2. What activities, if any, did Black male graduates of AAMI institutions prefer to become involved in that helped them increase academic success and/or feel more connected to their university?
3. What were the motives behind selecting certain AAMI activities for Black male college graduates?
4. What AAMI interventions or resources helped Black males manage to complete college?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on two frameworks: organizational learning theory and anti-deficit achievement framework.

### **Organizational Learning Theory**

This study was based on organizational learning theory, which states that “in order to be competitive in a changing environment, organizations must change their goals and actions to reach their goals. In order for learning to occur, however, the firm must make a conscious decision to change actions in response to a change in circumstances” (BYU, 2011, p. 1). This theory was used to address how an academic institution can work collectively to adapt to changes that occur within the learning environment, particularly as they relate to Black males in PWIs (Quaye & Harper, 2009). The college learns how to engage the population from past successes and failures, exposing and correcting past mistakes. School administrators expect problems to occur, but respond with a plan to ensure that students have the best opportunity to achieve academic success (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

### **Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

This study was based on the anti-deficit achievement framework. Harper (2010) developed the framework for research on students of color in science, technology, engineering, and math programs. In turn, the framework was based on several theories in education, sociology, and psychology that are related to the educational inequalities of ethnic/minority groups (Harper). The anti-deficit framework helped propose questions to discover how—contrary to the deficit model—Black males have succeeded in higher

education. Thus, the deficit model questions why Black males fail to succeed academically (Harper, 2012). To answer the research questions, the anti-deficit framework was used to understand Black males' engagement experiences, preferences, and motives for choosing certain campus activities. The anti-deficit model and organizational learning theory are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study sought to describe the common meaning of its participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013), that is, the lived engagement experiences of USG graduates who participated in activities affiliated with AAMI. Data were collected through in-depth interviews that consisted of anti-deficit reframing. For example, anti-deficit questions sought to discover how, through AAMI, graduates managed to become engaged in activities and how certain activities did or did not help them achieve academic success. Data were analyzed by identifying common themes that emerged from the interviews (Creswell).

### **Definitions**

*Academic Success*: refers to students who have completed undergraduate educational requirements from 4-year, bachelor's degree-granting institutions (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).

*African American Male Initiative (AAMI)*: refers to the University System of Georgia's initiative program implemented in 2002 to help "increase the recruitment, retention, and graduation of African American males within the University System through strategic interventions" (USG, 2012, p.2).

*Anti-deficit:* is a strengths-based approach with the intent of understanding how Black males have managed to experience success in higher education (Harper, 2010).

*Anti-deficit reframing:* is a line of questioning that helps understand how Black males have managed to experience success in higher education (Harper, 2010).

*Campus activities:* refers to the out-of-class activities that take place on or are sponsored by a college campus. These activities include, but are not limited to academic/career workshops, student government, mentorship programs, student leadership positions, internships, scholarship program, and activities that involve academic and social support (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2009).

*Deficit:* is an approach that investigates why Black males have been unsuccessful in higher education (Harper, 2012).

*Engagement:* is defined as the out of class, educationally purposeful activities that students participate in on college campuses, unless otherwise noted (Kuh et al., 2007).

*Graduation rates (Completion rates):* is the number of students who complete the educational requirements and earned a degree from a 4-year, bachelor degree-granting institution within 6-years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

*Motives:* are defined as the reasons behind choosing a certain activity on campus, unless otherwise noted (Harper et al., 2009).

*Predominantly White Institutions (PWI):* is an educational institutions where over 50% of the student population is White (Brown & Dancy, 2010).

*Preferences (engagement or involvement preferences):* is the types of campus activities students prefer to participate in (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study was Black male college graduates, who have participated in AAMI through USG from 2003 to 2015. Though there are hundreds of minority initiatives and programs that could have been chosen, this population was selected due to the significant increase in Black male graduation rates after USG implemented AAMI.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since the inception of AAMI in 2002, the Black male college graduation rate has experienced a 108.81% increase in graduation rates from 2003 to 2015 (USG, 2016). This study is significant because participants who graduated from college and participated in AAMI discussed the skills, resources, activities, and relationships that helped them complete college. Also, this research adds value to the literature by focusing on a strengths-based approach, anti-deficit, to understanding how Black males can succeed in academia, instead of a deficit approach that magnifies the disadvantages Black males face. Ultimately, this research study could help other academic institutions with engagement strategies to help reduce disengagement and low enrollment, and thus increase graduation rates.

### **Summary**

Researchers have demonstrated that student engagement increases graduation rates, despite challenges such as low-socio economic status or academic under-preparedness. Minority initiatives are one way in which educational institutions have attempted to engage Black male students in campus activities. However, for the past 15 years, graduation rates have remained low. AAMI is the first system-wide initiative that

has yielded significant results in enrollment and graduation rates. Therefore, gaining an understanding of the engagement experiences of participants, and the direct AAMI interventions that may have helped increase graduation rates, provide valuable information that could help other universities improve graduation rates.

Chapter 2 describes the current research on Black males in higher education, offers an in-depth description of the theoretical frameworks, and detailed information on USG's AAMI. In Chapter 3, I will present the rationale and research methods used to collect data for the study. In Chapter 4, I will provide detailed information regarding the results of the study. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretation of the finding, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implication for social change.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Black males complete college degree programs at a lower rate than Black females and all other racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States (Strayhorn, 2011).

Researchers have thoroughly examined the epidemic of Black male college dropouts by identifying challenges that the population must overcome to graduate. Deficit type of research (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Wood, 2011), often portrays Black males as academically inferior to Black women and individuals from other cultures and ethnicities, thus emphasizing failure, underachievement, and disengagement. Furthermore, graduation rates have generally remained low when educators use a deficit approach to examine the academic outcomes of Black males (Harper, 2012).

Researcher's suggests that undergraduate Black males who are involved in academic interests outside of the classroom (e.g., research assistant, student leadership positions) increase their opportunities for success in life by graduating from college (Harper, 2012), obtaining internships, and being able to competing for higher paying jobs (Harper & Quaye, 2009). However, studies have shown that the majority of Black male undergraduates are not involved in academic activities outside of the classroom (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Deficit-oriented research has attributed the problem of disengagement to behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes of Black male students (Palmer, Davis, Hilton, 2009; Woods, 2011), deficit oriented researchers neglect to address the institutions' role in engaging Black males in campus-activities (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the out-of-class engagement experiences and involvement preferences of Black males who (a) were involved in an African American Male Initiative (AAMI) and who (b) graduated from USG colleges and universities. This study is significant because participants who graduated and participated in USG's successful AAMI program, provided information that can help Black men and educational institutions succeed.

For example, before implementation of AAMI, the number of Black male students who earned a degree within 6 years was 28.95%. The 6-year rate for Black males who graduated from USG in 2011 rose to 40.35%, and the number of Black males who graduated with a bachelor's degree from USG increased by 58.11%, from 2003 to 2011. Recent findings show a 34.80% increase in graduation rates for Black males from 2009 to 2015, resulting in a 108.81% increase in bachelor degrees since the programs started.

A secondary purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature by using an anti-deficit approach to explore the experiences of Black males who were involved in AAMI and who graduated from college. The deficit model, used previously, questions why Black males fail to succeed academically (Harper, 2012).

This literature review describes three theoretical models: organizational learning theory, the deficit model, and the anti-deficit framework. Within the anti-deficit achievement framework, there are several theories that will be discussed: cultural and social capital theories, stereotype threat theory, attribution theory, campus ecology theory, critical race theory, theories on college student retention, possible selves theory,



and self-efficacy theory. This literature review investigated the academic performance and challenges of Black males in high school and college, while also identifying factors that contributed to academic success. Last, this literature review provides information on minority initiatives, specifically the University Systems of Georgia AAMI program

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To study the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI institutions within USG, the following databases were used: to identify resources for this study (scholarly journals, dissertations, textbooks, and government websites): Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Complete, PsychINFO, and SocINDEX. The keywords were used: *African American, Black, male, academic success, engagement experiences, African American Male Initiative (AAMI), undergraduate, higher education, University Systems of Georgia (USG), educational inequality, deficit, anti-deficit, graduation rates, and organizational learning.*

### **Organizational Learning Theory**

Organizational learning helps create a system in which institutions of higher education can continuously work towards improving enrollment rates, degree attainment, and student engagement (Quaye & Harper, 2009). Brigham Young University (2011) describes organizational learning theory:

In order to be competitive in a changing environment organizations must change their goals and actions to reach those goals. In order for learning to occur, however, the firm must make a conscious decision to change actions in response to a change in circumstances. (p.1)

The concept of organizational learning began in the 1950s when behaviorists March and Simon refuted economic models of management that they described as one-dimensional, restrictive, and contradictory of research on how decision outcomes were effectively determined (Bauman, 2000; Kezar, 2005). Simon and March believed that learning outcomes were individually determined by environmental factors within an organization. They found that program changes generally occur in response to performance levels (Bauman, 2000). Contemporary researchers have debated if the term “change” in organizational learning should be described as behavior or cognition; however, theorists agree that the concept of organizational learning refers to a modification in the institution’s knowledge base that transpires as part of an experience (Argote, 2013).

Knowledge is an essential component of organizational learning; it can be interpreted, assessed, and integrated into different experiences and social interactions (Argote, 2013). Organizations must acquire information relevant to the goals, challenges, failures, and successes the company has identified and/or experienced; this information is then assessed and converted into knowledge that is functional and maintained within the organization (Kezar, 2005). To facilitate learning, organizations must establish social situations where individuals transfer knowledge within a team or committee (Bauman, 2005). Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011) described this process as a cycle where knowledge is developed once task performance experience connects with the organizational context (the culture, structure, goals, and strategies of an organization).

The knowledge acquired by individuals within the company is transferred out of the organization into the environment; thus, changing the organizational context, and impacting future learning outcomes (Argote, 2013).

The process of organizational learning can help address how an institution of higher learning can work collectively to adapt to changes that occur in the learning environment, particularly as they relate to Black male student engagement practices (Harper & Quaye, 2009). For example, an institutional committee would acquire information on Black male undergraduate engagement experiences. Statistical data on student engagement practices would be retrieved from the university's research office, this data would then be translated into functional knowledge that can assist committee members with collectively exposing and correcting past mistakes (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). Committee members would respond with a plan to improve the organizational context, while ensuring that students have the best opportunities to achieve success (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

Colleges and universities in the United States have recognized the value of organizational learning theory in facilitating change (Kezar, 2005); however, many institutions have not used the concepts of organizational learning effectively in their decision making process (Bauman, 2005). Educational research offices have created data for government agencies and university decision making, however; researchers found that for many institutions, data are not properly translated into usable knowledge that would assist with internal decisions (Kezar, 2003). Furthermore, many colleges and universities have not developed effective strategies to organize and use data when making decisions

that could significantly affect higher education institutions (Bauman, 2005). For example, Benisome (2005) found that institutions generally do not sort student outcomes by race and ethnicity, instead decision makers within institutions share and reflect from their own belief systems and reasoning. These types of practices cover up the issues of educational inequalities and reinforce faulty thinking patterns that produce unequal outcomes.

The process of organizational learning helps expose faulty belief systems by helping college decision makers function as double-loop learners, instead of single-loop learners (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Double-loop learners look beyond external causes of academic challenges and disengagement practices of Black male students. These individuals explore solutions on how to change attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding the population, while reflecting on how their own belief systems could generate educational inequalities (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Benisome, 2005). Single-loop learners fail to reflect on how changing their own perceptions and beliefs could improve educational outcomes (Benisome, 2005). These individuals blame educational inequalities on external factors, using a deficit framework to explore the challenges and successes Black males face in higher education (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **Deficit Model**

Researchers have spent a significant amount of time studying the issues related to Black male achievement in higher education by utilizing a deficit approach (Strayhorn, 2010; Wood, 2011). The deficit model investigates why Black males have been unsuccessful in higher education, rather than examining how undergraduate Black males can attain academic success (Harper, 2012). Deficit thinking is shaped by stereotypes

that have already been established in society and the educational system (Gorski, 2010). Consequently, educators have portrayed the Black male student as lacking the skills, resources, motivation, and interest to learn and acquire the appropriate proficiencies to be academically successful (Brown & Brown, 2012; Ford & Grantham, 2003). Some studies have reported that the number of Black males in prison is greater than the number of Black males pursuing a college degree (Green, 2008). Additionally, researchers have highlighted disengagement, retention, and low college completion rates among Black male college students (Wood, 2011; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).

Though studying and identifying the challenges of Black males in higher education is important and necessary, continuous use of a deficit approach amplifies failure, instead of exploring solutions (Harper, 2010). For the past decade, the use of a deficit model has not improved retention rates among Black male undergraduate students; researchers still conclude that graduation rates remain dismal (Clayton, Hewitt, & Gaffney, 2004; Harper, 2010; Harper, 2013; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Wood, 2011). For example, two-thirds of Black males who begin college at a public institution do not attain a degree within six years (Harper & Harris, 2012). Additionally, the deficit approach has highlighted stereotypes that negatively affect some Black male's sense of belonging:

Belongingness is constantly threatened by the reinforcement of racist stereotypes that stigmatize them as unqualified admits who gained access to the institution through affirmative action or participation on an intercollegiate sports team, underprepared 'at risk' students who all emerged from low-income families and

urban ghettos, and dangerous thugs from the local community who pose a serious threat to the campus. (Harper et al., 2011, p. 180)

Some Black males internalized these stereotypes, causing them to feel overwhelmed, self-defeated, angry, fearful, and intimidated (Harper et al. 2011; Strayhorn, 2010). Many described their campus environment as hostile, unsupportive, and callous, making it more challenging to complete their academic studies (GSU, 2012; Harper, 2012; Harper et al. 2011; Strayhorn, 2013).

