Phenomenology: Exploring the Academic and Social Experiences of African American Males in an Urban Community College

by

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Phenomenology: Exploring the Academic and Social Experiences

of African American Males in an Urban Community College

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by

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DEDICATION

With enduring gratitude, I wish to dedicate this document to my Lord Jesus Christ and family, who inspire me to believe in my gifts and use them to make a meaningful difference in this world.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the academic and social experiences of African American male students in an urban community college. This qualitative study utilized the phenomenology tradition as a model to provide insight into the academic and social practices that promote participation and success among African American male students in an urban community college. The primary research question that guided this study was: “What are the experiences of African American men enrolled at an urban community college?” Additionally, the following related subquestions were explored:

1. How does academic involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
2. How does social involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
3. What learning activities are most meaningful in college experiences of African American male students at an urban community college?
4. How do African American men perceive their in-class and out-of-class experiences at an urban community college?
5. What institutional factors facilitate and serve as barriers to academic success for African American men?

The theories that were used to guide this study were Rendón’s theory of validation and Steele and Aronson’s theory of stereotype threat.

The sample was comprised of 10 African American males varying in age and experience. The data were triangulated through multiple methods, including a recorded
interview with each participant and a focus group interview. Participants were selected purposefully to ensure a participant pool comprised of individuals who would potentially have the most insight into the research questions and examined phenomenon. The analysis process resulted in the identification of five thematic categories that captured the essence of the participants’ shared experiences. The categories are: (a) barriers to academic achievement; (b) strategies to ensure success; (c) pedagogy of engagement; (d) deconstructing stereotypes; and (e) diversity and supportive learning environments. The participants identified several challenges that impeded their participation and degree attainment in postsecondary education. However, support offered by programs, counselors, and mentoring in college played a crucial role in reversing the negative effect caused by the challenges they experienced. Moreover, positive interactions with faculty members helped participants build confidence in their academic ability, thus participants began to see themselves as capable learners. Furthermore, pedagogical practices that engaged the men as active participants in the learning process, and allowed them to make connections to their life experiences, inspired deeper learning among participants. Clear directions and constant feedback also emerged as practices that enabled participants to achieve success in their classes. Although participants reported positive social and academic experiences in postsecondary education, negative stereotyping experienced in primary and secondary education influenced their disposition toward learning, confidence in their ability to learn, and educational aspirations. Through the research, negative stereotyping during their early schooling years appeared to have a precipitous affect on their participation and attainment at the postsecondary level. However, diversity and supportive learning environment on the college campus emerged as significant factors
that promoted academic and social involvement for the African American men in this study. Thus, the qualitative findings from this study contribute to broadening the discourse and informing the field of education of the perspectives and challenges facing African American men who attend community college.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah, 40:31). I thank God for who He is, and all He has done in my life. He is my anchor, and He gave me the strength to endure this rigorous process. Without Him, I would be nothing. I am truly grateful to be highly favored of the Lord, which has afforded me this distinct and highly regarded opportunity to be among the few who have achieved the highest level of degrees.

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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

Why commit myself to high academic achievement? How do I commit myself to achieve, to work hard over time in school, if I cannot predict when or under what circumstances this hard work will be acknowledged and recognized? How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, when African American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence? How can I aspire to and work toward excellence when it is unclear whether or when evaluations of my work can or should be taken seriously? (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, pp. 4-5)

Introduction

Perry and colleagues (2003) vividly captured the dilemma African American men face throughout the educational pipeline. The narrative brings voice to African American male students, who are often on the receiving end of discriminatory practices that perpetuate disparities in educational outcomes (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Harper, 2006a; Noguera, 2003). “Why commit myself to high academic achievement,” suggests that the pursuit of academic success for some students is a mere exercise in futility. Further, it makes clear that there might be a connection between the educational performance of African American males and the negative perceptions and expectations that are placed on them. “Failing student or a failing system,” was a question posed by Noguera and Wing (2006) in their book entitled,
**Unfinished Business.** According to Noguera and Wing, the inequality in institutional policy and practices that exists in public education ultimately results in racial disparities in educational outcomes. For example, African American males are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, more likely to be placed in special education, and are less likely to be placed in advanced-placement and honors courses (Noguera, 2003). In a recently published report titled *Higher Education Success Among Historically Marginalized Males*, L. Harris (2009) reported shortcomings in the K-12 pipeline, and insufficient knowledge and support of initiatives that successfully recruit and retain historically marginalized men of color as core issues responsible for low success rates among male students of color in postsecondary education.

There are many reasons for the low rates of success among African American males. Indeed, scholars have provided both anecdotal and empirical evidence of the multi-faceted challenges African American men face that may preclude their success in postsecondary education (Harper, 2006a; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b). And although community colleges are often African American males’ first encounter with postsecondary education and last opportunity for obtaining a college degree (Bush & Bush, 2005), efforts to document the status of their participation in community college have been low (Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2001). Therefore, additional research is needed regarding this issue. In this chapter, I describe the problem concerning the achievement of African American men in postsecondary education. After stating the problem, I discuss the purpose of the study and the questions that guided the research. Following are significant contributions of the present study to the current body of
research. Finally, definitions of key terms directly related to the research study are provided.

Statement of the Problem

Currently, there is little published research that focuses on the barriers faced by African American men who attend community colleges. Therefore, key issues that are discussed in this section include: Limited scholarly research on the experiences of African American men in community colleges, and gender, racial, and institutional factors that influence the educational experiences and success of African American men.

Limited Scholarly Attention to the Experiences of African American Men in Community Colleges

Although there has been extensive research on the academic achievement of African American males in postsecondary education, the research literature has not adequately explored the experiences of African American male students in community colleges (Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2001). Scholarly research on African American male achievement has focused primarily on their educational experiences in the K-12 and 4-year context; yet community college continues to be the primary entry point to postsecondary education for the majority of students of color, including African American males (Lewis & Middleton, 2003). Although the literature explores the challenges that lead to the underachievement of African American males in primary and secondary education and the 4-year institution (e.g., Cuyjet, 1997; Davis, 2003; Farkas, 2003; Fleming, 2001; Fries-Britt, 2002; Harper, 2004; F. Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009), they differ from challenges experienced in community college (Bush &
Bush, 2005; Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2001; F. Harris & Harper, 2008). Therefore, it is problematic to view the African American male experience in community college from a K-12 or 4-year college perspective. Indeed, it seems intuitive that more targeted research on factors that promote success in community college is a worthy task (Flowers, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2001; Lewis & Middleton, 2003), yet the unique experiences of African American men in community colleges remain silent in the literature.

While it appears that the presence of African Americans in higher education has increased (Hagedorn et al., 2001; Lewis & Middleton, 2003), there has been little to no progress in increasing participation rates among African American males (Strayhorn, 2008b). Interestingly, women outnumber men in bachelor degree attainment across all racial groups. However, the gap is widest between African American men and women than it is in any other group (F. Harris & Harper, 2008). During 2007-2008, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported Black women earned 68.6% of associates degrees awarded to African American students (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2008). Likewise, Black women earned 65.7% of bachelor’s degree awarded to African American students.

Educational disparities are most pronounced among African American males (Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b). Many alarming trends and statistics regarding the underrepresentation of African American males in postsecondary education are reported throughout the published literature (Hagedorn et al., 2001; Harper, 2008; Lewis & Middleton, 2003). For instance, Black men represented less than 5% of the 15 million undergraduate students in the United States (Strayhorn, 2008b), and only 30% of all Black men who entered college earned their college degree within 6 years (U.S.
Department of Education [USDOE], 2006). Moreover, Black men earned only 7.8% of all bachelor degrees awarded between 2007-2008 (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2009). Further, the retention rate of African American men in community colleges is the lowest of all ethnic groups nationally (Hagedorn et al., 2001). According to the 2007 African American Educational Opportunity Report (Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2007), African American students have lower standardized test scores, rates of high school completion, enrollment in 4-year institutions, and college degree attainment.

**Gender and Racial Factors**

Some scholars believe that race and gender are central to any discussion about African American males and achievement (Davis, 2003; F. Harris & Harper, 2008; Noguera, 2003). Scholars frequently acknowledge that cultural and gender factors have a profound influence on academic performance. As Davis (2003) asserted, “the perplexing and misunderstood intersection of race and gender” can offer an explanation for the underachievement of African American males in postsecondary education (p. 517). Yet, the intersection of gender and race in educational contexts is often overlooked in discussions of African American male student achievement in postsecondary education (Davis, 2003; F. Harris et al., 2011).

F. Harris and Harper (2008) argued that insufficient attention is given to masculinities and identity conflicts, specifically how gender socialization experiences affect male behavior and attitudes on college campuses. In a qualitative study with 68 male undergraduates, F. Harris (2010) found that “men are arriving on college campuses having been socialized to embrace traditional notions of masculinities” (p. 314). For
example, boys are socialized to view learning and studying as feminine values, while competitiveness, toughness, and aggressiveness are associated with masculine values (F. Harris & Harper, 2008). Majors and Billson’s (1992) “cool pose” concept is used among scholars (F. Harris et al., 2011) to explain patterns of masculine expression among Black men in college. The social rewards that are associated with cool pose are often behaviors that devalue academic achievement, while emphasizing masculine expressions such as sexual promiscuity, toughness, and athleticism (F. Harris et al., 2011). F. Harris (2010) purported that campus culture plays a significant role in maintaining traditional masculine expressions that lead to academic disengagement among men in college.

Many of these behavioral patterns emerge and are reinforced during the K-12 years. For example, in elementary schools teachers consistently reward feminine behavior and punish behavior that is traditionally masculine (Davis, 2003). Some scholars contend that teachers are responsible for imposing feminine standards of behavioral expectations that lead to “disengagement attitudes and behaviors” in the classroom (Davis, 2003, p. 528). Moreover, masculine expressions when exhibited in the classroom (independence, aggression, and active behavior), especially among African American males, often result in higher rates of disciplinary referrals, suspension, and expulsion (Davis, 2003). These trends suggest that there is incongruence between the behaviors that lead to academic success and those that define traditional masculinities for African American men (Davis, 2003; F. Harris & Harper, 2008). Thus, patterns of gender role socialization can offer an explanation of academic underachievement for African American males in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education.
Also problematic is the racial discrimination that African American males experience as a part of their everyday college experience (W. Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). African American males are the most stigmatized and stereotyped group in America (Swanson et al., 2003). For example, a research study by Swanson et al. (2003) reported negative stereotyping and tracking from early experiences in educational settings influence African American male achievement. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) explored the link between racial stereotypes, cumulative racial microaggressions (unconscious and subtle forms of racism), campus racial climate, and academic performance. Their study concluded that racial microaggressions in both academic and social settings created negative racial climates, as reported by African American students in their study. Further, students reported feelings of frustration and isolation. One student reported that his overall academic performance had been negatively affected by the racial climate on campus. Several students reported racial microaggressions had pushed them to the point of exit. Dancy and Brown (2008) asserted that when African American men perceive a negative campus racial climate, it could facilitate and lead to poor academic outcomes. Institutional factors that serve as barriers to the participation and attainment of African American men are discussed further in the next section.