For example, Harper (2010) found that when a panel of educational researchers was attempting to find the cause of Black male underachievement in science, one proposition was that the population was not successful because the benefits of affirmative action allowed these students to enter colleges, where they were not ready for the demands of coursework. This type of deficit mindset puts more undue pressure on some Black males by causing them to feel that they must continuously prove that they deserve a spot at an academic institution where they have already been accepted (Strayhorn, 2010).

The deficit model emphasizes the assumption that Black male college students cannot achieve the same type of academic success as White students (Brown & Brown, 2012). Thus, educational institutions have lowered their expectations of Black males, often responding to the problem of underachievement by blaming the student for what could be considered educational inequalities (Gorski, 2010). In an attempt to assist with this epidemic, educational institutions have responded by using measures that focus on

what the population lacks (Gorski, 2010), instead of creating environments that compel Black males to engage in activities that lead to academic success (Harper & Quaye, 2009). This type of deficit thinking overlooks social inequalities that have caused lack, by placing blame on communities that have been disenfranchised (Gorski, 2010). A more strengths-based model is needed to help Black males and educational institutions learn strategies to overcome the challenges that have historically impacted Black male undergraduates.

### **Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework**

The anti-deficit framework was created to examine the academic achievement of Black males from a strengths-based perspective. Harper (2012) explains that this approach includes questions that help researchers discover how Black males prepare for college, achieve success in higher education, and choose post-college options (career or graduate studies.). The anti-deficit model is built from several theories in education, sociology, and psychology that are related to the educational inequalities of ethnic/minority groups (Harper, 2010). This framework acknowledges the challenges that each theory presents regarding the disparities of minority groups; however, it utilizes reframed research questions that are contrary to the common inquires that are examined about underachievement, inadequate preparation, and disengagement of undergraduate Black males (Harper, 2012). For example, instead of asking why so few Black males graduate from college, researchers could inquire about how Black males have managed to complete a degree, despite the obstacles they have faced. The theories providing the foundation for the anti-deficit framework include cultural and social capital theories,

critical race theory, stereotype threat, attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, possible-selves theory, campus ecology theory, and theories on student retention (Harper, 2010).

### **Cultural and Social Capital Theories**

Bourdieu developed the concepts of cultural and social capital to describe issues related to educational and social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986; Weininger, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu (1986) found that capital could be divided into three areas; economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital is instantly transformed into assets (money and property); whereas cultural capital may be converted into assets, but the emphasis is placed on education and knowledge. Social capital, which is sometimes translated into economic capital, refers to the relationships or connections that a person has acquired (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu argued that, within a hierarchical society, the upper and middle class have an advantage with converting cultural and social capital into economic capital (Yosso, 2005). In cultural capital any skill can become an asset that serves the betterment of society (Weininger, 2013); however, most individuals with a higher socioeconomic status have acquired knowledge that is considered more valuable. This knowledge is often obtained through parental influence, elite educational institutions, and training programs (Yosso, 2005). In social capital upper and middle class individuals maintain valuable relationships in lucrative working environments that increase opportunities for economic capital (Gauntlett, 2011).

Yosso (2005) described Bourdieu's definition of capital as disregarding the abilities, resources, and family support of individuals from different racial and ethnic



groups. She developed an expanded view of capital called community cultural wealth; “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p.77). For example, navigational capital is a skill many minority students use to successfully manage and adjust to school environments that were not created to address the educational needs of racial and ethnic groups. Aspiration capital is the ability for an individual to look beyond life obstacles and have hope that their goals and dreams can still be accomplished.

This perspective is similar to Harper’s (2010) view of cultural and social capital. He uses aspects of Bourdieu’s theory to support an anti-deficit framework. He acknowledges that many minority students’ lack the cultural and social capital as defined by Bourdieu; however, he takes a strengths-based approach similar to Yosso (2005) by focusing on how students, who may lack traditional cultural and social capital, persist to achieve academic success. Many students are able to succeed academically, by acquiring knowledge, strategies, and social connections through minority organizations, campus activities, mentorship, and interacting with faculty (Harper, 2012; Reid, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) confronts the major arguments in education relating to stereotyping and racism by investigating how the higher education system has utilized practices to subordinate specific racial groups (Lintner, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This subordination reinforces negative generalizations like Black male

undergraduates are intellectually inferior or Black males are unable to adjust to the rigors of college life (Harper, 2009). CRT theorists have used various methods to challenge racial undertones that exist within higher education; one approach is the use of counternarratives, to share the experiences of individuals whose stories are often omitted within education research (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, Harper (2009) used counternarratives to tell the stories of academically successful Black male undergraduates whose achievements were often overlooked due to deficit-oriented research. This qualitative approach identified Black males as experts of their own experiences, encouraging them to present counternarratives regarding their own academic achievements (Harper, 2009).

CRT helps support an anti-deficit framework through the use of counternarratives to explore how academically successful Black male students are able to withstand racially-oriented stereotypes they encounter on campus (Harper, 2010). For example, Harper & Davis III (2012) used counternarratives of black male scholars applying for the University of Pennsylvania's Grad Prep Academy. The university received essays from 304 Black male applicants regarding their views on inequitable education, as well as a 2-hour focus group with the 10 students who were accepted into the Grad Prep Academy. The study found that Black male students recognized the inequalities within their education, yet most voiced that earning a degree is liberating and is the "great equalizer" (Harper & Davis III, 2012, p. 101). Many applicants believed that by earning a doctorate degree in education, they could help address the issues of inequalities that exist in secondary and post-secondary schools (Harper & Davis III, 2012).

### **Stereotype Threat Theory**

Negative stereotypes aimed towards people of color have been used to justify the low academic outcomes for ethnic minority students in higher education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001); this is particularly true for Black students and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs (Steele, 1997). When this population completes a collegiate assignment they are confronted with a stereotype threat: “the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype -a suspicion- about the group’s intellectual ability or competence” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). As a person attempts to prove his or her intellectual ability and/or disprove the idea that he or she does or does not fit a certain stereotype, the individual feels unnecessary pressure to perform in areas where they are considered experts. This type of pressure can lead to frustration, distractions, and can interfere with performance (Gates & Steele, 2009).

Harper (2010) used the basis of stereotype threat theory to help develop the anti-deficit model; however, instead of exploring the negative effects of stereotypes on minority students, he focused on how students are able to constructively respond to stereotypes and misconceptions about their race. For example, Harper (2012) found that many academically successful Black males were told the only reason they were admitted into college was because of affirmative action, other Black males were assumed to be part of the university basketball team. Instead of responding with anger, many students used strategies learned through minority organizations to educate peers and/or faculty about the stereotypes Black males face (Harper). This anti-deficit approach to confronting

stereotype threat is one way Black male undergraduates achieve academic success in challenging campus environments.

### **Attribution Theory**

When academic failure impacts minority populations, some researchers attribute the problem to stereotypes, unpreparedness, and economic status in an effort to explain low academic performance (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). Having an intrinsic desire to understand and explain task performances and outcomes, particularly when unforeseen events occur, is referred to as attribution theory (Weiner, 1979). Individuals generally categorize successes and failures within three categories; locus of causality (control), stability, and controllability. In locus of causality, performance outcomes can be described as internal or external (Purdue University, 2013). For example, internal causes would attribute success or failures to characteristics like ability, while external causes represent environmental factors that could influence performance, such as poor training. Controllability is the ability for a person to control factors, whereas uncontrollable circumstances are difficult to change (Harvey & Martinko, 2010; Purdue University, 2013). Last, stability causes are those that impact behaviors, but are steady (an intelligent person), whereas unstable causes could represent unpredictability (student effort); stability causes significantly impact individuals' future performances. For example, when low academic performance is attributed to a stable cause like incompetence, it is expected that a student will not achieve future success; however, if poor performance is based on an unstable cause such as effort, students can work harder to achieve academic success (Harvey & Martinko, 2010).

Researchers found that individuals not only identify success and failure as a result of competence and effort, but environmental influences like engaging in academic activities, utilizing community resources, and developing valuable relationships can influence positive outcomes (Weiner, 1979; Harper, 2012). These characteristics of attribution theory were used to support an anti-deficit model by identifying students who are competent, exert effort, and attribute part of their academic success to participating in academically-focused activities (Harper, 2010; Harper, 2012). This helps increase positive outcomes for ethnic minorities, and limits the tendency for researchers to attribute academic failure to biases, racism, and barriers that may exist within higher education.

### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

Increasing positive outcomes helps students develop confidence in their efforts to pursue an education and ultimately a career. The way in which people perceive their strengths and the confidence, beliefs, and motivation to perform outcomes, is described as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). When “strong efficacy expectations are developed through repeated success, the negative impact of occasional failures is likely to be reduced” (Bandura, 1977, p.195). Harper (2010) applied self-efficacy theory to help build an anti-deficit framework by recognizing that there are minority student achievers who develop confidence and mastery skills in academic areas. Weiser and Riggio (2010) found that self-efficacy is also a strong predictor of academic success and a higher GPA for minority undergraduates. Students who succeed academically and become experts in their fields can help educate and motivate other learners to acquire the necessary skills for

achievement. This can help decrease a deficit approach of examining why minority students lack the preparation, confidence, and motivation to exceed academically.

### **Possible-Selves Theory**

Cognitively, individuals possess a repertoire of ambitions, fears, pressures, and motivations concerning their future endeavors; individuals also imagine the successful person they could become, or are afraid of becoming. This idea is referred to as possible-selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible-selves can be utilized as a motivational tool that helps individuals recognize that he or she has some control over their own successes or failures (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Harper (2010) applied the concept of possible-selves theory to support an anti-deficit approach by examining the history, social experience, and possible mentor relationships of academically successful minority students. These types of experiences can help students envision themselves as graduates and professionals in their chosen field of study, despite the challenges that exist when pursuing a college education.

### **Campus Ecology Theory**

The college campus atmosphere can present a challenge to all incoming students; behaviors are significantly impacted by students' interactions with peers and faculty members. Brazzell (2001) found that some students who do not feel a sense of belonging on campus have left their colleges and abandoned their education goals. For some minority students who are part of a PWI, there is a sense of discomfort, and a pressure to assimilate to the White culture (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Despite the lack of belonging

that minorities feel on campus, many students of color strive to overcome their experiences and have adjusted to their school environment.

Harper (2010) utilizes a campus ecology theory to support an anti-deficit model, by inquiring about the strategies students used to manage through environments that are nonresponsive to the educational needs of minority students. For example, students who participated in the Black Male College Achievement study became acclimated to their campus environment by intentionally engaging in out-of-class academically focused engagement opportunities, interacting with highly motivated peers, and establishing relationships with faculty members who were leaders of campus clubs and organizations (Harper, 2012). Students reported that faculty regarded them more favorably, due to their engagement experiences outside of the classroom.

### **Theories on College Student Retention**

Researchers have extensively studied the area of student retention, and most recently minority student retention in higher education (Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 2006). Institutions have voiced the importance of increasing graduation rates, yet student retention is still a major issue (Tinto, 2006), particularly among Black male undergraduates (Palmer et al., 2009; Wood, 2011). Faculty members generally blame students for their lack of motivation, or shift the responsibility of increasing graduation rates to the office of student affairs (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Tinto (2002) found that students leave undergraduate studies due to feeling disconnected from peers, professors, and administrators. When students actively participate in academic and social activities

on campus, they tend to be more committed to their educational institution, and educational goals (Tinto, 2002).

Student retention theories support an anti-deficit approach by investigating the factors that keep “students of color enrolled through degree attainment instead of concentrating on the social, academic and cognitive, financial, and institutional barriers to persistence” (Harper, 2010, p.71). For example, researchers found that Black and Asian American students who were actively engaged in campus organizations showed an increase in student learning (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Minority student involvement in extra-curricular activities on campus helps increase student retention rates (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Last, faculty development and staying current on issues related to minority student engagement also improves retention (Tinto, 2006-2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

### **Academic Performance and the Challenges of Black Male Students**

Researchers have thoroughly documented the low retention and graduation rates for Black males in higher education. For example, Strayhorn (2010) reported that Black males represent 4.3% of all undergraduate students in the United States, the same percentage of Black undergraduate men who attended college in 1976. Over 25% of Black males leave community college within their first academic year, and 55% leave community college without earning a degree (Woods, 2011). There is an underrepresentation of Black males in graduate programs in comparison to men in other cultural groups. For example, between 1977 and 2007 Black males had a 109% rise in earned graduate degrees; however, Latino men had a 242% increase and Asian American



men experienced a 425% increase, while Black women gained a 253% rise in graduate degrees (Harper & Davis III, 2012). In 2012, 65.9% of Black women enrolled in college earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 34.1% of Black males (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Low graduation rates among Black male college students are significantly influenced by the academic performance of Black male high school students (Clayton, Hewitt, & Gaffney, 2004). The Schott Foundation (2010) found that 47% of Black male youths graduated from secondary school in 2008 on time (within 4 years), compared to 78% of White male students. Researchers attribute much of the problem to the economic backgrounds many Black youths have experienced (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Rascoe & Lange, 2013), and to poorer school districts that often lack the funding necessary to provide equal educational opportunities. Thus, some Black male secondary students do not receive the appropriate curriculum, resources, or quality teaching that is needed to enroll in and complete college (Palmer et al., 2009; Rascoe & Lange, 2013).

For example, the Schott Foundation (2010) found that White male high school students from more affluent school districts graduated at a 70% rate during the 2001 to 2002 school year, while Black males from poorer districts graduated at a 47% rate. In an attempt to close the achievement gap between the two groups, the state of New Jersey increased educational funding to students in poorer school districts. By the 2007 to 2008 school year, 75% of Black males graduated from high schools in New Jersey within four years, compared to 78% of White males. These statistics differ greatly from the 2007 to

2008 school year in most school districts across the United States. For example, in New York, 28% of Black males graduated from high school, compared to 68% of White males. Unfortunately, states like New York, “which provide their White students with adequate opportunities to learn, do not do so for their Black students” (Schott Foundation, 2010, p.15).

### **Factors that Contribute to the Academic Success of Black Male Undergraduates**

Though some Black males are from low economic backgrounds and have received unequal educational opportunities, many still enroll and graduate from college (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2009; Harper, 2012; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Reid, 2013). Research focused on the academic challenges of Black male college students must be overshadowed with experiences from those who have found ways to obtain academic success in higher education (Harper, 2012). For example, 56.7% of the 219 Black male college students he interviewed were from low-class and blue-collar families, yet they were all able to achieve academic success. These men earned at least a 3.0 GPA in college, were actively engaged in campus activities/leadership roles, received honors and/or scholarships, participated in enrichment programs, and developed relationships with faculty and school administrators. Despite their lower economic background, many of these students are now in graduate and post-graduate work at top tier universities, while several others have graduated to become doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and other professionals (Harper, 2012).

Harper and Davis III (2012) interviewed 10 Black male students who were part of the Grad Prep Academy (an initiative for college juniors who desire to pursue a Ph.D. in education) at the University of Pennsylvania. The students had an average high school GPA of 3.7, and a college GPA of 3.26. Most of the participants reported that their K-12 institutions lacked educational resource materials, had inferior teachers, and some students were reportedly misplaced in special education classes. In spite of this, all 10 participants were selected from over 300 high achieving Black males, to attend the Grad Prep Academy, with the potential of becoming Ph.D. students at the University of Pennsylvania (Harper & Davis III, 2012). Black males, who were identified as academically underprepared (low high school GPA and/or SAT scores), received assistance through a 6-week summer-bridge program, where they took courses and became familiar with the campus environment (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). These students graduated from college despite financial issues, pride (not wanting to ask for help), problems at home, and feeling disconnected to their university (Harper, 2009).

The key factors that contributed to the academic success of the Black male students in the above examples were student engagement activities on campus, and university support systems, such as college summer bridge programs, and mentorship (Harper, 2012; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). In-college experiences (e.g., student government, summer programs, interacting with faculty) can have a greater influence on academic achievement than pre-college factors like college preparatory courses and SAT scores (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Reid, 2013). There are many variables that influence the graduation rates among undergraduates;

however, research shows that students are more likely to attain a degree if they are engaged in academically-focused interests, than students who are disengaged (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 2002).

### **Student Engagement**

Kuh et al., (2007) described student engagement as involvement in educationally focused activities inside and outside the classroom. Engagement involves university efforts to present social and cultural capital opportunities that will increase learning, graduation rates, and provide campus assistance that encourage students to participate in institutional activities (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). Harper & Quaye (2009) described the difference between students who are actively engaged and those who are passively engaged. For example, a passive student may join a campus organization, but only attend a couple of meetings, whereas an active member attends most meetings, offers suggestions, and participates in projects. A student who is actively engaged will have a goal and plan to participate, will exert energy into preparing for courses, interact with faculty members, enhance academic experiences (taking a foreign language, actively participating in student events), and will have access to a campus that provides adequate support services that meets the needs of the student (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2012) described certain out of class engagements (e.g. research opportunities with faculty, studying abroad, gaining internships) as “high impact practices” (NSSE, p. 26); these activities have the potential

of positively changing a student's life and academic career. For example, Cuyjet (2006) found that Black male students who were actively engaged in multiple high-impact practices were able to have quality interactions with the president of their university; this relationship helped students obtain recommendation letters from the university president for academic awards and graduate school (Cuyjet, 2006). Other out-of-class engagement experiences have helped students connect to and gain insights from celebrities and political figures who spoke at national conventions. Also, several students earned internships and employment opportunities for their involvement in campus leadership positions (Cuyjet, 2006). Last, participants (who earned more than \$489,000.00 combined in scholarships) reported that they would not have received funding if it had not been for their campus involvement (Cuyjet, 2006).

Out-of-class engagement experiences for most students have significant positive outcomes (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye; 2009; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 2002); however, for Black males, engaging in campus activities has more of a positive impact on college completion rates than for White males and Black females (Reid, 2013). Yet, studies have shown that the majority of Black male undergraduates are not involved in academic interests outside the classroom (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2003 Harper et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2010). Black males are leaving campus leadership roles, and universities are having difficulty engaging students in campus activities (Harper & Quaye, 2006).

Researchers have found several reasons why Black males do not engage in campus activities. For example, some Black males do not view campus engagement opportunities as a masculine quality (Harper, 2004). Black males can enter college with

an oppositional identity (Dancy II, 2012), which involves not conforming to the standards of European masculinity (e.g., breadwinner, protector). The traditional European identity has been difficult to obtain due to the unequal educational and employment opportunities that Black males have historically faced (Harris, 1995). Thus, Black males have created their own sense of identity; such as being identified as tough or popular with women (Ferguson, 2000). Many Black males feel pressured to present a cool persona while achieving academic success (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011).

Black males who attend PWIs are sometimes stereotyped as intellectually inferior, felons, disadvantaged, and from low-income families (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper et al., 2011); these labels hinder students from being engaged in campus activities. Black males enter predominantly White universities with the perception that academic failure is expected (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Thus, Black male students can often feel stressed, uncomfortable, and isolated when universities do not have supportive services to help them adjust to their campus environment (Dancy II, 2012; Robertson & Mason, 2008).

### **Institutional Engagement Efforts**

On many college campuses, the responsibility is placed on the student to find ways to adjust to college life, and they are expected to find their own engagement opportunities (Harper, 2012). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) found that it is necessary for the educational institution (administrators, faculty, staff, and students) to explore options and identify their role in engaging students, particularly Black male college students (Harper, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009). For example, NSSE (2012) found that colleges and universities that were part of the Documenting Effective Educational Practices

(DEEP) project, demonstrated higher than expected graduation and engagement rates. Administrators, faculty, and staff members who took part in the DEEP project shared responsibility for the benchmark of academic excellence and educational achievement. These institutions incorporated a well-defined plan to help students succeed, worked hard to improve educational experiences through various teaching methods, and introduced high quality campus initiatives that met the needs of students (NSSE, 2012).

College and university leaders across the United States have created programs similar to the DEEP project to help address the needs of Black males (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Harris, III; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Hughes, 2010; Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010); however, many programs have not established a high-quality standard that can effectively help improve academic success among students (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; NSSE, 2012). Harper and Kuykendall (2012) outlined several criteria to help universities effectively establish successful Black male initiatives. First, it is important for universities to make their degree attainment statistics visible for the public to view. Displaying university's graduation and retention rates among Black males will help raise awareness, and can help institutions create programs that will appropriately address their students' needs (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Also, stakeholders, administrators, faculty, staff (of all races/ethnic groups), and Black male students (high-achieving, low-achieving, and average) should collaborate to create and develop Black male initiatives. Students should be viewed as experts, who have the opportunity to present their ideas and experiences. Third, similar to the DEEP project, student learning should be the center of campus initiatives (NSSE, 2012); Black males

should be given strategies to increase academic skills, adjust to their campus environment, and learn how to access and engage in activities (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Last, it is imperative that issues regarding race, stereotypes, and masculinity are discussed openly among campus professionals, particularly at PWIs (Robertson & Mason, 2008). Dismissing the issue of racism on campus can hinder an institution's objective of increasing Black male academic success (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

### **Black Male College Initiatives**

Some educational institutions have developed quality programs that create opportunities for Black males to become engaged in university sponsored activities (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Many campuses house minority initiatives that offer educational assistance, social support, and resources to help Black male students adjust to the campus environment (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Harris, 2012; Hughes, 2010). For example, the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) program helps Black males overcome challenges and gain understanding regarding the privileges of having a college education. Students have the opportunity to increase financial skills, acquire academic support, and grow spiritually (Cuyjet, 2006; Hughes, 2010).

The CARE initiative is a program that helps low-income and first generation minority students receive tutoring, advice, and academic support throughout their entire undergraduate experience (Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010). Students in the CARE program are more likely than non-Care students to return to college after their freshman year. Cuyjet (2006) reviewed the Son of Alkebulan initiative; this program is an open



forum for Black males who attend or work at the University of North Texas. The objective of the forum is to improve student retention through mentorship, inspiring unity among Black male students, advancing educationally focused conversation, and helping students adjust to the campus experience.

### **The University Systems of Georgia African American Male Initiative**

Hundreds of colleges and universities within the United States have created initiatives to help increase retention and graduation rates among Black male college students (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Harris, 2012), however; there are only 2 states, New York and Georgia, that have developed Black male initiatives that impact an entire university system (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2012). In 2002, the University Systems of Georgia (USG) African American Male Initiative (AAMI) was the first university system to launch an effort to increase low Black male graduation, retention, and enrollment rates in public colleges and universities in Georgia (Harper & Harris, 2012; USG, 2013). In its mission to discover why Black male students were withdrawing from college, a 52-member USG task force asked former Black males students why they withdrew from their institution (USG, 2012). Students reported that they felt disengaged on campus, and that faculty, staff, and peers could not relate to their educational experiences (USG, 2012).

In 2015, 26 of the 29 campuses within USG offer AAMI; each initiative is individually designed for the needs of each college or university. The multifaceted initiatives range from academic support, mentoring, leadership development, summer preparation programs, and engaging students in community and academically focused

activities inside and outside the classroom (USG, 2012). By engaging students in and through campus initiatives, the number of academically successful Black male college students has increased within USG. For example, from 2002 to 2011, Black males had an 80.73% increase in enrollment (from 17,068 to 30,847 students), and from 2003 to 2011 there was a 58.11% increase in bachelor degrees (1,294 to 2046 students) (USG, 2012). From 2009 to 2015 there was a 30.48% increase in bachelor degrees (1730 to 2702; USG, 2016). The retention rate for first-year, full-time Black male students in 2002 was 79.43% (1,740). By 2010 the retention rate lowered to 74.87%, though the number of students enrolled from 2002 to 2011 increased to 80.3% (3315 students) (USG, 2012). Due to its significant increase in enrollment and degree attainment, USG AAMI has been used as a national model to help increase academic success among Black male college students (USG, 2012).

Board of Regents (2012) began its launch of AAMI by identifying five core components: pipeline strategy (precollege summer program), academic skills enrichment (study skills), student support services (resources), adult and peer mentoring, and leadership development. Eventually a program theory on outreach and recruitment efforts was developed to help increase student enrollment. Once students were enrolled, they engaged in various programs like skills enrichment, leadership, student support, and mentoring (activities); these activities were predicted to produce high retention and graduation rates (results). As the initiative has expanded to over 75% of USG, a more encompassing model is needed to help monitor the direct AAMI interventions that have helped increase graduation and enrollment rates among Black male college students.

One way to help determine the means through which AAMI interventions have helped increase academic success among Black males is to explore the engagement practices and involvement preferences of students who have graduated from AAMI institutions. As stated previously, Black males have the lowest college completion rates among both genders and racial groups (Strayhorn, 2011), and Black males who are engaged in campus activities are more likely to complete college (Reid, 2013). Thus, USG, the first to utilize a university systems approach to engage Black males on campus, experienced significant increases in graduation and enrollment rates among Black males after implementing AAMI (USG, 2012). Therefore, understanding student engagement experiences from a successful program like AAMI can provide valuable insights for USG and other post-secondary institutions in need of increasing academic success among Black male college students.

Though student engagement has been linked to academic success (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009; NSSE, 2012), researchers found that there is limited data on the actual engagement experiences of Black male college students. For example, Strayhorn (2010) found that there is a lack of research on Black male college experiences utilizing qualitative methods; gaining insights from this approach can help increase student involvement and college success among Black males. Harper & Quaye (2009) found that understanding Black male student engagement preferences, and the motives behind those choices would be valuable to help increase student engagement. Harper et al. (2011) reported that the detailed involvement experiences of Black male student leaders at PWIs are rarely explored. Gaining insights from the engagement experiences of participants of

USG's successful AAMI program can help contribute to existing literature on Black male student engagement.

### **Summary**

The plight of Black males in education has received national attention for over 15 years. Most educators have utilized a deficit model to address the issues of low degree attainment and retention rates, instead of using an anti-deficit approach in understanding how the population can and have succeeded in higher education. Researchers have found that engaging Black undergraduate men in academically focused activities inside and outside the classroom increase their chances of academic success, despite academic underpreparedness, low economic background, and dealing with racially hostile environments.