**Institutional Factors**

African American men are often viewed in education as uneducable, dangerous and lazy (Strayhorn, 2008a). Ascribing such characteristics to African American men is problematic, particularly when these negative stereotypes affect the way these students are treated in school. Further, cultural messages that perpetuate racial stereotypes affect racial climate within educational settings (Solórzano et al., 2000). Harper and Hurtado
Solórzano and colleagues (2000) and others suggested that racial and cultural factors have a profound influence on the academic performance of African American students, including males. Furthermore, racism, racial stereotypes, and a negative campus racial climate can lead to dissatisfaction with the college, which can result in student departure (Tinto, 1993). Thus, theoretically speaking, students who report a positive collegiate racial climate, (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000) and validating interactions with others on campus including peers, faculty, and staff (Rendón, 1994) are more likely to succeed in college (Cabrera et al., 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rendón, 1994; Solórzano et al., 2000; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, understanding the factors that facilitate validating experiences between African American males and members of the campus community can play an important role in improving their success in college.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the social and academic experiences of African American male students in an urban community college to provide insight into the academic and social practices that promote participation and academic success among this group. As noted previously in this chapter, the current research indicates that only one-third of all Black men who enter college persist and earn a college degree (Strayhorn, 2008b). Moreover, community college is the main entry point into postsecondary education for African American men. Yet, much of the current literature focuses on the experiences of African American men who attend 4-year institutions. Thus, more information is needed about the role that academic and social factors play in facilitating the participation and academic success of African American males who attend
community college. The present study grew out of this context. For the purpose of this study, the experiences of African American men who attend an urban community college and participate in a learning community designed to facilitate academic achievement and success among African American and Latino men were explored to gain insight into the particular academic and social activities that promote participation and academic success among this student group. Specifically, I will focus on the factors that influence their participation in the academic and social communities of the college. This research will offer insights into the kinds of programs and services that aim to help community colleges better meet the needs of African American males and increase their chances of success.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question that will guide this study is: “What are the experiences of African American men enrolled at an urban community college?” The following related subquestions also are explored:

1. How does academic involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
2. How does social involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
3. What learning activities are most meaningful in college experiences of African American male students at an urban community college?
4. How do African American men perceive their in-class and out-of class experiences at an urban community college?
5. What institutional factors facilitate and serve as barriers to academic success for African American men?

**Significance of Study**

African American male students are the only student population that has consistently lagged behind other student groups in achieving positive student outcomes, such as degree attainment (Hagedorn et al., 2001; Strayhorn, 2008b). Although the African American male student experience is gaining considerable attention nationwide, there is still a lack of inquiry and empirical data that fully explores the particular factors that influence their success in higher education (Strayhorn, 2008b). Moreover, the inquiry continues to flourish about the challenges faced by African American men in 4-year institutions, yet it overlooks the challenges of African American males in community college. Furthermore, college faculty and administrators have insufficient knowledge about strategies to recruit and retain this student group (L. Harris, 2009). This is due, in large part, to not fully understanding the complexity of the issues that are unique to African American males. Some scholars (Davis, 2003; Flowers, 2006; Quaye & Harper, 2007) contend that student involvement might further enhance African American males’ commitment to an institution, which will influence their retention on campus. Thus, in this study I explored the particular activities that promote academic and social involvement among African American male students. The findings from this study help identify effective strategies that promote positive student outcomes among African American male students in urban community colleges.

**Definitions of Terms**

Below are definitions of terms used throughout this dissertation.
**Academic Involvement**—Practices that have proven to be effective in promoting student engagement in the classroom such as: Student-faculty contact, cooperative learning, active learning, and teaching style that appeals to diverse ways of learning. Additionally, effective classroom practices that are designed to allow students the opportunity to actively participate in their learning (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005).

**African American**—U.S. born citizens of African ancestry. Caribbean Americans, Native Africans, and other international students of color are excluded from this study, as their experience tends to differ from their U.S. born Black peers.

**African American and Black**—will be used interchangeably.

**Black and Brown Male Summit**—A mentoring program designed to address the achievement gap that exists among African American and Latino male students at Metropolitan Community College. The program helps students succeed by preparing, motivating, and providing students with information needed to succeed personally and academically. Program components include: annual conference, peer group gatherings, faculty and staff mentorship, and other educationally purposefully activities.

**Community College and Two-Year Institution**—is used interchangeably.

**Educationally Purposeful Activities**—Student engagement in activities associated with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) benchmarks, which lead to deep learning and the production of enduring and measurable gains and outcomes. The five NSSE benchmarks of effective educational practices are: Levels of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment (NSSE, 2006).
Learning Community—Students enroll in a common set of classes often organized around a theme, and often linked together. The model provides opportunities for students to create closer relationships with faculty and peers (Tinto, 2008). The faculty members who teach in learning communities work collaboratively to integrate the curriculum and class assignments. Also known as purposeful assignments, integrated assignments aim to teach multiple perspectives by integrating knowledge from different disciplines and fields of study (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Collaborative pedagogical practices that actively engage students in the learning process also are used.

Persistence—A measure of students continuation/or progression in school from term-to-term. It is based on continued enrollment from the fall to the spring term of an academic year.

Personal Growth Course—A course that teaches student success strategies and lifelong learning skills.

Social Involvement—Engagement in educationally purposeful activities that connect students to the campus (Tinto, 2000).

Student Outcomes—Institutional outcomes that can be quantified such as: Enrollment, graduation, retention, persistence, academic standing.

Umoja Community—The Umoja Community (Umoja) is a learning community that focuses on improving the success rates of African American students. Umoja was developed in 2006 and is currently hosted at 27 community colleges in California. The Umoja curriculum is designed to validate and recognize the history of African Americans. The Umoja mission is to promote student success by serving as a “critical resource” to enhance the academic and cultural experiences of African American and other California
Community College students (Umoja Community, 2011). The program’s educational philosophy is centered around the concept of validation through “pedagogy responsive to the African Diaspora,” and practices that “deliberately engage students as full participants in the construction of knowledge and critical thought” (Umoja Community, 2011).

**Theoretical Framework**

The advancement of theory can play a key role in understanding the factors that affect the educational experiences and outcomes among African American male students in postsecondary education. Given the complexity of variables surrounding the underachievement of African American males, established theories that are relevant to the experience of African American male collegians were used to guide this study. Two theories comprise the theoretical framework of this study, stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and validation theory (Rendón, 1994).

**Stereotypes**

The literature on race and racism indicates that there are societal assumptions about the traits and abilities of members of racial groups (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, & Castro, 2010). Further, people are often judged or stereotyped because of their group membership. African American male students are subjected to discrimination by students, faculty, and staff based on stereotypes that portray them as “criminals, gang members, athletes, and entertainers, but rarely as academics” (Fries-Britt & Griffin 2007, p. 511). Further, an underlying assumption for generations has held that African Americans are intellectually inferior to Whites. The controversial best-selling book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) supports this assertion. Steele and Aronson (1995) and Strayhorn (2008a) suggested that negative stereotypes can affect individual
reactions, performance on a task, motivation, and self-esteem. Therefore, negative stereotypes about African Americans’ intelligence have significant implications for educators. Strayhorn (2008b) noted that African American men tend to be described with words that have a negative connotation such as “uneducable, endangered, dysfunctional, dangerous, and lazy” (p. 27). Consequently, negative connotations about African American men perpetuate negative stereotypes and lowered expectations from teachers, counselors, and administrators (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008b).

Steele and Aronson (1995) suggested that the threat of being stereotyped could affect intellectual test performance of African American students. This phenomenon has been termed *stereotyped threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

**Stereotype Threat Theory**

The stereotype threat paradigm provides the conceptual basis for understanding the social-psychological factors that affect the academic performance of African American males. Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995) conducted a study to test whether the threat of conforming or being judged by a negative stereotype might interfere with the intellectual test performance of African American students. The study included Black and White undergraduate students from Stanford University. The participants were given 30 minutes to complete a difficult section of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Steele and Aronson (1995, as cited in Perry et al., 2003 ) argued that whenever African American students perform an intellectual task, they are “mindful of their race and the stereotypes about it” (p. 115). And since negative stereotypes concerning African Americans are often associated with their intellectual ability, Steele and Aronson predicted that African American students would perform worse than White students when
they perceived they were being tested on their intellectual ability. The study confirmed Steele and Aronson’s hypothesis. Thus, when the students were presented with a test that measured their verbal ability, African American students performed worse than the White students. However, when students were given the same test, which was presented as a test that did not measure individual differences in ability, the African American students’ performance on the test improved to match that of the Whites. In short, the presence of stereotype threat, where cognitive ability is being tested, may be self-threatening enough that it impairs the intellectual performance of African American students (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Steele and Aronson’s (1995) theory of stereotype threat is helpful when considering the gaps in achievement rates between White and African Americans at all levels of schooling. Perry and colleagues (2003) provided the following definition of stereotype threat: “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype” (p. 111). Further, students may “disidentify with achievement in school and other intellectual tasks in order to protect against the threat posed by the stereotype” (Perry et al., 2003, p. 797). Students who have stronger academic identity and skills are more likely to experience the pressure of stereotype threat because they fear their academic abilities will be compromised because of a negative group stereotype. When students trust that they are not at risk of being judged stereotypically, the detrimental effects of stereotype threat on academic performance is reduced.

Since the emergence of the stereotype threat theory, evidence in support of the theory has been strong and convincing. Proponents of the model contend that, “African
American students often feel that they have to go out of their way to prove that they are smart” (Fries-Britt, 2000, p. 57). It is important to note that, in some cases, students perform poorly in college, not only because of stereotype threat, but other factors such as lack of academic preparation and disassociation with school achievement. Indeed, understanding the psychosocial factors that influence academic achievement is an important and timely research focus (Alter, Aronson, Darley, Rodriguez, & Ruble, 2010; Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009).

Validation

In order to fully understand the factors that influence the participation and attainment of African American men, it is important to understand the prevalent theories underlying student retention. Such theories have focused primarily on a more traditional student profile, which is primarily White, full-time, traditional-aged, residential students enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities (Rendón, 2002). However, students of color (African American, Mexican American, and American Indian) are emerging as the new student majority (Rendón, 1994). Although today’s student demographic represents diversity in cultural experiences, the culture of the academy remains predominately Euro-centered (Rendón, 1994). Rendón (1994) suggested, “The culture of the academy must change to better meet the needs of today’s rich, diverse student population” (p. 34). Thus, recent scholarship on retention theories has been concerned primarily with new models of student learning and development that are more appropriate for the rapidly changing composition of students entering the academy (Rendón, 1994). Rendón made crucial assumptions regarding “how nontraditional students who came to college
expecting to fail suddenly began to believe in their innate capacity to learn and to become successful college students” (p. 36).

Rendón (1994) originally based her model of college student retention on the work of Astin (1985). However, Rendón’s study revealed that validation, as opposed to involvement, had transformed nontraditional students into powerful learners. Indeed, involvement in college is somewhat challenging for nontraditional students because many of them spend a majority of their time engaging in off-campus activities (Tinto, 2008). Rendón contended that validation may be the missing link to involvement, and may be required for involvement to occur. Rendón argued that students of color confront invalidating experiences on college campuses such as, lack of structure, stereotyping, “chilly academic climate” (p. 28), and perceived coldness from faculty and students. However, students described validating experiences as receiving help from individuals who took an active interest in them, affirmation of their academic abilities, and supportive of their academic and social endeavors. The theory of validation (Rendón, 1994) is said to have the following six elements:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.