Colleges and universities across the United States have attempted to engage Black male students through minority initiatives. USG's AAMI is an example of a system-wide initiative that has helped significantly increase enrollment and graduation rates among Black males by engaging students in campus-sponsored activities. Though this literature review highlighted the positive link between student engagement and academic success; there is a lack of research regarding the actual engagement experiences, involvement preferences, and motives behind the preferences of Black male college students.

Exploring the engagement experiences of students, and understanding the engagement efforts of USG's successful initiative program, can help USG and other educational institutions develop effective plans to increase Black male college success. This can be accomplished through an anti-deficit approach of utilizing questions that focus on how

students and USG have managed to overcome the challenges that exist, when institutions attempt to increase student engagement.

Chapter 3 presents the rationale and implementation of the research methods used to collect data for the study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI institutions within USG. By using anti-deficit achievement framework, this research investigated whether Black males attributed graduating to USG's AAMI activities. There was a lack of research regarding the engagement experiences of Black male college students, their preferences for particular campus pursuits, and their motives behind choosing certain activities (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010). Also, more research was needed to help determine the direct AAMI interventions that caused a significant increase in enrollment and graduation rates among its Black male population at USG (Board of Regents, USG, 2012). Thus, this study explored the AAMI activities and/or resource that were perceived to have contributed to the increased graduation rate among participants.

In this methodology chapter, I restate the research questions, describe the research design, and clarify the rationale for using phenomenological inquiry with an anti-deficit achievement framework. This chapter also describes the role of the researcher and provides details of the methodology, including participant selection logic, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis plan. This chapter also presents information on issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Four questions guided this study:

- What are the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI Institutions?
- What activities, if any, did Black male graduates of AAMI institutions prefer to become involved in that increased academic success and/or helped participants feel more connected to their university?
- What were the motives behind selecting certain AAMI activities for Black male college graduates?
- What AAMI strategies or resources helped participants manage to complete college?

As indicated above, the main objective of this study was to explore AAMI engagement experiences that may have directly influenced the increase in Black male graduation rates within USG.

Student engagement, described as the educationally purposeful, out-of-class activities that take place on college campuses (Kuh, 2007), has been linked to higher graduation rates. Students who lack a sense of belonging on campus are less likely to complete college (Tinto, 2000). For example, before the inception of AAMI, Black males who dropped out of colleges within USG reported feeling isolated from the campus majority (USG, 2013). USG reported that their colleges and universities failed to engage Black males in educational activities, causing the population to feel disconnected from faculty members, staff, and other students (USG). After the implementation of AAMI, a program that emphasizes the importance of student engagement, USG's Black male graduation rates significantly increased (USG, 2013). Thus, exploring the engagement

experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI institutions can offer insights into the types of educational activities that helped participants' complete college.

The study used a phenomenological research tradition, with an anti-deficit achievement framework. Creswell (2013) described the focus of phenomenological research as the lived experiences of participants who have encountered a common phenomenon. In phenomenological studies, researchers generally use interviews to ask questions regarding the type of event participants experience and the ways in which participants experienced the event. The data collected from participants were used to gain rich, in-depth information that goes beneath the general assumptions and perceptions individuals may have concerning a particular phenomenon (Lester, 1999). The information gained from interviews could provide opportunities for organizations to develop programs and policies that could cause a positive social change within a system (Creswell). Thus, this research study was appropriate for a phenomenological tradition because the lived engagement experiences of graduates from AAMI institutions were explored, which provided essential data that could help other educational institutions increase graduation rates among Black male college students and provided USG with information regarding the AAMI activities that directly influenced graduates.

Along with a phenomenological research tradition, this research study included an anti-deficit achievement framework. Harper (2012) created the anti-deficit perspective to help formulate effective questions that would aid in understanding how Black male college students can achieve academic success. This strengths-based approach is contrary to the research and media outlets that often emphasizes academic failure, disengagement,



and underachievement among Black male students. Instead, focus is placed on Black male achievement, engagement, and how the population is able to graduate college although opposition may persist. The anti-deficit framework addresses 3 dimensions: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post college success (Harper, 2012). This study specifically focused on interview questions based on the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit model; interview questions were used to gain information that helped address the study's primary research questions (see Appendix A for interview questions). The college achievement dimension incorporated the topics of classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and enriching educational experiences; the latter two topics are central concepts within the study. The goal of this research was to understand the out of class, educationally-focused experiences of Black male graduates of AAMI institutions. Therefore, an anti-deficit approach was an appropriate framework to use in conjunction with a phenomenological research tradition.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My interest in understanding Black male student achievement began in a search to understanding the educational gains of Black women. Through research, I found that Black women were graduating college at significantly higher levels than Black males (Harper & Davis III, 2012). For example, 65.9% of Black females and 34.1% of Black males earned a bachelor's degree in 2012, whereas 71.1% of Black females and 28.9% of Black males completed a master's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The low representation of Black males in higher education led me to search for causes and solutions to the problem.

When I began to research the issues surrounding the challenges of Black male achievement, I recognized that many researchers have taken the time to study academic failure, poverty, and under preparedness within the population; however, this type of research focus has not helped improve graduation rates among Black male college students (Clayton, Hewitt, & Gaffney, 2004; Harper 2010; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Wood 2011). Although I acknowledge that Black males have and may endure challenges and stereotypes academically, I felt that much of the educational research portrayed Black male college achievement as hopeless. This type of deficit research ignited a passion in me to discover Black males who have achieved success in higher education, and to offer hopeful information to potential Black male college students.

Thus, I stumbled upon a monumental study led by Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D., who interviewed over 200 successful Black male college students using an anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012). The purpose of his anti-deficit approach was to discover accomplishments, strengths, and academic experiences of the many Black males in college. Harper's research prompted me to explore how other Black males achieve college success in a society that often focuses on the challenges that Black males face in academia. Therefore, discovering that USG experienced a significant increase in Black male graduation rates after implementing AAMI inspired me to explore the experiences of those graduates who participated in AAMI activities.

In this phenomenological study, my role as a researcher was similar to that of a participant. Though information was obtained and analyzed with scientific rigor, it is important in qualitative studies to take part in the process by listening, gaining an

understanding of the issues and by sharing values, beliefs, and expectations (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). As a phenomenological researcher, I collected data through a semi-structured interviews that focused on showing empathy and establishing good rapport with participants (Rudestam & Newton; Lester, 1999). My extensive work history as a mental health counselor enabled me to use professional interviewing techniques that would help formulate effective questions and ways to explore, analyze, and evaluate patterns and themes within data.

I am aware of my biases in regards to the subject of Black males in higher education. These biases were managed by the concept of epoche. Creswell (2013) describes epoche as separating the researcher's personal understanding of a phenomenon by embracing a new perspective toward the research study. I accomplished the process of epoche by utilizing the method of bracketing, which involves recognizing my own experiences with researching the phenomenon and setting my biases aside to learn from participants' experiences.

One bracketing method I used to support the process of epoche was writing memos to evaluate research procedures, I incorporated personal observations, and I documented thoughts and feeling concerning the research process (Tuffon & Newman, 2010). Bracketing first took place before interviewing participants; however, biases that occur during one phase of the study can filter into another area (Tuffon & Newman). Therefore, bracketing was also utilized before analyzing data and throughout the research process.

Biases were also managed because this researcher is not a Black male and has not personally experienced the phenomenon that was examined. Last, the researcher did not have any pre-existing relationship with participants or university personnel, eliminating ethical issues that could occur within a work environment.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

The study focused on the engagement experiences and preferences of Black male college students who graduated from colleges and universities within USG and were involved in AAMI. Criteria sampling was used to find participants who closely fit the requirements of the study (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Subjects for the study were located through one university's Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment. Invitation letters were sent via email to appropriate AAMI directors to gain access to potential participants who graduated from an AAMI institution. Invitation letters included information regarding requirements to participate in the study, the reason for the study, privacy issues, and the researcher's contact information (see Appendix B).

After a few months of sending follow-up emails and making phone calls, one university's AAMI director referred me to their Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment for information. I contacted the department by phone and emailed information concerning the study. I was eventually sent an email with 2 attachments, a letter granting me permission to obtain student information (see Appendix D), and a copy of their AAMI directory of graduates. The directory provided a list of 25 former students, 18 with addresses and phone numbers, and 7 with a home address only. I attempted to

call all individuals with phone numbers. I discovered that 11 phone numbers were valid and 6 phone numbers were disconnected or the wrong number.

Once alumni were contacted and expressed interest in the study, it was determined that participation requirements were met. Eligibility criteria included the following characteristics: (a) graduate of a 4-year, bachelor degree granting AAMI institution within USG, (b) identified as a Black male who is at least 18 years of age, (c) and participated in at least one AAMI affiliated activity during their undergraduate studies at USG. Participants qualified to meet the eligibility criteria through a screening process that asked the following questions: (a) “Were you a graduate of a 4-year, bachelor degree granting AAMI institution within USG between 2003 and 2014?”, and (b) “Did you participate in any activities, workshops, and/or academic programs affiliated with AAMI? Participants were selected based on positive responses to the screening questions. Participants were informed of the role of the researcher, the importance of their participation, confidentiality issues, the types of questions to be asked, and the interviewing process. Once confirmation of participation was agreed upon, the researcher established a time and place for the interview. Before participating in the interview process, participants signed an informed consent that outlined the research criteria. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions regarding the study throughout the data collection process.

Researchers who utilize a phenomenological method often interview a small number of participants (3 to 25) to gain rich, in-depth information from individuals

(Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1999). For this study, I interviewed 6 participants. Although, each participant added their own unique experiences to the research, generally, answers to research questions became redundant. Therefore, data collection stopped once each concept had been saturated and no new information was discovered (Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected by the researcher through semistructured phone interviews. Interview questions were created based on the anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2010, 2012). The anti-deficit framework is appropriate for the population because it consists of reframed questions that help discover how Black males have obtained success, instead of deficit-oriented questions that focuses on academic failure. The content validity of the anti-deficit achievement framework is established through research conducted by Harper (2012, 2010). As stated previously, reframed research questions were used to interview over 200 Black male undergraduate students in the NBMCAS (Harper, 2012; see Table 1). Reframed questions were also utilized to gain insights from students of color in STEM programs (Harper, 2010). Thus, I created reframed interview questions based on the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit achievement framework to inquire how AAMI may have helped participants graduate from college, and also to discover the engagement experiences of participants (see Appendix A).

Table 1

*Sample Reframed Questions Explored in the NBMCAS*

| Deficit-Oriented Questions   | Anti-Deficit Reframing   |
|--|--|
| Why do so few Black males enroll in college?   | How were college aspirations cultivated among Black male undergraduates who are currently enroll?  |
| Why are Black male student' rates of persistence and degree attainment lowest among both sexes and all racial ethnic groups in higher education? | How did Black males manage to persist and earn their degrees, despite transition issues, racist stereotypes, academic under preparedness, and other negative forces? |
| Why are Black male undergraduates so disengaged in campus leadership positions and out-of-class activities?                                      | What compelled Black male students to pursue leadership and engagement opportunities on their campuses?  |
| Why are Black males' relationships with faculty and administrators so weak?  | How do Black males go about cultivating meaningful, value-added relationships with key institutional agents?   |

*Note.* From "An Anti-Deficit Framework for Research on Students of Color in STEM," by S.R. Harper, 2010, *New Direction for Institutional Research*, 148, p. 68. Copyright 2010 by John Wiley & Sons. Adapted with permission of the author.

Interviewing techniques were used to explore concepts and identify themes and patterns. All 6 participants were contacted for a phone interview. I assured that confidentiality and privacy rules were followed. I also encouraged participants to ensure that the responses given during the phone interview occurred in a secure place where confidential information could not be disclosed.

The interviewing process occurred one time and took an average of 30 minutes to complete with each subject. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member checked with most participants to verify information was properly collected and interpreted by researcher. Also, debriefing with committee members helped address

problems related to collecting, interpreting, and validating data. For the purposes of adhering to issues of confidentiality, participants' names were only disclosed to the researcher. To assure that names were kept confidential codes (P1, P2, P3, etc.) were created to identify each participant.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data collected from participants was specific to the following research questions: What are the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI Institutions? What activities, if any, did Black male graduates of AAMI institutions prefer to become involved in that increased academic success and/or helped participants feel more connected to their university? What were the motives behind selecting certain AAMI activities for Black male college graduates? What AAMI strategies or resources helped participants manage to complete college? Creswell's (2013) version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method was used to analyze data. Information was organized through the use of Dedoose Software (Dedoose Version 6.1.18, 2015).

There were several steps involved when analyzing data from the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen approach (Creswell, 2013): First, I documented thoughts and feeling concerning the research process, so data analysis started with a fresh perspective in my mind. Secondly, I used horizontalization to help identify and record noteworthy statements participants made regarding their experiences with AAMI. Next, I utilized the concept called clusters of meaning to group important data into themes or groups. Last, I included textural and



structural descriptions involving participants AAMI experiences and how those experiences occurred.

Dedoose software was used to evaluate similar codes and patterns gathered from the responses participants provided through semi-structured interviews. Although Dedoose software was used to facilitate the data analysis process, the researcher did not overly rely on the software to provide the rich, in-depth research that the phenomenological method is known to represent. Rudestam and Newton (2007) recommend that the researcher personally become well acquainted with the information gained from the data and take responsibility with creating new categories and codes. Thus, Dedoose software was only utilized to provide support to the phenomenological data analysis process. Once data analysis was completed, there was one discrepant case identified.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2013) considers several questions when assessing the credibility of a phenomenological research study:

- Does the researcher understand the philosophical concepts of phenomenology?
- Is the researcher studying a well-defined phenomenon accurately?
- Does the researcher utilize data analysis techniques from a phenomenological perspective?
- Does the researcher accurately explain the description of the experience and how the experience occurred?

- Is the researcher self-aware and hold himself or herself accountable for understanding and sharing the experiences of the participants being studied?

To establish credibility as defined by the standards above, I utilized member checking, debriefing, and reflexivity. First, member checking consisted of participants receiving a copy of their interview transcript for review. Also, I emailed information containing the eight themes along with interpretations of the data. Most participants confirmed via email or telephone that their interview or experiences were captured accurately. One participant added demographic information to the study. Secondly, debriefing with committee members and colleagues concerning research methods, data analysis, and data collection procedures helped challenge the researcher's perspective and ensured the research process was credible. Last, I utilized reflexivity by documenting in a journal personal thoughts, biases, and beliefs that may impact the research process (Creswell, 2013).

To increase trustworthiness of data I also established transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To allow the option for transferability in other settings, the researcher used rich, in-depth descriptions to describe the phenomenon participants experienced (Creswell, 2013). Dependability was confirmed by the use of an audit trail. A journal was kept to record the researcher's thoughts and feelings concerning the study (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The entire research process was documented, information was recorded within the dissertation proposal, through tape recordings, and notes were taken on how the data was collected and analyzed.

Documentation was particularly utilized when I interviewed P6. I had to rely heavily on notes due to difficulties hearing the respondent over the telephone. After I

transcribed and interpreted the data from the interviews, I attempted to contact P6 for a member check first by telephone and several times via email. However, the telephone number I had for P6 was no longer in service, and P6 never responded to the emails I sent. However, during the initial phone interview, I asked P6 each interview question listed in Appendix A, and wrote down all of his answers to those questions. I repeated the answers to the interview questions, and P6 confirmed that what I had written was correct. Although, I did not obtain the detailed descriptions I received from the other participants, the basic answers to all interview questions were attained, and data from P6's interview was incorporated throughout all 8 themes that emerged from the study. Therefore, I do not believe P6's information affected saturation.

Last, to establish confirmability, the researcher was involved in a process of epoche. As mentioned previously, a bracketing method called memo writing supported the process of epoche by allowing me to process feelings that helped set aside biases, so that the true experiences of participants were heard. To maintain proper perspective of the phenomenon experienced by participants, I -recorded, took notes, and transcribed each interview. As mentioned previously, I utilized member checking to assure that participants' experiences were captured accurately.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Throughout the interviewing and data collection process participants were treated appropriately within the stated ethical guidelines for research. On November 3, 2016 my study was approved (11-03-14-0112747) and met the ethical standards for Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Also, an IRB extension was approved on 10/13/2015.

Information regarding the purpose and objective of the study was clearly written on invitation letters that were emailed to AAMI directors and on university's Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment. The invitation letter included the researcher's contact information and confidential voicemail for potential participants who were interested in the study.

To assure that participants had a clear understanding of ethical guidelines, the researcher explained verbally and in writing issues surrounding confidentiality. For example, individuals were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were welcomed to leave the study at any time without any repercussions. Participants were also encouraged to voice any questions or concerns regarding the interviewing process or the nature of the subject. Last, participants were asked to sign a consent form before the data collection process began.

All data from interviews were kept confidential. Names of participants were only disclosed to the researcher. To ensure that names were kept confidential, codes (P1, P2, P3, etc.) were created to identify each participant. Electronic data collected from interviews were kept confidential and remained secure on a password-protected computer, stored in the researcher's home. All interview notes, recordings, files, and any information concerning the research study was restricted to the researcher and kept in a locked file cabinet inside the researcher's home. In accordance with university research ethical guidelines, all data collected will be destroyed five years after the completion of the research study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI colleges and universities within USG. The study provided detailed information on a phenomenological research tradition with an anti-deficit achievement framework. This method of research was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of individuals who participated in AAMI and graduated from college. Interview questions were created based on the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit achievement framework. Developing a passion for the topic of Black males in higher education can create bias; therefore as a researcher, I set aside preconceived ideas so that the true experiences of the participants were documented.

Participants in the study were chosen based on a criteria sampling strategy and met the requirements for that of a Black male college graduate within USG who participated in AAMI. There were six participants who were interviewed. The interviewing process stopped once saturation was met and no new information was found. Participants were located through one university's Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment. The department provided a directory of former AAMI participants who graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Data were analyzed inductively, using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen approach. The process included epoche, horizontalization, and clusters of meaning, and textural and structural descriptions. Dedoose software was used to evaluate recurring codes and themes.

This chapter also covered issues of trustworthiness, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical concerns. To establish

credibility the following strategies were implemented in the research study; member checking, debriefing, and reflexivity. Last, it was imperative that ethical guidelines and procedures were followed to protect participants from potential danger. This included researchers ensuring that participants signed a written consent and adequately explained issues surrounding confidentiality, data collection procedures, how information was stored and protected, and the purpose of a signed written consent.

Chapter 4 provides detailed information on the results of the study.

Information includes the setting of the study, demographics, data collection and analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the AAMI engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from AAMI institutions within USG. I wanted to learn

whether any of AAMI's interventions had directly influenced the increase in Black male graduation rates. Participants were asked interview questions based on the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit achievement model. Each was meant to address at least one of the four research questions.

In this results section, I describe the demographics, explain how data were collected, discuss the process of analysis, and evaluate the trustworthiness of the process. The chapter concludes with the final results.

### **Demographics**

Demographic information included each participant's major, year of AAMI participation, and year of graduation. At this particular institution, AAMI occurs only during the fall and spring semesters of participants' freshmen year. The program does not go beyond the first year of college. The participants took part in AAMI in the 2007, 2008, and 2009 school years; they graduated in 2011, 2012, and 2013. The majors include accounting, marketing, economics, education, and finance.

### **Data Collection**

Six men answered semistructured, in-depth interview questions based on the anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2010, 2012). During the initial phone contact, I explained the details of the study, screened participants to ensure that eligibility criteria were met, briefly reviewed the consent form, and set up a time for the telephone interview. Once consent forms were received, I conducted roughly 30-minute telephone interviews --digitally recorded--with all six participants in a private location in my home.

### **Variations in Data**

In my proposal, I had planned to interview 10–12 AAMI alumni from six different colleges and universities. However, due to other universities' IRB regulations, the number of AMMI institutions was reduced to one university. As a result, the number of participants also decreased. All participants attended the same university and participated in similar activities within the AAMI learning community, and data reached saturation after 6 participants.

Saturation was determined by using two different strategies. First, after coding and identifying significant statements, 12 themes were created. But, once I became more familiar with the data, I recognized that participants were using different words to describe the same ideas, causing a duplication of themes. Therefore, the themes were reduced from 12 to eight. Last, saturation also emerged once new data that was discovered did not add any new concepts or ideas to the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1988).

For example, there was a negative case identified in this study, where P5's views differed from other alumni who were interviewed. However, P5's interview was used in this study to confirm the results of the research on student engagement and feeling connected. Specific information regarding the negative case analysis will be presented under the "Evidence of Trustworthiness" section.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Organizing Data**

Creswell's (2013) version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological approach was used to move inductively from significant statements to several themes that emerged



from interview questions. First, I managed any biases I have in regards to Black males in higher education. I utilized a bracketing method that involved writing notes as research procedures were evaluated, memos of personal observations were documented during interviews, and my thoughts and feelings concerning the research process were kept in a journal. Bracketing took place before interviewing participants and before data was analyzed.

### **Emerging Themes**

Secondly, horizontalization was used to identify and record significant statements directly related to the lived experience of Black males who graduated from college and participated in AAMI. Significant statements were identified as quotes that each alumni used to describe their experiences pertaining to interview questions related to AAMI (Creswell, 2013). Once significant statements were captured, meanings were derived inductively and grouped into the following eight themes: (a) AAMI class/learning community, (b) skills/social aspect, (c) mentorship (d) campus activities, (e) racial divide/split, (f) feeling connected, (g) program weaknesses, and (h) program impact.

Last, textural and structural descriptions were created for each of the themes, then evaluated for participants' individual experience. Once all 8 themes were identified and finalized, composite descriptions taken from transcripts were created for each theme. Some descriptions were similar and sometimes repeated by different participants. However, to avoid repetition, general descriptions of each theme are included in Table 2.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility for this research study was established by utilizing strategies of member checking, debriefing, and reflexivity. The strategy of member checking consisted of participants receiving a copy of their interview transcript for review. Also, I emailed information containing the 8 themes that emerged from the data. Participants confirmed via email or telephone that their interview or experiences were captured accurately. One participant added demographic information to the study. I debriefed with committee members and colleagues concerning research methods, data analysis, and data collection procedures. Also, I utilized reflexivity by documenting in a journal personal thoughts, biases, and beliefs that may impact the research process (Creswell. 2013).

### **Transferability**

To allow the option for transferability in other settings, I used rich, in-depth experiences to describe the lived experiences of Black males who graduated from college and participated in AAMI (Creswell, 2013). Thick details emerged from multiple analysis of transcripts, digital audio recordings, and was verified through member checking.

### **Dependability**

As presented in Chapter 3, dependability was confirmed by the use of an audit trail. The entire research process has been documented, information was recorded within Table 2.

### *Emerging Themes with Structural Descriptions*

| Emerging Themes               | Structural Description   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| AAMI Class/Learning Community | Set up as a course. One day the course was in class; the other day was outside of class. The course involved study hall, mentorship, and skill building. Everyone had the same classes. Classes were mandatory. Classes were handpicked by school. |

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|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Skills/Social Aspect | Taught how to study. Leadership skills. Mock interviews, resume, and networking. Addressed acting out. Helped form good habits. Encouraged to get involved in campus activities and leadership roles. Helped transition into college socially and academically. Exposed to other Black males with the same mindset. Bond. How to be successful in college and after college. Comradery, friendship. |
| Mentorship           | Great relationship with mentor. The mentor pushed participants in the right direction. The mentor was someone participants could relate to.   |
| Campus Activities    | Student Government Association. Student Activities Council. Honor Society. Black Student Alliance. The Society. MDA. Involved in leadership organizations, Fraternities. Involved in many campus activities.  |
| Racial Divide/Split  | Divide in Greek life, racial tension on campus, divide in the college city. Did not feel impacted by racism. Diverse campus and staff. Battle with the government, Target on Back. Racist comments made.  |
| Feeling Connected    | Diverse background helped. Already familiar with the college. Was recognized on campus because of program. Had the same classes. Studying together. Exposure to the program.  |
| Program Weakness     | Not being able to help all AAMI participants succeed. Need more mentors. Need more programs within AAMI. Program lost its structure. Focused more on graduating, instead of finding a career.   |
| Program Impact       | Helped excel college careers. Program helped prepare for first couple of years in college. Changed mindsets. Would not have received advanced degrees. Would not have graduated. Would not have had the same college experience. Still connected to leaders and other AAMI alumnus.   |

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### **Confirmability**

Creswell's 2013 version of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological method was used to analyze data. The first step within this approach is to go through a process of epoche. I used a bracketing method of memo writing to support the process of epoche.

This allowed me to process feelings that helped set aside biases, so the true lived experiences of participants can be captured. To maintain proper perspective of the phenomenon, each interview was recorded, reviewed, and transcribed verbatim. As mentioned previously, the strategy of member checking consisted of participants receiving a completed copy of their interview for review, also most participants confirmed through email or by telephone that their experience was captured accurately.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

After analyzing data, a negative case was identified. P5's answers related to RQ2 differed from the other participants; however, his data was included and used to confirm the results of the study concerning campus activities and feeling connected to AAMI peers. Although, P5's contrast in answers can be found in Themes 2, 4, and 7, his responses to Theme 2 has a logical explanation. P5 reported that AAMI did not help him feel connected to the university because he was already familiar with the university before joining the initiative. However, he reported that AAMI was an added benefit to feeling connected (see Theme 5).

Themes 4 and 7 also show the contrasts in data between P5 and all other participants. However, these themes have a connection that is related to campus activities and feeling connected to peers. For example, P5 did not feel the sense of "brotherhood" that other participants expressed. But all other participants were involved in campus activities outside of AAMI, many of the same organizations (the same fraternity, Black Student Alliance, Student Government). The opportunities for all other participants to feel a sense of "brotherhood" was increased because participants were getting involved in

similar activities. P5, who was only involved in AAMI and no other campus activities, would have less opportunities to build quality interactions with his peers (Cuyjet, 2006). Therefore, the contrasts in data from P5 compared to all other participants helps confirm that becoming involved in multiple campus activities is associated with building quality interactions with peers, while the least amount of involvement in campus activities is associated with lower quality interactions with peers.