2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they, and everything that they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable. Lacking validation, students feel crippled, silenced, subordinate, and/or mistrusted.

3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation occurs both in- and out-of-class. In-class validation agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be (1) significant others, such as a spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend; (2) family members, such as parents, siblings, relatives, and children; (3) friends, such as classmates and friends attending and not attending college; and, (4) college staff, including faculty who meet with students out-of-class, counselors/advisors, coaches, tutors, teaching assistants, and resident advisors.

5. Validation suggests a development process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.

6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student’s college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class. (pp. 44-45)

Rendón (1994) postulated that validating agents on college campus, such as teachers, counselors, and peers have a huge impact on students’ overall experience in college. Moreover, while most students are independent and can navigate within academic and social settings, nontraditional students need active intervention from significant others to help them negotiate institutional life (Rendón, 1994). Rendón explained, “It appears that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them” (p. 44). Providing opportunities for involvement and expecting students to involve themselves in the social and academic communities of the college will not work for nontraditional students. However, “What is needed is the active academic and
interpersonal validation of these students—a process that affirms, supports, enables, and reinforces their capacity to fully develop themselves as students and individuals” (Rendón, 1994, p. 45). Noteworthy is that Rendón (2002) found that validation had a positive impact on the academic and personal growth of nontraditional students in the community college Puente program. Rendón’s analysis of the Puente program verified that strategies that go beyond intellectual development to attend to social and emotional and inner life skills also were effective. Moreover, validating experiences “such as encouragement, affirmation, and support have a significant impact on student development in and out of college” (Rendón, 2002, p. 644). Although Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation has not been used in studies regarding African American men specifically, the implications of the model for promoting success for nontraditional college students are quite significant (Rendón, 2002). Furthermore, the theory of validation is a useful framework for understanding the impact of in- and out-of-class experiences that can facilitate African American male student personal development and social adjustment on a college campus.

**Summary**

In this study I explored the sociocultural and institutional barriers that African American men face within the educational pipeline. The stereotype threat is a useful framework for understanding the “social-psychological predicament that can arise from widely known negative stereotypes about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Moreover, the theory of validation was used for its relevancy in promoting an “enabling, confirming and supportive process . . . that fosters academic and interpersonal development” for nontraditional students (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). The next chapter
delineates the literature that focused on the academic achievement of African American male students.
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview of published literature and research that have explored the academic achievement of African American male students. Although much of the current body of literature focuses exclusively on African American males who attend 4-year institutions, the literature reviewed in this study examines the current trends and outcomes of African American male students who attend both community college and the 4-year institution. Drawing on research that examines the K-12 experience of African American males, the section begins with an analysis of the barriers that influence academic outcomes of African American males. This is followed by a review of literature that highlights trends in enrollment, academic performance, and degree attainment among African American males in postsecondary education. Finally, literature that explores institutional climate and classroom practices that promote success among this student group is presented.

The K-12 Experiences of African American Males

African American males’ experiences in K-12 schooling influence their behaviors and dispositions toward education (Noguera, 2003). The behavioral trends begin to form during African American males’ K-12 educational experiences. There is considerable evidence that suggests early educational experiences of African American males have a profound influence on degree attainment and their long-term educational success (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b; Swanson et al., 2003). Thomas and Stevenson (2009) asserted that gender inequities in classroom structures and school discipline procedures could promote poor academic outcomes for urban, low-income African American boys. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize some of the most significant
trends in the K-12 educational experiences of African American males that have a negative impact on their participation and success in postsecondary education. Furthermore, questions regarding the participation and success of African American males in postsecondary education must be examined and understood as a “pipeline issue,” which involves tracking their transitions, experiences, and trajectories across the entire span of their educational career (elementary, secondary, postsecondary; Davis, 2003; L. Harris, 2009; Swanson et al., 2003). If African American males are not succeeding, and have negative educational experiences during their elementary and secondary schooling, they are less likely to persist to the postsecondary level (Swanson et al., 2003). Given the complexity of issues experienced by African American males in primary and secondary education, this section briefly discusses patterns of high school persistence and graduation, overrepresentation in special education programs, inequitable disciplinary practices, male gender role socialization, and structural racism.

**High School Persistence and Graduation**

Perhaps the most significant contributor to the underrepresentation of African American males in institutions of higher education is low level of achievement in areas such as persistence and graduation in high school. Davis (2003), Noguera (2003), Strayhorn (2008b), Swanson and colleagues (2003), and Thomas and Stevenson (2009) all recognized problems that exist along the educational pipeline that contribute to outcome disparities between African American males and their White and female peers. Racial disparities in educational participation and attainment between African American males and White males begin to appear as early as secondary education and become more apparent along the educational pipeline. For example, in 2008 the high school
completion rates for African Americans remained below those of Whites and Asians/Pacific Islanders (88% vs. 94%; USDOE, 2008). According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2008) report, during 2005-2006 more than 50% of African American males did not graduate from high school with their cohorts. Further, a report by Shaun Harper (2006a) entitled *Black Male Students at Public Flagship Universities in the U.S.: Status, Trends, and Implication for Policy and Practice*, indicated that the high school graduation rates of African American males ages 18-24 (74.3%) is slightly lower than their White male and African American female counterparts (86.4% and 80.2%, respectively). The difference in graduation and persistence rates holds even when African Americans and White students have similar socioeconomic backgrounds. There are many conjectures about the factors that influence the underachievement of African American males. Unfortunately, there is no consensus, while the decline in participation and attainment among African American males continues to be problematic. To fully understand the underachievement of African American males in postsecondary education, I begin with a look at barriers situated in elementary and secondary educational settings.

**Overrepresentation in Special Education Programs**

Farkas (2003) noted the overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs as a factor associated with the underachievement of this student group. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2003), Black students are more likely than White, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islander to receive special education services. While Black males comprise 9% of the public school population, they represent 20% and 4% of special education and
honor student placements, respectively (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). As Kunjufu pointed out in his 2005 book, *Keeping Black Boys Out of Special Education*, African American males are overrepresented and misplaced in special education as a result of biased testing practices, and cultural and gender misunderstandings of African American males. Kunjufu argued that African American males are culturally more energetic and assertive, which educators misinterpret as hyperactive and aggressive behavior. In this regard, it is not surprising that African American males are often misplaced in special education as a result of disciplinary problems in the classroom (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Thomas, Coard, Stevenson, Bentley, & Zamel, 2009). Farkas (2003) argued that ethnic minority students are disproportionately placed in special education due to discriminatory actions on the part of teachers and school district personnel. Thomas and Stevenson (2009) suggested that teachers tend to have lower expectations for the abilities and performance of urban, low-income African American males. Furthermore, African American males are provided with fewer opportunities for enrollment in advanced placement courses (Farkas, 2003). Moreover, African American males are more likely to be placed into lower ability groups, receive less demanding curriculum and instruction, and experience lower cognitive gains than White students (Farkas, 2003). By contrast, White students are more likely to take courses in the higher tracks (e.g., Advanced Placement courses), which lead to greater student achievement (Farkas, 2003). As a consequence, African American males trajectory of academic achievement is significantly flatter (Farkas, 2003).

The overrepresentation of African American males in special education and underrepresentation in advanced courses can have a precipitous effect on skill
development during the elementary and secondary school years (Farkas, 2003).

According to an ACT Policy Report (Wimberly, 2002) titled, *School Relationships Foster Success for African American Students*, most African American students (89%) expressed a clear desire to attend college or earn a college degree, while over half (56%) were actually moving toward that goal. In comparison, the same report found that 89% of White students expected to attend college or earn a college degree, and 67% were meeting that goal. Many factors may help to explain the gap between the educational aspirations and achievement of African American students, although the findings suggested that fewer students were on college preparatory track and fewer students took advanced placement course. Farkas (2003) suggested that the combination of strong skills and rigorous instruction in advanced courses guaranteed a strong upward trajectory of academic achievement. Therefore, the overrepresentation of African American males in special education courses, and underrepresentation in advanced courses, can significantly influence educational aspirations and participation at the postsecondary level.

**Inequitable Disciplinary Practices**

African American males tend to be overrepresented among students who experience behavior and discipline problems in school. Noguera (2003) asserted that African American males “are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school” (p. 445). Scholars (e.g., Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b) suggested cultural messages that portray African American males as threatening, disrespectful, and uninterested in education affected the way these students are treated and disciplined in schools. According to Dancy and Brown (2008), teachers
tend to “reward behavior that is traditionally feminine (conformity, quietness, cooperation) and punish behavior that is traditionally masculine (independence, adventurousness, rebellion to authority)” (p. 988). Proponents contend that teachers impose “feminine behavioral standards” on African American males, which often result in their disengagement and alienation in the classroom (Davies, 2003, p. 528). Other scholars (Thomas et al., 2009) posit that racial biases in teacher’s perceptions and expectations may account for their disproportionate reports of classroom adjustment problems. Thomas et al. (2009) found that teachers misinterpret the behavioral coping strategies used by African American male youth to adjust to social challenges as overactive, aggressive, and disruptive behavior in the classroom. Students who demonstrate a persistent pattern of such behaviors are at risk of maltreatment by teachers, school suspensions, and other disciplinary actions (Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). An analysis of school suspensions by Mendez and Knoff (2003) seemed to support this assertion. The analysis revealed that African American suspension rates exceeded their representation in the student population. For example, African American males comprised 12% of the student population, but accounted for 28% of the suspensions. Contrarily, White males comprised 30% of the student population, but accounted for only 12% of the suspensions. Taken together, the weight of evidence suggests that patterns of disparities in school disciplinary practices, and negative teachers’ perceptions and expectations, might play an important role in creating and maintaining low academic achievement among African American male students in primary and secondary education (Farkas, 2003; Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Given the evidence that suggests early educational experiences of African American
males have a profound influence on postsecondary enrollment (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008b; Swanson et al., 2003), it is important to critically examine racial structural inequities in public K-12 schools.

**Structural Racism**

Many factors may help to explain why the proportion of African American male students graduating from high school and enrolling in college is less than all other student groups. However, a prevailing assumption suggests that African American male underachievement is due to the structural inequity that is present in schools that disproportionately serve students of color. Notwithstanding the intended outcome of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) Supreme Court ruling, African American students are concentrated in high-minority and high-poverty schools, which are vulnerable to patterns of low achievement. According to the 2002 ACT Policy Report, *School Relationships Foster Success for African American Students* (Wimberly, 2002), African American students are more likely to attend schools that have “fewer students on a college preparatory track; fewer students took advanced placement courses; and the college going rates were lower than those in high schools predominately attended by White students” (p. vii). The educational resources and opportunities that schools provide have a profound effect on students’ level of success (Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2007). Scholars consistently report that African American male students are more likely than any other student group to attend schools that are racially segregated, and deficient in the most basic educational conditions and opportunities (Harper, 2008; Noguera, 2003). Accordingly, improving the academic achievement
of African American males necessitates access to the educational resources and opportunities they need to graduate high school and prepare for postsecondary education.