One of the major objectives of AAMI was for participants to get involved in community and campus activities outside of the initiative. AAMI encouraged and offered support for students to engage in campus activities. P3, who was in the same AAMI class as P5 (see Table 2), reported that students were encouraged to engage in campus activities besides AAMI (see Theme 4). However, P3 also reported that some participants were not able to see the benefits of being involved in campus activities outside of the initiative, and AAMI had difficulties reaching those student (see Theme 7). This idea supports research presented in chapter 2; there are students who are actively engaged in initiatives (vigorously participating in all events suggested by AAMI staff), and there are some who are passively engaged in an initiative (those who may participate in some aspects of an initiative). However, becoming actively engaged in activities produces more positive benefits and quality interactions with others (Harper & Quaye, 2009; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012).

### **Study Results**

The results of this study were derived from interview questions based on

the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit achievement framework. Interview questions were used to address the research questions presented in this study. Significant statements were extracted from interview answers, then analyzed and arranged, resulting in 8 different themes (see Table 3). Below, themes along with supportive quotations from participants addressed the 4 research questions.

### **Theme 1: AAMI Class/Learning community**

Theme 1 emerged as participants began to describe the structure and activities that occurred within AAMI. This theme addressed the first and third research questions: What are the engagement experiences of participants? What were the motives behind selecting certain AAMI activities? Many of the engagement experiences of participants took place within the learning community. Participants reported that the initiative was set up as a credit-based course. Thus, motives were most likely based on students being required to attend class. P6 reported that this was true for him and his peers. Below are supportive quotations from the five other alumni.

This was a 1 credit course. We met twice a week. Once out of class and then, of course, the in-class meeting that we had. That was basically the structure of AAMI when I first started. Basically it was a learning community. Everybody had the same classes. There were 20 of us. (P1)

We had all of the same classes together for the whole freshman year. Outside of the classes we had a study group. Also, we had multiple sessions with one of the mentors over the entire program. Most of us were all in the same dorm also. (P4)

It was originally set up as a group of 30 of us. They basically came in, they picked out all of our classes, they set a mentorship program, I would say. We did study halls and things of that nature. (P2)

Within the AAMI we had the learning community. It's a group of freshman who have study halls on Tuesday and Thursdays. We would attend it and our friends would come. We invite guys and girls, everybody we can think of. (P3)

That class was really good. It was impactful, informational. Overall a great class. (P5)

Participants had similar responses to questions regarding the structure of AAMI. Depending on the year alumni participated, AAMI was set up as a learning community of 20–30 students. All participants had the same academic classes, a study hall and/or AAMI class that met twice a week. For all participants, AAMI was considered a credit-based course, therefore, students were required to attend class or their grades could be negatively impacted.

### **Theme 2: Skills/Social Aspect**

This theme addressed RQ4, What AAMI strategies or resources helped Black males complete college? Theme 2 emerged as the researcher asked participants about the

skills or resources they may have learned through AAMI. All alumni mentioned skills learned or a bond formed with other participants.

I learned basically how I really need to study to be in college. The differences between being in high school and being in college. Working with people who are like myself, being able to do what it took to be successful. Then, even the guest speakers who were there, they were very helpful. (P5)

The program helped me form good study habits, addressed acting out, helped with resumes, making connections, and extending my network. (P6)

They hand-picked every single one of our classes freshman year. We took those classes together. At that point we all became friends. We were able to share the experience. We went to games together. We ate together. It was a family environment. They definitely taught us leadership skill. They made us dress nicely on certain days. They did mock interviews with us. They basically taught us skills that would help us be successful, not only in college but following graduation. I really appreciate how they helped us transition into college. (P2)

I didn't have those same study habits coming into college. Being able to get with the same people that are in the same class with me that I already know, we were able to study together, those key things right there really helped me get acclimated to college life. (P4)



There weren't any skills that were taught to us. I think the biggest thing, a lot of times when people go to college, they go for the social aspect. I think being in a learning community, it helped me transition into college without worrying about the social aspect. (P1)

The exposure it gave me. Because going to the university, I only knew a couple of people I went to high school with, who went there. Not many people, and those same people, they were acquaintances. It wasn't friendships or anything like that they gave me. I guess, being around other males with the same mindset as me, a bond a friendship to have. (P4)

My favorite part of the program had to be the brotherhood of it. We networked we did all kinds of cool events...the best part honestly and truly was just building a bond with those guys. Because we all came in not knowing each other...at first, everybody cliques up a little bit, but over time everybody was cool with everybody. There were times when honestly, if you needed a ride somewhere, you could call one of them. If you needed something to eat, you could call someone. (P3)

Participants described specific skills learned in AAMI, including career building, networking, study skills, and leadership skills. However, out of all the skills mentioned, most alumni highly valued the social aspect or bond that was formed among participants. Although bonding is not a particular skill, alumni believed that being around other Black males who were motivated to earn a degree, helped contribute to their success during and after college.

### **Theme 3: Mentorship**

This theme also addressed RQ4, What AAMI strategies or resources helped Black males complete college? Theme 3 emerged as participants discussed their interactions with AAMI faculty and staff. All participants mentioned that guest speakers, faculty, and a peer mentor was present. But, the relationship established with peer mentors seemed most significant in helping students academically. Below are supportive quotations from 3 of 6 participants.

Well, we definitely had a great relationship with the mentors of the program. I guess you could say the alumni of AAMI that were there...they definitely helped us along. We had a close relationship with those guys. Not the professors, faculty, and staff, we didn't interact with them too much, but our mentors were our main point of contact. (P2)

There was one mentor. He wasn't a faculty member, he was actually a senior. He served as a mentor for a lot of us....He would sit us down, talk to us, and push us in the right direction as far as having mock interviews, how to dress, how to

handle yourself as a professional, and how to handle yourself in a city like our college city. (P1)

The fact that we had someone who we could actually relate to and someone who could see things from our side, who could give us insight on the things we went through, and how being in an organization like that helped him and actually changed his collegiate experience...helped us out for the best. (P3)

Alumni reported that guest speakers and faculty members were part of AAMI's success; however, mentorship was most influential for participants. There was one mentor in particular that many participants mentioned. He was a former AAMI participant and student body president at their university. Some participants felt they could relate to their mentor because of his age, and his experience with AAMI. The mentor taught various skills and motivated participants to strive for success.

#### **Theme 4: Campus Activities**

This theme addressed RQ1 and RQ 2: What are the engagement experiences of Black males involved in AAMI? What activities did AAMI graduates prefer to be involved in? Theme 4 emerged as the researcher asked participants if they were involved in campus activities outside of AAMI. Five out of 6 alumni discussed being engaged in at least one activity outside of AAMI. The activities they preferred included fraternities (all participants mentioned the same fraternity), student government, and Black Alliance. P5

was the only participant who was not involved in campus activities outside of AAMI.

Below are supportive quotations from participants.

Yes, I was involved in SGA, Honor Society, and I pledged Alpha Phi Alpha. (P6)

I participated in Student Activities Council for a little while. Then I did the fraternity thing, but I mostly worked. I worked a lot. I wasn't really too involved with some of the things while on campus besides being a part of the AAMI community. (P2)

Freshman year, no. I wasn't much involved. From sophomore, well actually, the second semester of my freshman year, I became involved in MDA, from there I was involved in a little bit of everything. I ended up being-yeah, I was very involved on campus. Different leadership organizations, Alpha Phi Alpha, many other different organizations as well. (P4)

BSA was the Black Student Alliance. I pledged, I was heavily involved with that. I wasn't on SGA, but Student Activities Council. My roommate, he was usually on the SGA board. You name it, as far as being involved on campus, we were definitely involved and at every campus event. (P1)

Freshman throughout college, I was in Student Government Association. I was in Student Activities Council, I was in Black Student Alliance. Yeah, there was a

group called The Society. It was about fashion in the modern day culture in the African American community. Honestly, I have to go back and check my resume. There's so many. (P3)

When asked if AAMI encouraged his participation or if he just had a desire to get involved in campus activities, P3 explained his background and AAMI's influence:

I knew I was going to college, but I thought of it as I'll go to college, party a little bit, get a degree then start working. Being in an organization and being involved on campus never once crossed my mind. I remember the first night we were there. The mentor and faculty member, they were telling us all of this stuff, all about college. It went in one ear and out the other...I was like "be honest with us. Why are you trying to get us to do all of this stuff? They basically said, "Take advantage of the opportunity. A lot of people don't have what you guys got going on right now. Since you're just now coming in, you have the perfect opportunity. You make your destiny start from here.

As mentioned previously, five out of six participants in this study were involved in multiple campus organizations, and many were involved in the same organizations. This is not surprising since AAMI encouraged students to be engaged in campus activities, many were involved in the same organizations. All of these participants reported feeling a sense of brotherhood or comradery. However, P5, who was not involved in any activities outside of AAMI, did not experience the bond and comradery that the other participants

discussed. P5 felt more programs were needed to help participants grow together (See Theme 7). This could indicate that becoming involved in organizations outside of AAMI may have also helped participants form their bond with one another.

### **Theme 5: Connection**

This theme addressed RQ4, What AAMI strategies or resources helped Black males complete college? As mentioned in Chapter 2, before the implementation of AAMI, USG found that their Black male students were leaving college early because they felt disconnected to the university. AAMI is being used as a strategy to help the population feel connected and to increase graduation rates for Black male college students. Theme 5 emerged when the researcher asked participants if AAMI helped them feel connected to the university. Five out of 6 participants felt that being in AAMI helped them feel connected to the university. P5 reported that he already had a connection to the university, but reported AAMI was an added benefit. Below are supportive quotes from participants.

It definitely helps, from the relationships that started on the first day of class.

Once we got acclimated to school, two or three years down the road we were getting involved with on campus organizations outside of AAMI. When you're around successful people, obviously they are involved more on campus, as far as being involved with student SGA. I was involved in a lot of other things aside from AAMI. (P1)

I would have to say no. Before the program, I was already familiar with the university. I already knew I would go to college. I guess it (AAMI) was an added benefit. (5)

Because I was exposed to the program, actually, and having that mentor, that even exposed me more because he pretty much gave us the game. We understood what our university was about, what college life was all about. That exposure really helped all of us, as far as getting acclimated to college life. It really did. I could definitely see why people before did not feel connected, if they were in a regular learning community, because those other learning communities did not do half of the things we did in AAMI. (P4)

One of my really good mentors, close friends, I call him uncle, he connected me with the guy that was over the program at the time, and they spoke to me and they persuaded me to go to the university. Then from that moment I got connected with some of the leaders in the program. I'm still friends with them today. Some of them are my fraternity brothers. (P2)

It really did connect us to the campus. We were freshman and there were seniors and grad students coming up talking to us and knowing our names. We didn't even know them. It gave us a sense of self, "man, I feel like I'm really important out here. Because I don't even know these people and seniors do not talk to

freshman. That doesn't happen in college." It really did help get us connected.

(P3)

Overwhelming, most alumni believed that AAMI helped them feel connected to the university. First, participants felt connected because the learning community provided an opportunity for them to build relationships with one another. Secondly, faculty and staff informed participants about their university and what to expect out of college. Last, participants felt connected because they were involved in campus activities outside of AAMI.

### **Theme 6: Racial Divide/Split**

This theme addressed RQ1, What were the engagement experiences of participant? Specifically, this theme emerge as I asked address participants if race impacted their experiences on campus. All participant reported that race did not directly impact their academic experience on campus. However, some participants reported that racism was present on campus or within their college city. Below are supported quotes from all participants.

P2 reported that he didn't experience racism like some of his peers,

I think it had a lot to do with where I'm originally from. That place was really diverse. I was prepared for how different races interact. I play sports and I was very active in the community, so I had the chance to be around a lot of different people and a lot of different ethnicities. It really didn't bother me or I really didn't experience it as much as some of the people who were in the group with me.



No, I really didn't experiences that at the college. I think primarily because it was a segregated campus, but I think for most of us, it was basically, you stayed within your own comfort zone as far as race. If you were raised in an all Black community, you pretty much stayed with that group. Some people were good at stepping outside of their race. Yeah, as far as racism I didn't get a chance to experience that on campus because I really don't expose myself to other races. (P1)

It's a very diverse campus. I would say, though, of course there is a split, but the split only happens in the Greek world. That's really the biggest split that you see. You got your White sororities and fraternities that really just deal with one another...but regular Caucasian or whatever classes and stuff like that, I didn't really see. I wasn't put against any, much adversity as far as that. It is a lot of different ethnicities, as far as teachers and stuff it was cool. I can't say that I being black really brought a lot of obstacles being there. It also accelerated a lot of my leadership abilities, because heck, it was only us, many of us leading organizations and stuff. If anything, I would say it was more positive than negative. (P4)

There were times. I know one year for the Student Government Association. A Black guy, he was the president and he was running for reelection. There was a Caucasian male who also began to run. He was a frat guy, and we all know how

that goes, in that type of environment. Literally the campus split apart. It was Black vs White. It was honestly like a race war on campus. It was bad to the point where they were slandering names, passing out fliers at apartment complexes. I was receiving phone calls from people to go do some illegal things, not really illegal, but to slander their names as well. I was like, no, I'm bigger than that. I don't entertain stupidity with stupidity. The Black guy running for president said "there are a lot of people who hate the fact that we are on this campus. The way we're going to make them hate us even more is by succeeding." Him telling us that, it stuck with us. We made it through. No hard feelings against those guys, the Caucasian males that were in the drama. It was not the best, but we just rose above it (P3)

It's an obvious divide in the college city. Honestly it's pretty bad. But, I tried my best to see through it. I don't see color. That's one of the reasons I went to this college instead of a HBCU, like my siblings. Because my mom told me, "Okay your older brother went to a HBCU, you need to go somewhere with diversity...when you graduate you're not only going to work with Black people. So, you need to know how to handle yourself amongst Black and White." (P3)

When asked if he experienced racism in college, P6 discussed his experience walking around his college city.

On Thursdays AAMI required us to dress up. One Thursday I was walking around in the city with a suit on. Someone came up to me and asked if I had to go to court for something because I was dressed up.

P1 discussed his views on being a Black male going to college,

I think we're definitely fighting a different battle as Black males when we go to college. I personally going from a Suburban to a rural environment like the college city, there were a lot of aspects that you didn't take into consideration when you came to the college city. When I first got here. I was like, I don't think I'm going to have fun here. I'm going to do this that or the other. I found myself in the back of a police car several times. It's not that I was a thug, it's not this, that, or the other, but you're definitely fighting with the government out there....the biggest thing about the campus like this it's easy to get yourself in trouble with the law. There's a target on your head. Day one as soon as you come to campus.

As reported previously, racism or a racial divide existed on campus, but participants stated they were not personally impacted by racism. Some participants reported that their diverse backgrounds helped them interact with individuals from all races, while others only interacted with members of their own race. But, although alumni reported they were not personally impacted by racism on campus, P1 and P6 reportedly experienced racism in the college town. For example, P1 reported that living in a predominantly white college city caused him and other Black male college students to get

in trouble with the law easily. He reportedly found himself in the back of a police car several times. He stated “there is a target on your head. Day one as soon as you get on campus.” P6 reported a White person in the community assumed he was going to court just because he was dressed up. Both participants classified these experiences as racism.

### **Theme 7: Program Weakness**

This theme also addresses RQ4 strategies and resources helped Black males graduate college? Although this section is labeled weaknesses, theme 7 emerged as alumni described what they believe can improve the program or the strategies that helped participants succeed, but no longer exist in AAMI. All participant responses are listed below,

There is a need for more mentors, more upperclassmen to help mentor students.

(P6)

Right before I graduated, I did notice that the program had slacked off a lot actually. I was involve in it. But, I guess I didn't see the same emphasis that they put on it with us. I don't know where the program is now I don't know what the focus is now, because actually at the university, of course the enrollment rate has went up, but as far as Blacks as well, it has increased a lot. I don't know where the program is now. (P4)

I think they got away from the course as far as they didn't offer the course. I don't think it was mandatory as it was when I first started. From what I've gathered,

basically it was more optional. Basically, it didn't impact a student's grade if they weren't active within the course. I know for us we had to meet. We had a class meeting that wasn't mandatory, but we thought it was mandatory. We met Tuesdays and Thursdays, Tuesday was the only day we had class. The mentor would sit us down, talk to us, and push us in the right direction as far as having mock interviews, how to dress, how to handle yourself as a professional, and how to handle yourself in the college city. They didn't have that by the time I graduated. (P1)

I think they could have more programs within. They could probably include maybe more mini conferences or retreats where people really get to know each other better. Not only learning together, but also growing together. That can be maybe something they can look into doing in the future. Before they go to college, do something there. Not very many people stick together as a program. Ice breakers where they didn't know each other. Talk about college, what their expectations are. Something to get to know each other better and talk about each other's future plans, goals, aspirations. (P5)

I would say, if those grabbing guys that get caught up in, I guess you could say, 'college life', they should be helping them out. Because I was one of the guys where I saw the benefits of being involved, of being a positive person on campus. I took advantage of it. As soon as I started, I was like, Okay, "I want that." Then

you have some guys, they're the party promoters, and all the girls, and all that stuff. The first thing they're like, "Okay, being involved is cool and all, but if I go to this I'm going to miss the party. If I go to this I'm going to miss going to this function at somebody's house." We got separated. (P3)

I would definitely say that some of the weaknesses could be that the classes we may have taken were pretty easy because they knew the professors, and they tried to make it to where you get through the first year of college, you have a higher chance of finishing. They definitely wanted us to get through the first year. We took a lot of courses that may have not been directly reflected to the course we needed to be on. Their focus was more on us graduating instead of finding the degree or the career field that we want to get into. That can be a negative because I think it's more important to go to college to find a good career, then it us to graduate. (P2)

Participants had different responses for program weaknesses. P1 and P4, who also served as mentors for AAMI, reported the program had significantly changed its structure. Students were not required to attend courses, and they were not taught some of the skills alumni in this study remember learning. Other weaknesses included a lack of mentors, a need for more programs within AAMI, making classes easier so participants can pass and graduate college, not helping students find careers, and not having an effective strategy to help students who were not actively engaged in AAMI.

**Theme 8: Impact/Recommendation**

This theme addresses RQ4, What AAMI strategies and resources helped Black males graduate college? Theme eight emerged throughout the interview process. Participants discussed the impact of AAMI and if the program helped them graduate from college. When asked if AAMI helped him graduate, P5 reported, “I think it did to a lesser degree. I think it did involve me graduating from college. P6 stated that being around “other successful Black males” in AAMI helped contribute to him graduating. “The comradery, the friendships that were built.” Below, the other four participant discuss the programs impact.

The faculty member and mentor opened our eyes to so many things that never would have crossed my mind in going to college, from networking and taking advantage of opportunities on campus, even little things like, ‘hey, there’s a canned food drive, go get your name in it. Go help out. Helping out you will meet a classmate, who knew a professor, who knew a business owner that could give you an internship. Without them instilling that in us early, I honestly do not know. I would have graduated, I’m not going to say I wouldn’t have graduated. I would have forced myself to graduate, but I’m not sure if my experience would have been the same (P3)

I think being able to be around so many positive people. A lot of those guys. I’m still close to today. Being able to see a lot of people succeed at that time and just to be around people like that, it does wonders. Like I said, socially and definitely

every day. I think the biggest thing is when I came to college, I knew a couple of people from high school, but I didn't know anybody else. The community, it definitely gave me an outlet as far as being able to meet people. That's where a lot of us struggle. Sometimes we naturally keep to ourselves. To be able to know 20 other people, we got a chance to see that everybody has a common interest as far as coming in and graduating. (P1)

I don't think I would have graduated if it wasn't for AAMI. I really appreciated them helping us transition in college. They hand-picked every single one of our classes freshmen year. We took those classes together. At that point, we all became friends. We went to games together. We went to lunch together. We ate together. It was a family environment. It was really a good experience. (P2)

Where I am today I definitely, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have gotten my masters, I wouldn't have done any of those things had I not come through the program. I would have graduated, but as far as, I think it would have been on a much slower track. I think, from my program, if I'm not mistaken. I'm going to say out of 20 people that were in the program, I would say only three or four did not graduate. When I say they didn't graduate, they didn't graduate from this university. They could have gone on to get an associate's degree from somewhere else. (P1)



I don't know if I would have graduated if it wasn't for AAMI. I honestly didn't know what AAMI meant to me until I started getting into my upper class years and I realized all these guys that I started with are really good friends of mine. We're on this journey together and we're trying to graduate and get into society and all that good stuff. Coming in I believe I got a phone call "you need to come to this college. It's really important that you come out here." I didn't know why it was important for me to come out there right then. The college had one of the best programs for AAMI, no other school had it in state. They had a vision. I think that was important to my development and all those things. (P4)

Participants passionately discussed the positive impact AAMI had on their college experience, their lives, and/or their careers. All participants believed AAMI contributed to them graduating from college. Some participants discussed the impact of learning how to network, getting involved in campus activities, and being motivated to get an advanced degree. However, the social aspect of AAMI and the bond developed within the learning community was most impactful. Participants reported that developing a relationship with other successful Black males helped them excel academically, socially, and professionally.

### **Summary**

In response to the RQ1, What are the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from educational institution within USG who were involved in AAM," all

alumni were actively involved in the AAMI learning community. The community consisted of all participants attending classes; they were taught study skills, career development, leadership skills, and a bond was developed with their peers. Secondly, 5 out of 6 participants were involved in campus activities outside of AAMI. These activities included, but were not limited to Student Government Association, Student Activities Council, Black Student Alliance, MDA, the Society, and fraternities. There was a connection found between becoming involved with activities outside of AAMI and forming a bond. P5, who did not participate in any activities besides AAMI did not feel connected to his peers, while all other participants who were involved in campus activities experienced quality relationships with peers.

In response to the research question, "What activities, if any did Black male graduates of AAMI prefer to be involved with that helped them increase academic success and /or feel more connected to the university," although it is not a specific activity, four out of six participants reported that being around positive, successful Black males in their learning community helped them graduate and/or increase their academic success. Also, five out of six participants were involved in campus activities, preferences included the Student Government Association, Black student Alliance, and all participants mentioned the same fraternity

In response to the third question, "what were the motives behind selecting certain AAMI activities," I initially wanted to interview participants from 6 different AAMI institutions. Some institutions may have allowed their students to select certain activities within AAMI (academic support, mentoring, leadership development, summer

preparation programs). However, the AAMI institution in this study was set up for students to attend classes that taught skills and encouraged students to get involved in other community and campus activities. They did not have a chance to pick an activity like mentoring, or leadership development; these activities were all required as parts of the initiative. Although most participants were enthusiastic about AAMI, participants reported that the initiative was setup as a credit-based course. So, motives may have been based on students being required to attend.

In response to the last question, "What AAMI strategies and resources helped Black males manage to complete college," all participants stated that some aspect of AAMI contributed to them graduating from college. This includes study skills, encouragement to get involved in campus activities, mentorship, mock interviews, and resume building. However, all but one participant, stated that building relationships with other successful and positive Black males in the program was most impactful. In chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for social change, and the conclusion of the study.

## Chapter 5: Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from an AAMI university, and who were involved in AAMI programs. This study used the anti-deficit achievement framework to explore the academic success of Black males from a strengths-based perspective. The interview questions were based on the college achievement dimension of the anti-deficit framework, which focused on how Black males (a) prepare for college, (b) achieve success in higher education, and (c) choose graduate schools and career options (Harper, 2012). Interview questions were used to gain in-depth information from participants that helped address the study's four research questions.

This study was conducted to help develop strategies to help increase graduation rates among Black male college students. Researchers have demonstrated that student engagement is linked to degree attainment (Reid, 2013; NSSE, 2013). Since USG experienced a 108.81% increase in college completion rates after AAMI (USG, 2015), it is important to explore the engagement experiences of graduates involved in AAMI in order to discover some of the direct interventions that may have helped alumni achieve academic success.

Four findings gave insight into the interventions that benefited graduates. First, all participants were actively involved in AAMI; 5 out of 6 were engaged in other campus activities, and some participants reported that AAMI staff encouraged them to get involved in campus activities. Secondly, 4 out of 6 reported that out of all of the

skills/interventions learned through the initiative, building relationships with other successful Black males has the greatest impact in helping them graduate from college. Third, although most participants were enthusiastic about AAMI, the program required students to take a credit-based course. Therefore, if students did not participate, their grades would drop. Last, the strategies and resources that participants believed helped them complete college were study skills, encouragement to get involved in campus activities, mentorship, mock interviews, resume assistance, networking, and building relationships with other successful Black males.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings of this study confirmed the research on student engagement presented in Chapter 2. For example, all participants in this study graduated from their university, were actively involved in AAMI, and five out of six were also engaged in other campus activities including leadership roles. In Chapter 2, Harper (2012) found that high-achieving Black male college students were actively engaged in campus activities, leadership roles, and enrichment programs.

Another finding that was consistent with the literature, was some of the skills and resources that alumni believed had contributed to their academic success. For example, AAMI participants reported that learning study skills, encouragement from AAMI staff to get involved in campus activities, mentorship, mock interviews, and resume building were skills that helped them complete college. Similarly, research presented in chapter 2 found that becoming involved in campus activities, mentorship, and a summer bridge

program helped students achieve academic success (Harper, 2012; Harper & Davis III, 2012; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).

Compared to the research presented in chapter two, there are findings in this study that extend knowledge in the subject area of Black male initiatives. For example, most participants reported that the relationships formed with other AAMI students helped them academically, socially, and professionally. Research in chapter 2 shows that within initiatives, interactions with faculty and school administrators' positively impacted Black males (Harper, 2012). Also, AAMI's requirement for participants to attend a credit-based class extends knowledge in the research area. The initiatives discussed in chapter 2 appear to be voluntary and do not require students to attend a course (Cuyjet, 2006; Hughes, 2010; Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010). However, an initiative that requires participation may be more impactful because students would attend class on a consistent basis.

For example, alumni involved in AAMI were mandated to engage in weekly classes where they were taught leadership, career, networking, and/or study skills. But, the knowledge participants gained from AAMI faculty and mentors may have been enhanced and cultivated due to consistent class attendance. Also, the bond between participants was developed and strengthened due to the time spent in AAMI classes, academic courses, and eventually other campus activities. As a result, alumni reported that the skills learned in AAMI and/or the bond formed with other successful Black males helped them obtain academic success.

The findings of this study are consistent with the theoretical frameworks presented in chapter 2. For example, USG used concepts associated with organizational learning theory to help increase Black male college enrollment and graduation rates by implementing AAMI. First, USG recognized their Black male students were leaving college early. Next, a task-force explored and acquired information on why former Black male students withdrew from college early. Once it was discovered that former students felt disconnected on campus, the data was then assessed, converted into knowledge, and transferred to colleges and universities in the form of AAMI (Argote, 2013; USG, 2012). As a result, four out of 6 participants in this study credited AAMI with helping them feel connected to their university.