**Trends in African American Male Achievement in Postsecondary Education**

Community colleges enroll almost half of all undergraduates in the United States (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010). Low tuition rates and the open access policies seem to be contributing factors. While access to higher education has expanded, there is still a disproportionate amount of African American male students who do not graduate from high school and achieve a college degree (Hagedorn et al., 2001). In the next section, I examine the current enrollment and graduation trends for African American male students in postsecondary education. Further, examining barriers to admission to 4-year institutions is reviewed to help explain the reasons why community colleges are where most African American men begin postsecondary education.

Stringent admission requirements and the rising cost of attending college have restricted access to 4-year institutions for many students. Financial constraints can preclude admission to 4-year institutions because many students cannot afford to attend (Tinto, 2008). Similarly, higher education policies that have legitimated community college as an entry point to the bachelor’s degree encourage community college attendance among disadvantaged students (Wellman, 2002). Further, unlike 4-year institutions, community colleges do not exclude students because of the lack of academic preparation, and the cost of attending community college is significantly less than a 4-year institution. Because of these factors, many students are seeing community colleges as a viable and realistic option for pursuing higher education (Piland & Wolf, 2003).
Currently in the United States, most racial subgroups have made significant progress in postsecondary enrollment (Strayhorn, 2008a). Consequently, the student demographics have changed drastically in comparison to the more traditional student population from years prior (White, traditional-aged, middle class). Although the number of underrepresented minority students attending college has increased, the representation of male students within this population has not. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2005), in 2004 minority groups accounted for 32% of the total undergraduate enrollment in the United States. Within the minority groups, female enrollment increased more than the enrollment of males. For example, only 56 African American males attended higher education for every 100 African American females (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2007). Interestingly, of the African American males who made the transition to higher education, they were less likely to complete a college degree than any other student population (USDOE, 2005).

Although there has been an increase in African American males entering college since the 1990s, comparatively the total number of African American males who attain a degree is still very dismal. Scholars frequently acknowledge that African American males are the only student population that attains far less rewards than their female counterparts (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2006b; F. Harris & Harper, 2008). For example, in 2007-2008 the U.S. Department of Education reported African American females accounted for 68.6% of all Associate degrees conferred to African American students (USDOE, 2008). Moreover, for those African American males who overcame the obstacles of transfer to the 4-year institution (transfer shock, cool out, stop out), they
experienced a similar trend in bachelor degree attainment. The postsecondary graduation rates in spring 2008 for African American men seeking a bachelor’s degree at 4-year public institutions who completed in 6 years showed an 11.7% advantage for African American females (44.8%) over African American males (33.1%; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2010). Therefore, addressing the issues surrounding African American male underachievement, particularly at community colleges, have tremendous consequences for the overall success of this student group. There are many reasons for the low rates of success for African American men, but the sociocultural and identify factors are paramount and can impede their ability to engage socially and academically on campus.

**Sociocultural and Identity Factors**

Disproportionately fewer African American male students do not graduate from high school or achieve a college degree when compared to other student groups (Hagedorn et al., 2001). Although it is hard to speculate, many scholars postulate there is a connection between the academic performance of African American males and the environmental and cultural factors they have to contend with (Cuyjet, 1997; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2006a; Noguera, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 2000). A prevailing assumption for many years has held that African American males, more than any other group, encounter social pressures in the American society that contribute to their underachievement. Additionally, understanding male gender role conflict (O’Neil, 1981), and the incongruence between the behaviors associated with student success in college and the socially constructed images that are culturally associated with masculinity (F. Harris & Harper, 2008), help to make sense of the gender and identity challenges
faced by African American male students. Taken together, these factors could explain the reasons why African American males are less likely to attend postsecondary institutions and attain degrees than any other group. The next section examines the influence of racial factors on the participation and attainment of African American males.

**Racial Factors**

Given the issues related to race, gender, and cultural bias, African American male students face complex psychosocial challenges that have a profound effect on their participation and degree attainment at the postsecondary level. Scholars (Davis, 2003; Harper, 2006a; Noguera, 2003; Quaye & Harper, 2007) frequently acknowledge racial factors that suppress the development of African American male academic ability. John Ogbu (1978) attempted to provide an explanation for the underachievement of African Americans in his early writings about social structure (Caste Theory), and introduction of concepts like ‘oppositional culture’ and ‘involuntary minorities’ (Ogbo, 2003; Ogbo & Simons, 1998). According to Ogbo (as cited in Foley, 2004), African American male academic disengagement is a “reaction or adaption to an oppressive, stigmatizing socio-cultural system” (p. 389). Thus, the formation of healthy racial identities will help African American males confront negative life circumstances (Cross, 1995) and stereotypes that aid in their academic underachievement. As Dawsen-Threat (1997) asserted, “Students can make conscious decisions on their commitment to an African American identity while simultaneously shaping themselves as scholars, intellectuals, and budding professionals” (p. 34). However, high achieving African American students are often accused by their peers of acting White, and “are likely to encounter pressure from Black peers when they demonstrate interest in academics” (Fries-Britt, 2002, p. 5).
Therefore, contending with the psychological forces that promote anti-intellectualism among their African American peer group may be a more salient issue.

There are psychological forces that influence the academic experiences of African American male students (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2003; Harper, 2006b; Noguera, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008a). African American men have to contend with negative stereotypes that portray them as intellectually inferior (Harper, 2006b; Strayhorn, 2008b). On one hand, the American society celebrates the physical and athletic abilities of African American males, but when it comes to their intellectual abilities, African American men are viewed as lacking in intellectual skills (Harper, 2006b). Ford (1996) suggested that African American male students sometimes underachieve so that they can hide their intellectual competence. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) referred to this phenomenon as camouflaging. The authors theorized that African American students purposely underachieve to hide their intellectual abilities as a way to gain cultural entrée into Black peer groups (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Strayhorn, 2008a). In some cases, African American male students sabotage their success by failing classes, procrastinating, and refusing to be in classes that are for the gifted and advanced (Harper, 2006b). Research suggests that the anti-intellectualism among their African American peer group influence their attitudes and lack of motivation associated with academic achievement. While the aforementioned research has offered significant insight into the sociocultural and identity challenges faced by African American male students, other studies document the patterns of gender role socialization that can contribute to the underachievement of this student population.
Male Gender Role Socialization

Patterns of gender role socialization also have been linked to the underachievement of African American males. These patterns of socialization consist of socially constructed norms and expectations of gendered behavior. According to Swain (2005), masculine identity and attending to schoolwork are fundamentally incompatible, given the processes of gender socialization for boys. F. Harris and Harper (2008) posited that certain patterns of gender role socialization teach males that schools and classrooms are feminine spaces that impede the development of productive masculinities. As such, learning and studying are activities that are associated with women and femininity. Conversely, masculinity is associated with activities that represent rigor, strength, and power. Therefore, many boys conform to the gender expectation by engaging in masculine-oriented activities, such as sports, and avoid learning activities such as reading, participating in class, and following school rules. Dancy and Brown (2008) asserted, “Traditional masculine behaviors may contribute to academic difficulties throughout their school years but can lead to rewards like popularity” (p. 988).

African American Male Masculinity

Most studies that focus on the underachievement of African American males say little about the unique gender related challenges they experience in higher education (F. Harris & Harper, 2008). As previously noted in the section that highlighted the K-12 schooling experiences, certain patterns of gender role socialization teach males that learning and studying are activities that are associated with femininity. Given the accusation of being less masculine, men engage in activities that support the development of traditional masculinities (sports, sexism, and homophobia; F. Harris et al., 2011).
O’Neil (1981) postulated that when men are unable to live up to the expectations of socially constructed masculinities, they are likely to be viewed as less masculine. Based on this concept, it is not a surprise that academically driven males develop alternative conceptualizations of masculinities. A study conducted by Martin and Harris (2006) supported this assertion. Martin and Harris (2006) explored the attitudes and beliefs about masculinities held by academically driven African American male student athletes. Martin and Harris found that the participants expressed masculine conceptualizations that were inconsistent with traditional gendered norms for African American males. For example, participants in the study associated masculinity with moral character, integrity, accountability, and setting a positive example for others to follow. One participant shared the following:

Masculinity, to me, is knowing that as a man you have to make decisions that are going to be different from everybody else and being comfortable with who you are as man, regardless of what other people say. And masculine men can do things like go get their nails done, because they are comfortable with who they are. They understand that there are more important things out there than to be portrayed as this big tough guy. I think a masculine guy is somebody who is responsible, presents himself well, and is just not caught up into the whole type deal. (Martin & Harris, 2006, p. 368)

Given the paucity of literature on African American masculinities and gender performance (Harris et al., 2011), understanding the specific gender factors that influence their academic success, especially those who attend community college, poses a real challenge. Harper’s (2004) research study on high-achieving African American male
students concluded that active involvement in out-of-class activities, such as leadership positions, student organizations, as well as meaningful interactions with other student leaders, administrators, and faculty, “significantly enhances the undergraduate experience of African American males” (p. 14). Therefore, understanding the institutional factors that promote campus involvement among African American males who attend community college is an important research focus.

**Institutional Factors**

Helping African American males engage in the campus social and academic environment has emerged as an important area of investigation (Flowers, 2003). Given the growing body of research that indicates the campus environment and educational experiences influence the educational outcomes of students (Fleming, 2001; Flowers, 2003; Solórzano et al., 2000), it is important to examine the influence of such factors on the academic achievement of African American males. Therefore, the discussion in this section focuses on institutional factors that enable the participation and success of African American males and institutional responses to concerns about African American male achievement. It is important to note that research that focuses exclusively on the African American male experience at the community college has been sparse. Thus, institutional factors that influence the educational outcomes of African American males who attend 4-year institutions also are examined. First, I will examine the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling that eradicated segregation in educational institutions, and provided unrestricted access to quality education regardless of race, color, or national origin.
Racially Integrated Educational Institutions

To provide context for understanding the issues surrounding campus environments in postsecondary education, the section begins with a brief overview of the Supreme Court ruling that ameliorated segregation in educational institutions. The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) case played a pivotal role in changing the racial composition of the student population in educational institutions. The Brown decision challenged the legal basis of racial segregation in schools and public facilities by declaring the act unconstitutional and discriminatory. The predominate discourse on the Brown decision have focused on desegregation trends in K-12 public schools (Bell, 2004), while paying scant attention to the effect of the ruling at the postsecondary level (Harper, 2008). Desegregating public schools was a difficult task, yet Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided the impetus for desegregation at colleges and universities by prohibiting payments of federal funds to institutions that discriminated based on race, color, or national origin. However, collegiate segregation continued to be problematic. Although there have been significant gains in providing access in postsecondary education for students of color, the underrepresentation of African American males at predominately White institutions (PWI) is still problematic.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

African American male participation in higher education remains scant at all levels (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Moreover, institutions of higher education have significant improvements to make in improving college enrollment and completion rates among African American men. Some scholars contend that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are one of the best models for improving African American
males’ educational attainment (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Historically Black Colleges and Universities are held as the primary providers of postsecondary education for African Americans in a social environment of racial discrimination (Brown & Davis, 2001). Further, HBCUs have experienced positive educational gains, notably awarding 28.5% of Black baccalaureate degrees, 16% of Black first-professional degrees, 15% of Black master’s degree, and 9% of Black doctoral degrees (Brown & Davis, 2001; Dancy & Brown, 2008). Brown and Davis (2001) asserted, “Black colleges act as a social equalizer for individuals historically denied access to higher educational opportunity and excluded from full participation in society” (p. 33).

Although researchers have reported many positive experiences for African American students who attend HBCUs, some scholars argue that students, particularly Black males, may report negative experiences with the political climate and rule enforcement that exists at some HBCUs. Findings from a study conducted by Harper and Gasman (2008) suggest that Black male students who attend HBCUs can possess negative feelings toward their institutions as a result of political conservatism toward sexuality, self-presentation, and positional subordination. More specifically, they explained that conservative political institutional climates could have a negative impact on retention and persistence among Black males (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). Palmer et al. (2010) explored the impact of HBCUs in helping to facilitate academic achievement for Black males. Palmer et al. found that racial composition and support from peers, faculty, and role models facilitated learning and academic success for Black males in their study. Similarly, Fleming (2001) purported that African American students who attend HBCUs have a more positive
psychological, interpersonal, academic, and cognitive impact than Black students who attend PWIs. A prevailing assumption is that faculty-student interactions in and out of the classroom are positively correlated with cognitive and psychosocial development among African American students in college (Flowers, 2003).

Interactions With Faculty and Peers

Across the published literature, scholars consistently argue that African American students who attended HBCUs are more likely to receive greater academic and social benefits than African American students who attended PWIs (Flowers, 2003). Perhaps the most significant factor that positively impacts students’ academic and social outcomes in meaningful ways is student-faculty interactions (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Fleming, 2001; Flowers, 2003). Researchers have suggested that African American students were more likely to report greater interactions with faculty at HBCUs than at PWIs (Flowers, 2003). Consequently, some advocates (e.g., Brown & Davis, 2001; Flowers, 2003; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006) contend that the college racial composition and institutional environment influence the frequency and magnitude of African American students’ interactions with faculty. Further, Dancy and Brown (2008) suggested that faculty-student interaction is paramount for creating communities in college and improving the collegiate perceptions of African American men. Historically, Black Colleges and Universities provide opportunities for African American students to develop social networks and relationships with committed faculty, as well as alumni leaders in the professions and society (Brown & Davis, 2001). These networks and relationships function as conduits for transmission of information about jobs and other opportunities (Brown & Davis, 2001). Consequently, the reproduction and distribution of specific
sociocultural resources and networks are often cited as primary roles of HBCUs (Brown & Davis, 2001).

Some scholars have found that African American students experience feelings of isolation and alienation because of the insufficient pool of same race faculty and like type peers from which to draw potential role models (Fries-Britt, 2000; Strayhorn, 2008a). Therefore, scholars have linked having supportive relationships with peers on campus to higher levels of satisfaction in college for African American men (Harper, 2006b; Strayhorn, 2008b). Palmer and Gasman (2008) found that peer groups significantly influence Black male achievement. The participants reported that their friends encouraged and motivated them to persist and to become academically successful (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). One participant noted the following:

If you got a whole bunch of friends pressuring you to do well, you don’t really have a choice if you want to stay with that group to do well, and pressure might sound very elementary but it’s true. I don’t care how old you get, it’s very true. I was indirectly pressured into doing well through others. (Palmer & Gasman, 2008, pp. 60-61)

Access to role models and mentors was also found to be a significant factor that supported academic success among Black males. Many participants in the study described their university environment as supportive and caring as a result of support, motivation, and encouragement from peers, faculty, staff, and administrators (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Feelings of hostility, isolation, alienation, and marginalization are reasons why some African American men depart from college (Strayhorn, 2008a). Moreover, African
American men report having difficulties fitting in and feel unwelcomed, socially isolated, and unsupported by their peers and faculty members (Strayhorn, 2008a). Further, African American men find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2008a). Some scholars attribute poor educational outcomes (retention, persistence, and degree attainment) to African American males’ sense of belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2008a). Safe spaces for expression of personal experiences (Dancy & Brown, 2008), such as multicultural and ethnic centers, facilitate “culturally affirming environments and experiences” for students of color, including African American students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 20). Thus, supportive relationships with major socializing agents on campus (peers, faculty, and staff), and culturally affirming learning environments, will facilitate a sense of belonging and connection to the college campus for African American male students (Rendón, 1994; Strayhorn, 2008a).

**Campus Climate**

Equitable access to postsecondary education for African American students was among the intended outcomes of the Brown decision. Scholars have argued that certain institutional characteristics and environments increase the participation and success for students of color in general and African American males in particular. Furthermore, racial prejudice and discrimination on campus, and in the classroom, influence withdrawal decisions, academic performance, and student’s academic and social experiences at an institution (Cabrera et al., 1999). Solórzano et al. (2000) maintained that the racial climate of the college campus plays a vital role in the educational outcomes (college access, persistence, and graduation) of African American students. Solórzano et al. defined racial climate as the “overall racial environment of the college campus”
According to the authors, subtle forms of racism and insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color have a negative influence on the college racial climate. They defined the insults as microaggressions and explained that African American students who experienced racial microaggressions in social and academic spaces reported feelings of frustration, isolation, and discouragement and “made them feel that they could not perform well academically” (p. 69). A multi-campus study on the experiences of African American male students by W. Smith et al. (2007) seemed to support this assertion. The study revealed that African American males experienced racial battle fatigue as a result of the cumulative effects of microaggressions. W. Smith et al. defined racial battle fatigue as “the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism” (p. 555). Several scholars argued that a positive racial climate, which is supportive, inclusive, and reflects the experience of diverse students, will lead to positive academic outcomes for African American students (Fleming, 2001; Parker & Flowers, 2003).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

There is growing recognition of the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy to improve educational outcomes of students (Piland, Hess, & Piland, 2000). As community colleges continue to be the primary postsecondary educational system of choice for students from underrepresented groups, Piland and colleagues (2000) suggest that incorporating multiculturalism and diversity into the course curricula will help community colleges meet the needs of a more diverse student population. The authors contend that multiculturalism and diversity in educational courses provide students with
opportunities to learn about the contributions of minorities to American society, which have typically been overlooked in the past. Likewise, multicultural course content allow minority students to see their contributions reflected in the curriculum, which allows students to make connections between their college and cultural experiences. Quaye and Harper (2007) indicated that multicultural and diversity curricula enriched student learning by broadening student perspective. Further, Piland and colleagues (2000) asserted that students in courses that infuse multicultural diverse curriculum reported meaningful and deep learning. Likewise, Howard (2001) found that learning is enhanced when classroom-teaching strategies are congruent with the culture and communication styles of culturally diverse students.

Teaching African American students effectively is an important issue facing educators. Howard (2001) suggested that identifying successful teaching strategies for educating African American students could be key to reversing school failures. However, many schools fall short in structuring teaching styles in a way that meets the needs of a culturally diverse group of students (Howard, 2001). There is growing recognition of the role that culture plays in the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1931/1966). Culturally relevant pedagogy has been shown to improve chances of cognitive development (Howard, 2001). Furthermore, it uses cultural referents to impart knowledge that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, critical thinking, problem solving, and academic achievement are among the outcomes associated with inclusive pedagogy and curricula (Quaye & Harper, 2007). Therefore, institutions where faculty continually neglect the cultural experiences that African American male students bring to the classroom will continue to come up
short in improving the educational outcomes of this student group (Quaye & Harper, 2007).

**Institutional Responses**

Despite the many explanations offered by scholars for race and gender disparities in educational attainment, some scholars argue that institutions are not serious about engaging, retaining, and improving the outcomes of minority males (Harper, 2009). As institutions continue to struggle with meeting the educational needs of African American male students, educators and policy makers are looking to the existing scholarship to identify programs and practices that aim to decrease the gender gap among males of color in higher education. According to L. Harris (2009), the empirical research that explains the cause and solution for the underachievement of African American males is less than substantial. L. Harris noted that there is “insufficient knowledge about what works to successfully recruit and retain historically marginalized males” (p. 1). Yet, institutions continue to lack the accountability systems and institutional research activities to support inquiry, learning, and change (Bensimon, Rueda, Dowd, & Harris, 2007). The underachievement of African American males has long-term implications that are correlated with economic and social opportunities (Cuyjet, 1994; L. Harris, 2009). Some institutions have responded to concerns about African American male achievement through programmatic interventions. While the evidence of effective interventions is limited, there are a number of promising programs and strategies that have been successful in improving educational outcomes among African American males (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010; L. Harris, 2009).
Programmatic Interventions

Loren Harris (2009) offered a brief description of six notable programs that have made a positive difference in the participation and success of men of color in postsecondary education:

1. Call Me Mister (CMM), a partnership between Clemson and three HBCUs, which aims to double the number of Black male teachers in South Carolina.

2. The University System of Georgia Board of Regents’ African American male Initiative (AAMI), a system-wide effort to provide funding to programs at colleges and universities across the state that aim to enhance the recruitment and retention of Black males.

3. City University of New York (CUNY) Black Male Initiative (BMI), an initiative aimed at improving the enrollment and graduation rates of Black males, individuals who do not graduate from high school, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

4. Student African American Brotherhood Organization (SAAB), an organization that exists at more than 100 high schools and colleges to foster academic excellence and community service among Black males.

5. Maricopa Community College Achieving a College Education (ACE), a current high school/college enrollment program designed to increase postsecondary enrollment and graduation of Latino students.

6. The Puente Project (PP), a 30-year-old program aimed at improving the academic achievement among low-income Latino students.
Some common elements present in each program were strategies aimed at supporting the inclusion and educational success of men of color in higher education. Although many of these programs focused on increased participation and attainment in community college, with the exception of a few, their impact on successful transitions to the 4-year institution and baccalaureate degree attainment is unclear. Further, most of the interventions lacked the funding needed to sustain program efforts over time. In addition, more evidence of impact is needed to justify growing these efforts to broader scale. While evidence of program effectiveness is still limited for some emerging programs, many community colleges already offer effective programs and services (orientation programs, learning communities, student success courses) that can be used to help African American males succeed (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010). Though several programs and initiatives have reported positive educational outcomes, they have done little to improve the overall success of African American males in postsecondary education.