The anti-deficit achievement framework was used because the theory helped me create interview questions aimed toward discovering how Black males have succeeded in higher education, contrary to the deficit model, which questions why Black males fail to succeed academically. Harper (2010) developed the model to interview students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Interview questions from this study were created by using sample interview questions from Harper (2010). Once participants were interviewed, significant statements were identified and grouped into different themes. Most of the themes reflect the anti-deficit achievement framework; these include AAMI class/learning community, skills/social aspect, mentorship, campus activities, and feeling connected. The anti-deficit model is built from several theories within sociology, education and psychology. However, there are two

theories that directly reflect the themes in this study: cultural and social capital theories and theories on college student retention (Harper, 2010).

Bourdieu developed the concepts of cultural and social capital to describe issues related to educational and social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986; Weininger & Lareau, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu (1986) argued that upper and middle class societies have acquired knowledge that is considered more valuable than those who are of lower status or minority. This knowledge is often obtained through parental influence, elite educational institutions, and training programs. Due to their educational background and social connections, Bourdieu believed those with a higher socioeconomic status have an advantage with converting cultural and social capital into economic capital (Yosso, 2005). Harper (2010) takes a strength-based approach to Bourdieu's ideas. Although Harper acknowledges that many minority students lack the cultural and social capital Bourdieu describes, he believes students achieve success by acquiring knowledge, strategies, and social connections through minority organizations, campus activities, mentorship, and interacting with faculty.

The themes associated with Harper's perspective on cultural and social capital are AAMI class/learning community, skills/social aspect, mentorship, and campus activities. For example, participants reported that they acquired knowledge, skills, and social connections through AAMI, including sessions with mentors and sometimes faculty members. Participants were also heavily involved in campus activities, specifically leadership organizations. As a result of their acquired knowledge, skills, and social



connections participants reported that AAMI helped them obtain success during and after college.

Student retention in higher education is a major issue (Tinto, 2006), particularly among Black male undergraduates (Palmer et al., 2009, Wood, 2011). Universities generally blame students for their lack of motivation or shift the responsibility of increasing graduation rates to the office of student affairs. However, Tinto (2000) found that students leave college because they feel disconnected from peers, professors and administrators. Harper's perspective on theories of student retention seeks to understand factors that keep students enrolled in college, despite possible barriers. Researchers found when students actively participate in academic and social activities on campus, they tend to be more committed to their college and educational goals, improving retention rates (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

The theme of feeling connected reflects the theories on college student retention. For example, AAMI found that their Black male students were leaving college early because they felt disconnected on campus. Therefore, USG implemented AAMI to engage Black male students in academically focused activities inside and outside the classroom to help students feel connected. As a result, from 2003 to 2011 there was a 58.11% increase in bachelor degrees for Black male college students (USG, 2012). Most participants in reported that AAMI helped them feel connected to their university, and several students reported that the social aspect of bonding with other successful men contributed to them graduating from college.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations in this study. First, participants are graduates of one university within USG who participated in AAMI. Depending on the university, each AAMI program may be set up differently. Therefore, the experiences in this study may not be representative of all students who participated in programs associated with AAMI. Also, this study is qualitative in nature, therefore there were no statistical specifications for reliability and validity. Third triangulation was not used, which limits the number of methods used to collect data. However, other strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness of data collected (Krefting, 1991). For example, member checking with participants was used to verify information collected and interpreted by researcher, reflexivity was utilized, and debriefing with committee members helped address problems related to collecting, interpreting, and validating data (Krefting).

Also, a smaller sample size of 6 was used, as opposed to the original 10 to 12 participants. However, this was because the proposed research study was intended to compare the engagement experiences of participants from six different AAMI institutions. This study explored the engagement experiences of participants from one AAMI institution. Saturation was still reached as subjects participated in similar activities, and no information was found that could add any new ideas to the research study. Although, the sample size of this research decreased, the study still adds valuable information to the body of literature on student engagement.

Last, due to technical difficulties P6's interview was based on answers received from the interview questions listed in Appendix A. P6 could not be reached for member

checking, however, he confirmed during the interview that the answers I wrote down were correct. Although P6's interview was not as descriptive as the other participants, all of the answered to the interview questions listed in Appendix A were obtained. Therefore, the data P6 provided added valuable information to the research study, not affecting saturation.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of this study, there are several recommendations for future research on Black male college students' engagement experiences. First, interviewing several AAMI alumni who graduated from different colleges and universities within USG could provide additional information on student success. Secondly, comparing the engagement experiences of AAMI students or graduates from different AAMI institutions is needed, particularly since each initiative has their own unique program and offers different types of activities. Third, there is a need to interview alumni who participated in this study's AAMI institution and graduated in 2015 or beyond. For example, some participants reported that AAMI changed its structure, and current AAMI participants are not required to attend AAMI classes. Fourth, most alumni reported that building a bond with other participants contributed to them graduating from college. A study focused more on how the structure may have helped form the bond could offer more insight into additional strategies to increase Black male college success. Also, all of the participants in this study were professionally successful; they were managers, accountants, business executives, etc. Interviewing more AAMI alumni who graduated from college could determine if there is a link between participating in AAMI and attaining professional success. Last,

there is a need to interview AAMI faculty and staff to explore their experience with students and to gain more insight into the structure of AAMI programs.

There are other recommendations for this study based on the research presented in chapter 2. First, there is a lack of research on the engagement experiences of Black male student leaders at PWIs. (Harper et al. 2011), and this study provided limited information on motives for choosing certain activities. Thus, further research is needed in this area. There is also a need to perform a quantitative study to determine the direct AAMI interventions that participants believed may have helped them graduate from college (USG, 2012).

Last, I will discuss a few recommendations for universities who want to implement a successful initiative similar to AAMI. First, there is a need for more universities to launch a system-wide program to help Black male college students achieve academic success. A systems approach could impact several colleges and universities, and could include the ideas of various administrators, board members, faculty, and staff members. USG used a system-wide approach to launch AAMI, and the organization has seen a significant increase in graduation and enrollment rates since the program's inception. Each AAMI institution has their own unique version of the initiative to meet the needs of their Black male students. Therefore, information regarding AAMI graduates and completion rates must be specific to each AAMI institution. When creating a system-wide initiative, it is important to have information available at a central location so the university system has updated information on the successes and failures of the initiative. Also, providing the data in a central place gives researchers direct access to important

statistical information. Secondly, understanding deficit-oriented research is important; however, this study has shown that there is value in understanding how Black males succeed academically. Almost every participant thanked me for interviewing them about their AAMI experiences. Some participants reported that I was the first person to ask them about their academic success. Third, research on student engagement, skills/resources, mentorship, and peer relationships should be incorporated into the initiative. Participants in this study reported that the skills, training, mentorship, campus activities, mock interviews, and peer relations helped them feel connected to their university and graduate from college. Finally, Black male students (all academic levels), former students, and those who have graduated should be interviewed concerning their college experience. Also, if willing, some of these men should become board members, providing ideas to create an appropriate initiative. All participants in this study were very insightful, they willingly discussed their engagement experiences and addressed ways the initiative could be improved.

### **Implications**

This study has the potential to create positive social change within educational systems and throughout society. The findings of this research can be used to inform high schools, university systems, and colleges of specific methods that may help improve academic outcomes for Black male college students. For example, replicating AAMI in a high school setting, where students build peer relationship, learn study skills, gain career knowledge, and are encouraged to get involved in community and extra-curricular

activities could prepare more Black males to graduate high school. An increase in Black male high school graduates could lead to an increase in Black male college graduates.

Utilizing the anti-deficit achievement framework can help create social change within educational research. For the past 15 years, researchers have used a deficit approach to examine the disadvantages, lack of resources, and under preparedness Black males may face in college (Brown & Brown, 2012; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood, 2011). However, statistics still conclude that graduation rates remain dismal within the population (Clayton, Hewitt, & Gaffney; 2004, Harper, 2010; Harper, 2013; Harper, 2014; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Wood, 2011). The use of the anti-deficit approach in this study highlighted skills, resources, and engagement experiences participants believed helped them graduate from college. Future studies using an anti-deficit approach could provide more strategies for Black male success in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that AAMI helped participants feel connected to their university, taught important skills, encouraged students to become involved in campus activities, and provided an atmosphere for Black males to foster relationships with one another. Participants not only graduated from college, some are pursuing graduate education and hope to earn post-graduate degrees. Others are accountants, managers, business executives, coaches, and aspiring authors. I was inspired as I listened to participants passionately discuss the impact AAMI had on them academically, professionally, socially, and personally.

Some Black males will face educational challenges due to issues like social inequalities and under preparedness, while other Black males are academically successful and will graduate from college with little difficulties. However, initiatives like AAMI can help all students increase academic success, build quality interactions with peers, learn career skills, and help support students' efforts to engage in campus activities outside of AAMI. This study shows that all participants believed some aspect of the interventions mentioned above helped them graduate from college. Therefore, educational institutions who want to increase graduation rates among their Black male population should develop high-quality initiatives that help engage their students in similar activities.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What type of AAMI program(s) were you involved in (academic support, mentoring, leadership programs, summer preparation program, etc.)?
2. What motivated you to become involved in the specific AAMI program(s)?
3. What were your expectations before becoming involved in AAMI? Did AAMI meet those expectations? Please explain.
4. Were you involved in any university related activities outside of AAMI? If so, what (if any) AAMI skills or resources helped you engage in university related activities?
5. What specific AAMI activities, skills, and/or resources (if any) contributed to your academic success?
6. Did race impact your experience as a Black male college student at USG? If so, did AAMI skills, resources, and/or relationships help you manage race-related issues?
7. Did interactions with AAMI faculty and staff members contribute to your academic success? Please Explain.
8. Before the implementation of AAMI, many Black undergraduates reportedly left school early due to not feeling connecting to their college/university. Does AAMI help you feel more connected to your educational institution?
9. Would you recommend your specific AAMI program to help other Black male undergraduate successfully complete college? Please explain.
10. Describe your academic history (GPA, school activities). What activities, motivations, or influence do you believe have been most influential in helping you complete college?

## Appendix B: Invitation Letter

Dear Alumni,

I, Charika Davis, a doctoral student at Walden University, invite you to take part in a research study entitled Exploring Minority Initiative Programs and Black Male College Student Engagement Experiences.

The purpose of the study is to explore the engagement experiences of Black males who graduated from educational institutions within the University Systems of Georgia, and who participated in the African American Male Initiative (AAMI). The study will focus upon the engagement activities that may have helped participants graduate from their college or university.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 1 hour phone or face-to-face interview. A 15-30 minute follow up interview may be schedule to ensure responses to interview questions are accurate.

Here are some sample questions:

1. Describe what you enjoyed the most about your specific AAMI program. What did you like the least about your program?
2. What specific AAMI activities, skills or resources (if any) contributed to you graduating college
3. Were you involved in any university related activities outside of AAMI? If so, how did AAMI skills, or resources help you engage in university related activities?

Participating in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The potential benefit of this study would be that your information regarding your experiences could help with understanding how programs affiliated with AAMI has helped Black male college students graduate.

If you have any question, please contact the researcher via phone at 678-371-5839 or at [charika.davis@waldenu.edu](mailto:charika.davis@waldenu.edu). If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 610-312-1210.

Sincerely,

Charika L. Davis, MA

Ph.D. Psychology Candidate  
Walden University  
School of Psychology  
Minneapolis, MN 55401

## Appendix C: Permission to Obtain Student Directory

April 21, 2015

*Via Email: charika.davis@waldenu.edu*

Charika Davis  
Walden University  
School of Psychology

**RE: Directory Information - AAMI**

Dear Ms. Davis:

We are in receipt of your email dated April 17, 2015 in which you requested official records of the University of West Georgia, pursuant to the Open Records Act O.C.G.A. §50-18-70 et seq. This letter shall serve as the required response pursuant to O.C.G.A §50-18-70 (b)(1)(A).

We have determined that the University of West Georgia does maintain records responsive to your request and have included them with this correspondence.

Contact this office if you have questions regarding this matter.

Sincerely,  
Tara Pearson  
Open Records Officer

TP/es

CC: Dr. Catherine A. Jenks, Associate Vice President and Custodian of Records  
Jane Simpson, University Legal Counsel

## Appendix D: License Agreement for Table 1

This Agreement between Charika L Davis ("You") and John Wiley and Sons ("John Wiley and Sons") consists of your license details and the terms and conditions provided by John Wiley and Sons and Copyright Clearance Center.

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| Licensed Content Publisher            | John Wiley and Sons   |
| Licensed Content Publication          | New Directions for Institutional Research   |
| Licensed Content Title                | An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM               |
| Licensed Content Author               | Shaun R. Harper   |
| Licensed Content Date                 | Dec 16, 2010  |
| Pages                                 | 12  |
| Type of use                           | Dissertation/Thesis   |
| Requestor type                        | University/Academic   |
| Format                                | Electronic  |
| Portion                               | Figure/table  |
| Number of figures/tables              | 1   |
| Original Wiley figure/table number(s) | Table 6.3 Sample Reframed Research questions Explored in the NBMCAS                           |
| Will you be translating?              | No  |
| Title of your thesis / dissertation   | Exploring Minority Initiative Programs and Black Male College Students Engagement Experiences |