Institutions must evaluate how certain institutional structures, policies, and practices fail to produce positive outcomes for African American males (Bensimon et al., 2007). The empirical evidence suggests that African American males have constant encounters with negative racial stereotypes, gender inequities, and structural racism that induce the inevitability of their failure (Davis, 2003; Farkas, 2003; Noguera, 2003; W. Smith et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b; Swanson et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Evidence-based practices, which gained popularity in recent years, assume that data drives change (Bensimon et al., 2007). Yet, most institutions of higher education have not used existing data to invest in learning structures
and processes that addresses the inequality in educational outcomes. However, notable interventions such as Equity Scorecard (Bensimon et al., 2007), and promising programs as noted in the previous section, all aim to bring about equity in educational outcomes. Based on the published research, it may be argued that programs and practices that are validating, supportive, and affirming of students’ academic abilities as capable learners, might help institutions in achieving equity in educational outcomes for African American male students. Rendón’s (1994) student validation theory and Steele and Aronson’s (1995) stereotype threat theory support this assertion. The next chapter delineates the research design that was used to explore and understand the academic and social experiences of African American men in an urban community college.
CHAPTER 3—RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of African American males at an urban community college. The primary research question that guided this study was: “What are the experiences of African American men enrolled at an urban community college?” The following related subquestions also were explored:

1. How does academic and social involvement enhance student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
2. How does social involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
3. What learning activities are most meaningful in college experiences of African American male students at an urban community college?
4. How do African American men perceive their in-class and out-of-class experiences at an urban community college?
5. What institutional factors facilitate and serve as barriers to academic success for African American men?

Topic areas discussed in this chapter include: the research design, the background and role of the researcher, data collection and analysis procedures, trustworthiness of the study, and limitations. In order to obtain a rich description of the lived experiences of African American males at an urban community college, a phenomenological research design was used. This methodology helped to elucidate the essence of lived experiences of African American male students, and the meanings they ascribed to their experience.
Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described qualitative inquiry as a set of interpretive methods used to “study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methods were used to capture the shared experiences of African American male students at an urban community college (Patton, 2002). One of the fundamental goals of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). This qualitative research study allowed me to explore both the social and academic interactions that shape the experiences of African American male community college students. Relevant themes, patterns, and insights were examined to better understand the meanings African American male students ascribe to their experiences at an urban community college. The insights gained from this study can be used to inform future decisions regarding programs and services designed to help African American men succeed in community colleges.

Phenomenology

The phenomenology tradition in qualitative research focuses on “the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon being described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Phenomenological inquiry assumes there is a lived experience that is shared by the participants (Creswell, 2009). According to Welman and Kruger (1999), the phenomenologist aims to understand the social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of those who are involved. Further, phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, seeks meanings and descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses
(Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological account seeks the essences of shared experience, which are the central meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced (Patton, 2002). Therefore, conducting a study with a phenomenological focus is key in gaining a deeper understanding of the unique shared experiences of African American male community college students.

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl introduced the concept of phenomenology in the early 1900s. Phenomenology is a philosophical method grounded in “subjective openness” (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl argued that human beings gain knowledge, or reality, through immediate experience. Realities, therefore, are treated as pure ‘phenomenon’ and the only absolute data from where to begin (Groenewald, 2004). Also described as the science of actualities that seek knowledge of human experiences, phenomenology seeks the common experience of a group of people and describes what the participants have experienced. Creswell (2009) asserted that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experience through their interactions with others. To this end, a phenomenological study was conducted to provide a rich description of the lived experiences of African American male students at an urban community college.

**The Local Setting**

The study was conducted at Metropolitan Community College (MCC), an urban community college located in Southern California. The college is a public community college serving the urban areas in the most southern region of the State. Metropolitan Community College was established as the first community college in the southern region during the early 1900s, and was the third community college established in the state of California. The diverse campus is a comprehensive, community college offering a wide
variety of occupational and academic programs. The college is part of a three-college district, which is governed by a five-member board of trustees and a chancellor who provide policy direction for the organization. The chancellor serves as the district’s chief executive officer and works with the college presidents in the daily operation of the district, colleges, centers, and military programs. Of the 18,090 students attending the urban college in fall 2009, women comprised over half (54%) of the student population. The racial/ethnic composition of the student body was as follows: 35% Latino, 28% White, 13% Black, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Filipino, 1% American Indian, and 12% declined or are listed as “other.” Nearly one-third of the students were first generation college students, and 31.1% of the student body received financial aid.

The educational goals of students who attend MCC vary from completing a certificate program, acquiring an associate’s degree, or transferring to a 4-year university. Approximately 47% of students enrolled with the intent of transferring. However, women (55%) had a higher transfer rate on average compared to their male (45%) counterparts. In a 2010 Institutional Research and Planning report released by the district, MCC reported the following transfer rates by ethnicity between 2005/2006 and 2009/2010: 44% White, 25% Latino, 13% “other” or unreported, 7% African American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% Filipino, and 1% American Indian. The number of associate’s degrees conferred showed similar outcomes with White students and women receiving the most awards across all award categories. While the district does not disaggregate the data on transfer and graduation rates by ethnicity and gender combined, a look at the data suggests that African Americans and male students have a considerably
lower transfer and graduation rate than other student populations (San Diego Community College District, Office of Institutional Research and Planning, 2010).

**Learning Communities**

The learning community model at MCC is used to create a supportive learning environment that promotes deep learning and social development for students. With the learning community model, students enroll in linked courses that share a common theme. The model provides opportunities for students to create closer relationships with faculty and other students. Faculty members who teach in learning communities work collaboratively to integrate the curriculum and class assignments. Also known as purposeful assignments, integrated assignments aim to teach multiple perspectives by integrating knowledge from different disciplines and fields of study (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008). Collaborative pedagogical practices that actively engage students in the learning process also are used. For example, group discussions and problem-based group assignments encourage students to critically analyze information and problem-solve in small interactive groups (Barkley et al., 2005; Laird, Chen, & Kuh, 2008). There is growing recognition of the potential of the learning community model to improve educational outcomes of students, which rests on theoretical models that recognize the importance of both academic and social involvement to student attainment (Astin, 1987; Barkley et al., 2005; Laird et al., 2008; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; Tinto, 2008). Therefore, African American male students who participate in a learning community model, specifically the Umoja Community and the Black and Brown Male Initiative offered at MCC, were selected in order to get a full analysis of the social and academic experiences of African American men at an urban community college.
Umoja Community

The Umoja Community (Umoja) is a learning community that focuses on improving the success rates of African American students. Umoja was developed in 2006 and is currently hosted at 27 community colleges in California. The Umoja curriculum is designed to validate and recognize the history of African Americans. The Umoja mission is to promote student success by serving as a critical resource to enhance the academic and cultural experiences of African American and other California Community College students (Umoja Community, 2011). The program’s educational philosophy is centered around the concept of validation through “pedagogy responsive to the African Diaspora,” and practices that “deliberately engage students as full participants in the construction of knowledge and critical thought” (Umoja Community, 2011). The Umoja classroom is organic and provides a safe space for students to “add their voice to the collective voices and stories of the African Diaspora” (Umoja Community, 2011). Classroom activities are interactive and often require students to reflect on their learning, through journal entries, and open, honest discussions.

The learning community model for Umoja at MCC is comprised of the following courses: personal growth, developmental English, and developmental Math. The program serves approximately 30 students each semester, and incorporates a cohort model to help create a strong sense of community among the students and faculty. Additionally, students participate in co-curricular activities, such as student club involvement and university field trips. Since its inception, the Umoja program statewide model has shown promising evidence of improving the retention and success rate for African American students in several community colleges across the state (Umoja Community, 2011).
However, there are no data available on the success rates of African American men in Umoja at this urban college at this time.

**Black and Brown Male Initiative**

The Black and Brown Male Initiative is a comprehensive program that was designed to address the racial achievement gap that exists among African American and Latino male students at the college in this study. Although the Umoja and the Black and Brown Male Initiative serve similar student populations, they are separate, stand-alone programs. Whereas the Umoja program aims to improve the success rates of all African American students—both men and women, the Black and Brown Male Initiative focuses on improving the success of African American and Latino males. However, students can be both a Black and Brown Male Initiative and an Umoja student. The Black and Brown Male Initiative helps students succeed by: informing, motivating, and preparing them for success both academically and personally. Participants in the Black and Brown Male Initiative receive the following personalized services: personal development, mentoring, and activities that promote student involvement on the campus and in the community.

Participation in the Black and Brown Male Initiative aids in promoting campus involvement among African American male students at the community college in this study. Research shows that greater degrees of involvement in campus activities are positively correlated with student satisfaction with the college, academic achievement, and persistence toward graduation (Astin, 1977, 1985; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Laird et al., 2008; NSSE, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2008). Some scholars (e.g., Laird et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) argue that disengagement is the greatest contributor to
student dropout rates. Highly involved students are more likely to spend time studying on campus, participating in student activities, and having more interactions with faculty members and other students (Laird et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2008). Unlike 4-year institutions where many students reside on campus, community college students typically live off campus and attend school part-time. Hence, participation in the Black and Brown Male Initiative plays a critical role in promoting student involvement among African American males by integrating students into the social and academic communities of the college. Based on the published research regarding student involvement (e.g., Astin, 1977, 1985; Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006; Tinto, 2008), the program model may help improve the educational outcomes of this student population.

The educational attainment and participation of African American and Latino males is an ongoing concern at MCC. For example, African American and Latino males at the college have the lowest rates of graduation compared to other student groups. Therefore, the Black and Brown Male Initiative introduced a summer course that focused on the development of identity, and how the establishment of healthy identities (cultural and gender) will help improve academic performance (F. Harris & Harper, 2008; F. Harris et al., 2011; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The course was developed based on the current published literature (Cuyjet, 1997; Hagedorn et al., 2001; F. Harris & Harper, 2008; F. Harris et al., 2011; Quaye & Harper 2007) that addresses best practices to improve the educational outcomes of male students of color. Models of identity development (cultural and gender) were critiqued for their relevancy in understanding students’ personal and academic goals (Cross, 1971; F. Harris & Harper,
2008). W. Smith and colleagues (2007) asserted, “Black males carry two negative social identities . . . one as a member of the African American race and the other as a Black male” (p. 553). African American students are subjected to discrimination based on stereotypes that often portray them as criminals, gang members, athletes, and entertainers, but rarely as academics (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Given these negative stereotypes that threaten the identity and sense of self for men of color, activities such as the Black and Brown Male Initiative Mentoring Program and the annual Black and Brown Male Initiative conference were developed to provide an opportunity for the young men to discuss strategies to overcome challenges presented by the negative portrayal of men of color in higher education. The goal of the mentoring program is to increase faculty and peer interactions among African American and Latino male students. The Black and Brown Male Initiative conference aims to motivate and inspire men of color through workshops that address real life issues.

**Population Sample and Data Collection**

Ten African American male students were selected for this study. Participants were selected purposefully to ensure a participant pool comprised of individuals who would potentially have the most insight into the research questions and examined phenomenon.

**Participants**

As noted by Moustakas (1994), it is essential that “the research participant has experienced the phenomenon” and is interested in understanding the nature and meaning of the phenomenon (p. 107). Therefore, in order to explore the academic (in-class) and social (out-of-class) experiences of African American males, participants were identified
and recruited based on their involvement in the Umoja and/or the Black and Brown Male Initiative learning communities at the community college in this study. African American men who participate in a learning community program were chosen to provide insight into how these programs enhance academic and social engagement for African American men at community colleges. Given the severe lack of empirical research on African American males who attend community colleges, the research pool of 10 was appropriate for selecting information-rich cases that yielded in-depth understanding and insights into the experiences of African American males (Patton, 2002). Data were collected until data saturation was achieved. Saturation occurred when no new or relevant information emerged from the data (Creswell, 2009).

An invitation to participate was provided to participants to identify all students who met the criteria for participating in this study. Participants were African American men who attended MCC and were students in the Black and Brown Male Initiative or Umoja learning community. The invitation included questions that captured the information needed to screen and identify potential participants. Students recruited and selected for this study met the following criteria: (a) self-identified as an African American male; (b) was a current student at the college in this study during the time of data collection; and (c) had participated in the Black Male Initiative or Umoja program.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in research are especially important when human subjects are involved. Prior to initiating contact with prospective participants, the procedures that guided the research were submitted to the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board for approval. During the initial interview, students were informed of the
purpose of the study, the targeted population for the study, and the responsibility of the researcher to protect the rights, safety, and welfare of the participants in the study. Participants also received detailed information about the research process, and were given the opportunity to ask questions. All participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and the information collected was confidential. At the conclusion of the interview, students had enough information to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the study.

**Data Collection Methods**

This study was important in understanding the academic and social experiences of African American males who attend community college. Therefore, methods that aim toward yielding thick depictions of the participants’ experiences were used to conduct the study (Moustakas, 1994). Data were collected during the spring 2011 term. This included one recorded interview with each participant and a focus group interview.

The individual interviews were the first step in data collection methods for this study. Each of the participants was asked to participate in one 90-minute to 2-hour interview. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were designed to provide the most insight into the social and academic experiences of the participants, and their perception of whether or not the experiences affect their participation in college. The interview was informal, interactive, and evoked a rich, substantive description of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Although a fixed sequence of questions was used, the interview was semi-structured and conversational, thus allowing the participants to share a comprehensive account of their experiences (see Appendix A). Moustakas (1994) asserted, “The phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent
resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47). Preliminary themes that emerged from the individual interviews were key in developing a focus group protocol, and ensured focus group interview questions were targeted and evoked responses with sufficient meaning and depth. Each interview was audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed using the Hyper RESEARCH qualitative data analysis program. A follow-up interview via telephone ensured an accurate account of what was shared by participants. The immediate postinterview review and follow-up established a context for interpreting and making sense of the data (Patton, 2002).

Focus group interviews were the second step in data collection methods for this study. Data were collected in focus group interviews with the 10 participants in the study. Each student participated in one of two separate focus groups. Each focus group included five participants. Thus, there were a total of two focus groups in the study. Figure 1 provides a depiction of the focus group process.

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<td>Focus Group, Round 1 (five participants)</td>
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*Figure 1. Sequence of data collection and analysis.*

The focus group interviews allowed participants the opportunity to interact with other students who shared similar backgrounds (Patton, 2002). The focus group was an interactive discussion between the moderator and the respondents. The term moderator is
used to highlight a specific function of the interviewer, which is moderating or guiding the discussion (Krueger, 1994). The interview aimed to elicit a dialogue that is conversational, organic, and flexible. Therefore, the interview utilized open-ended comments and questions (see Appendix B). The questions “will evoke a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Once a good rapport was established, I asked questions that required the participants to reflect on their feelings, opinions, and values. Moustakas (1994) explained that the “interviewer is responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively” (p. 114). Throughout the process, I provided feedback that was supportive so that the participants continued to feel comfortable with being transparent about their experiences. The objective was to get high-quality data in a social context where the participants could consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 2002). When necessary, I used probing questions to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of the response, and give cues to the participants about the level of response desired (Patton, 2002). Participants’ responses were audio recorded during the individual and focus group interviews and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

According to Patton (2002), phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. The analytical process focused on exploring the experiences shared by the participants, and through the interpretive process I began to get a general sense of the overall meanings. A professional transcription service, Kimberly Monroe
Transcription Services, was utilized to aid in the transcription of digital audio recordings. I read through all of the transcripts and engaged in an analytical process known as *epoche.* According to Ihde (1977), *epoche* requires that looking precedes judgment and that judgment of what is real or most real be suspended until sufficient evidence is in. Moustakas (1994) noted, phenomenology “attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness” (p. 41). Likewise, *epoche* is a process that helps the researcher remove or at least become aware of any prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Katz, 1987). *Epoche* is an ongoing analytical process that takes place throughout the research. The purpose of *epoche* is to preserve the authenticity of what was shared about the participants’ experiences and the meanings they made of their experience. To further ensure that the meanings were those of the participants and not of my own, I used a technique called bracketing. I bracketed out any presuppositions, opinions, and ideas I had about the study (Moustakas, 1994). As I read each line of the transcription data from interviews and focus groups, I bracketed out my thoughts and assumptions into the margins of the transcripts. I revisited the comments that were written in the margins at the conclusion of each transcript to ensure that the data were analyzed according to the experiences of the participants and not my own. This process allowed me to speak honestly about my interpretations of the information shared by the participants in the most authentic way possible.

Coding also was used during the analytical process. Coding involved grouping textual data into categories or themes that were labeled based on language used by
participants (Creswell, 2009). Essentially, the coding process was used to label the primary patterns in the data in order to determine significance (Patton, 2002). The transcripts were analyzed using three strategies proposed by Charmaz (2006) including initial, focused, and axial coding. According to Charmaz, “Through coding, you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (p. 46). The initial coding practices should stick closely to the data, and codes should be “short, simple, active, and analytic” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50). The initial coding required a word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident analysis in order to determine emergent themes. After the initial coding practices were conducted, focused coding was used to help “synthesis and explain larger segments of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). According to Charmaz, focused coding allows the researcher to determine the adequacy of the initial codes. Charmaz further noted, “Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). A focused coding method allowed me to synthesize larger segments of the data in order to further develop emergent themes that determined meaning in the data. I grouped codes from the open coding phase into categories based on their similarity. Upon completion of the focused coding phase, axial coding, the third and final phase of coding was conducted

Unlike the initial and focused coding phases, which fractured data into distinct codes, axial coding organized and resembled large amounts of data to give coherence to the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006). In conducting axial coding, I linked categories with subcategories, and asked how they were related (Charmaz, 2006). This process helped clarify emerging ideas, and allowed me to make better sense of the data (Charmaz,
Upon completion of the initial, focused, and axial coding phases, the categories and subcategories that emerged from the transcripts were compared to past literature and theoretical perspectives (Creswell, 2009).

**Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance**

Several steps were taken to ensure quality and trustworthiness in this study. Creswell (2009) offered eight primary measures for evaluating the accuracy of findings in qualitative research; however, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and thick description were used. These measures also addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and ensured that my interpretation of the data was truly reflective of the participants’ experiences.

Trustworthiness and quality assurance were established in this study through data triangulation. Therefore, individual interviews and focus group interviews were employed to ensure accuracy and authenticity of the qualitative findings (Patton, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) asserted, “The use of multiple methods or triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 5). By triangulating with the use of multiple methods, the study was less vulnerable to errors that are linked to a particular method (Patton, 2002). An informant team consisting of two participants from the sample was established for member checks. The two informants read and provided feedback on my interpretation of the data to validate that it reflected their perspectives regarding the phenomenon being studied. Further, feedback was solicited from two peer debriefers, MCC faculty members, who were familiar with African American male issues and retention programs at a large urban community college. The debriefers and I engaged in a discussion regarding the meanings I had made
of the African American men’s experiences at an urban community college to ensure there were no biases reflected in the data by the researcher. Last, rich, detailed descriptions of the participants’ experiences were used to convey the findings (Creswell, 2009).

**Role and Background of the Researcher**

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis for this phenomenological study. Because I served in a leadership role at the institution where the study took place, it was crucial to emphasize the importance of “self-awareness, political and cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). As Moustakas (1994) reinforced, “Such a science requires a return to self . . . a self reflective process that enables the researcher to increasingly know herself or himself within the experience being investigated” (p. 47). To this end, I explain my experiences that influenced my approach to the study in the next section.

In my tenure as a student services employee at the institution in this study, I have held various positions that serve students from underrepresented, low-income, minority backgrounds, specifically providing leadership to the Black and Brown Male Initiative. In this capacity, the goal was to understand the academic and social factors that contributed to student success, and use the information to inform future practices to better serve students. As the coordinator and co-founder of the Black and Brown Male Initiative, I have a vested interest in improving the educational attainment and participation of African American and Latino male students.
While not directly involved with the students in the program, I recognize that my leadership role may influence participant responses during the focus group interviews. Therefore, possible biases may have presented themselves during the data collection. The focus group questions were designed, however, to minimize potential biased responses. According to Patton (2002), the perspective that the researcher brings to qualitative research is part of the context for the findings. With this in mind, I was attentive to and conscious of my voice, and the voice of the participants in the study (Patton, 2002).

**Limitations**

Although efforts were made to ensure the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis, three limitations are readily apparent in this research study. The first limitation pertains to the limited transferability of the findings from this study. The study focused on African American males who attend an urban community college and participate in learning community programs. It is important to note that students in learning communities will likely be more engaged than the typical African American male community college student population, as learning community students participate in co-curricular activities that promote campus engagement (e.g., student club, conferences, and community activities). Therefore, the results of this study may only be loosely generalized to other African American males in community colleges that have similar structures and demographics as the urban community college in this study. Another potential limitation of this study pertained to the leadership role in which the researcher serves at the community college in this study. The researcher’s leadership role might influence participants’ responses during the focus group interviews. For example, interviewees may be reluctant to be open and authentic about their lived experiences as
students, given their knowledge of the researcher’s leadership role at the community college in this study. Accordingly, focus group questions were designed to solicit both positive and negative responses relative to students’ experiences in order to minimize potential biased responses. Last, it is important to note that given the researcher’s role at the institution, and the researcher’s role as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis for this study, possible biases might present themselves. Therefore, it was important to employ a self-reflective process that requires “a return to the self” in order to understand myself within the experience being investigated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Further, I employed a strict use of epoche, member checks, and bracketing practices, which were described earlier in this chapter.

Summary

The research employed qualitative methods to explore the unique experiences of African American males at an urban community college. A phenomenological approach was used in order to offer rich, detailed descriptions of participants’ lived experiences (Patton, 2002). As Moustakas (1994) noted, “The phenomenological approach requires a return to experience in order to capture the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Thus, through on-going interactions with the participants, I brought voice to African American male perceptions as community college students, and how they make sense of their college experiences (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002).
CHAPTER 4—FINDINGS

Findings from the interviews with 10 African American males who attend an urban community college and participated in the Black and Brown Male Initiative, or the Umoja Learning Community, are presented in this chapter. Using a phenomenological approach, this study was intended to uncover the shared experiences regarding academic and social involvement among the participants in this study. These findings were obtained using qualitative methods that included 10 individual face-to-face interviews and two focus group interviews. The findings provide insights into the academic and social experiences of 10 African American men who attend an urban community college. Reported in the next paragraph are descriptions of the thematic categories that emerged from the data analysis.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, coding strategies proposed by Charmaz (2006) including initial, focused, and axial coding, were used during the analytical process. Coding involved grouping textual data into categories or themes that are labeled based on language used by participants (Creswell, 2009). Coding practices were used to make sense of each transcript, look for general patterns and relationships across transcripts, and make general discoveries about the academic and social experiences of African American men at an urban community college. Five thematic categories emerged from analyses of the coded transcripts. The thematic categories are: (a) barriers to academic achievement; (b) strategies to ensure success; (c) pedagogy of engagement; (d) deconstructing stereotypes; and (e) diversity and supportive learning environments. Descriptions of each thematic category are supported by reflections made by participants during the individual
and focus group interviews. Prior to presenting the themes and findings, I briefly
describe the 10 men who participated in the study.

Participants

Ten African American male students who attend Metropolitan Community
College (MCC), which is located in the southern region of California, participated in this
study. The study included six students who participated in an African American learning
community, one student athlete, and three African American male students from the
general student population. However, all participants participated in one or several
activities sponsored by the Black and Brown Male Summit, a program at MCC that was
designed for men of color in higher education. Participation in the above mentioned
program would allow participants the opportunity to access programmatic components
that aided in their participation and achievement in community college.

The demographic characteristics of the 10 men who participated in the study were
obtained from individual and/or focus group interview transcripts. The participants
self-identified as African American men and ranged from 18 to 27 years of age at the time
of the study. Two participants were 22 years old; five participants were 19 years old; one
participant was 18 years old; one participant was 21; and one participant was 27 years
old. None of the participants were married; however, two of the men had young children.
Notably, one participant was a single parent and was the sole provider for the household.
Five participants were generally living independent of their parents, but eight participants
received some help from family members to pay for college and living expenses.
Similarly, eight participants used public transportation to travel to and from school,
although two participants used a bike or skateboard, and one participant used his own car.
When talking about their families, many of the men recounted stories of a stable family situation in which they felt safe and loved. However, a few of the men interviewed described their families as “dysfunctional,” and in some cases reported experiencing physical and/or emotional abuse. For the men in this study, they had varied experiences in terms of upbringing; one came from middle class, seven from working class, and two from low-income.

All of the men were first generation college students, meaning that no one in their immediate family had received a bachelor’s degree or higher. Analysis of the interview data showed that all of the men graduated from high school; although three graduated from a continuation high school. A continuation high school is an alternative to a traditional high school designed for students who are considered at-risk of dropping out, or not graduating at the normal pace. The requirements to graduate are the same, but the scheduling is more flexible to allow students to earn their credits at a quicker pace, since they are usually missing credits or lacking the grades needed to graduate. Students who attend continuation schools may have discipline problems (social and emotional adjustment issues), drug users, pregnant teens, and teenage mothers.

All of the men enrolled in developmental English and math courses and were, to some degree, underprepared for college level coursework. This is a common pattern at the urban community college in this study. All of the men aspired to receive a minimum of an associate’s degree with hopes of transferring to a 4-year institution to receive a bachelor’s degree. One participant noted that he wanted to receive a doctorate. Similarly, all of the men received financial aid; with the exception of one participant who received aid but was disqualified due to academic probation. Six participants were
first-year students at MCC. Additionally, six of the men in this study balanced full or part-time employment with school. Because of work and/or family responsibilities, seven of the participants were not attending college full time.

The overall college experiences of the men are further explored in the presentation of the findings. Given the small sample size, efforts have been made to maintain the anonymity of the African American male participants. Therefore, the names of participants have been changed in the presentation of the data. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym.

**Barriers to Academic Achievement**

The first thematic category relates to challenges experienced by participants that had the potential to interfere with their ability to fully engage in the pursuit of their education. There are three subthemes that support the larger theme: (a) behavioral challenges; (b) prior academic preparation; and (c) financial hardship. Participants consistently indicated that precollege experiences had a significant impact on their academic success in college. The participants also reported that the challenges they experienced in college were related to insufficient financial aid to support them while attending school.

In order to present subthemes in the participants’ voices, “I was a bad kid” refers to behavioral challenges; “I missed a lot of things I should have learned” refers to prior academic preparation; and “money is probably the biggest challenge” refers to financial hardships.
“I Was the Bad Kid”

The participants consistently cited classroom adjustment challenges experienced at the primary and secondary school levels as factors that made it difficult for them to pursue postsecondary education. Several participants reflected upon the consequences that were associated with behavioral difficulties in the classroom, which resulted in higher reports of misconduct referrals, overrepresentation in special education programs, and created more strained teacher-student relationships. They frequently spoke of how behavioral problems in the classroom, particularly in the form of overactive and disruptive conduct, resulted in biases in teachers’ perceptions and expectation of their academic abilities. Moreover, patterns of negative teacher expectations and perceptions had an adverse affect on the degree of support they received from teachers. Kevin acknowledged the behavioral problems he experienced in elementary and middle school.

Well, I had a lot of behavioral problems growing up in school. I have ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] and I have a history with depression, with different medications and so forth. I got expelled out of I think at least five schools in elementary and middle school.

Kevin explained that a few incidents of behavioral misconduct in the classroom were intentional and intended to get a reaction from the teacher. Kevin added:

I would disrupt the classroom, get on top of the tables and start hollering and screaming, make fun of the teachers. One time I peed in my pants on purpose because my teacher wouldn’t let me use the bathroom. So, I did that to make a point. Fighting, all the above, anything you’re thinking, I did it probably.
During a focus group interview, Kevin recalled an incident in middle school when he was expelled from school because he broke a window:

A moment that sticks out is when I got expelled from one of my schools in middle school. And I mean they told me if I got into one fight I would be done; I mean it was something really small and I just remember that meeting they just made me seem like I was this monster.

He elaborated,

It was a downward spiral from there, like they put me in this really like bad school for like kids with a lot of behavioral issues and stuff, and like that was the year that I really rebelled. I got, you know, I was getting involved with gang members and I, you know, I did a little bit of drugs at that time and didn’t really care about school from then on.

For some participants, their behavior was perceived by teachers as excessively problematic and school disciplinary expulsion was recommended. Consequently, they had to attend an alternative continuation school for a period of time. Andrew offered the following reflection:

Probably the decline of my high school year was freshman year I got caught up with these guys, and I went to [a continuation high school] actually, and we crossed that bridge and went to Wal-Mart and stole some bee-bee guns and I stole a knife. Someone seen us on campus and told . . . I served probation for like a half year and I got kicked out of the county schools [unified school district].

The participants described the continuation schools as racially segregated schools that disproportionately served African American and Latino males. And since these
placements were based on teachers’ informal judgments of student skills and behavior, there is certainly opportunity for teacher prejudice and discrimination to affect outcomes. Furthermore, participants were rarely reassessed to determine placement into higher performing schools. Therefore, a careful examination of the high concentration of African American men in continuation school may yield evidence of discriminatory placement of this student group.

The participants’ attendance at continuation schools has had a negative effect on their trajectory of achievement and school engagement. Thus, challenges associated with continuation schools (lack of resources, less demanding instruction, under qualified teachers) that disproportionately serve students of color led to poor educational outcomes for the men in this study.

“I Missed A Lot of Things I Should Have Learned”

Many of the participants entered college for the first time underprepared for college level work. A number of participants attributed their academic challenges in college to their participation in special education programs and continuation schools that lacked the academic rigor needed to prepare students for college level coursework. Consequently, participants did not acquire the skills needed to critically analyze information, problem-solve, and use critical thinking skills. These particular skills are essential to college academic preparation. Thus, lacking these skills can have a negative impact on the participants’ academic trajectory. Andrew stated:

I missed a lot of things that I thought I should have learned like between Spanish and math, a lot of that like fell behind me. I mean I always loved to read and
write, those were always my strengths, but a lot of things that I should have caught up on that I’m trying to do now, I should have learned then [in high school].

The participants asserted that the lack of academic preparation received at the secondary school level has had an adverse effect on African American male achievement. Kevin asserted:

Probably a lot of us [African American men] are behind because I mean like, the school I was taught like it was not challenging at all, for me at least, maybe some of the other kids it was, but the work was always below average. . . . And so I come here [to MCC] and I’m just so behind. I have to play catch up, that’s a challenge. I’m 22 years old and I’m still in English 49.

English 49 is the second writing course in the developmental English sequence at MCC. At this English level, two additional semesters of English courses would be required before enrolling in freshman composition. Lacking the essential skills and academic preparation that are acquired at the primary and secondary school levels resulted in the low-level English placement of nine participants in the present study. Consequently, it will take the men longer to complete the requirements for an associate’s degree and/or transfer to the 4-year institution.

For Fred, a student who struggled to graduate from high school, he was surprised that he made it to college.

It really was a shock. I was like “wow am I really in college? Have I made it this far?” Because it was a struggle just to graduate high school. So I was like “wow this is an achievement and I can keep going.”
Although Fred was excited to be in college, he lamented the fact that he barely passed the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE), a test designed to help identify students who are not developing skills that are essential for life after high school.

Yeah, it was challenging because there is a requirement to pass the CAHSEE and I kept on missing it by 2 points, so I couldn’t go to prom or go to grad night or even walk [graduation]. . . . But like at the end of summer they told me that I passed it and all they did was just give me my diploma.

The summer before enrolling into college, Fred was minimally able to demonstrate 12th grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics. This seemed to be the trend for many of the participants in this study, which would explain the academic challenges they have experienced at MCC. Participants seemed to be making great strides toward academic progress at MCC, although many of them needed additional academic support (tutoring, peer study groups, supplemental instruction) to help them acquire the skills needed to successfully complete college level coursework.

While many participants discussed the significance of the lack of academic rigor and its impact on their success, some participants noted the lack of exposure to the academic resources that help prepare students for college. As Michael stated, “The students that were deemed I guess college bound, they got more attention from their teachers and I saw that I didn’t receive as much counseling as those kids did as well.” Some participants recalled that their White peers were encouraged to take college preparatory classes, advanced placement course, and provided with other educational opportunities that encourages a strong upward trajectory of academic achievement. The generalized perception of racial discrepancies in education was captured by Kevin, who
stated: “I mean the school system is more designed for them [White students], you know, the way the classes are, the way it is being taught and so forth, it is for them. For somebody like me it’s really tough.” Participants described examples of discriminatory treatment they received from school personnel in secondary education. Specifically, some participants noted that school personal had lowered expectations of African American men, which influenced their academic aspirations. Participants explained that counselors did not expose them to the academic opportunities that would prepare them for college. In fact, some participants suggested that counselors, and other school personnel, did not expect them to attend college based on their academic abilities. One participant felt that his counselor might have promoted college enrollment had he been involved in a sport. Michael provided the following reflection:

A lot of my friends on the football team all had the same counselor, and she was advising them on what they could do with their future. . . . She never like even moved a pen stroke towards pointing me in any type of direction. And I think it was at one point I just stopped going to her, and I stopped looking for guidance because I was like, she is not gonna help me. She hasn’t told me anything like she’s told the rest of my peers.

Frequent encounters with discriminatory treatment from counselors were not uncommon for the African American men in this study. The men commented that counselors failed to advise them on college options and requirements to attend the 4-year institution. Instead, participants reported that counselors focused primarily on requirements needed to complete high school, with some attention given to enrollment at the community college. Therefore, community college became the gateway to postsecondary education for the
African American men in this study. Participants’ experiences with negative stereotypes about African American men are discussed later in the chapter. In the next section, participants discussed financial challenges that affected their ability to engage in their academics.

“Money Is Probably the Biggest Challenge”

The participants cited financial hardship as a challenge that prevented them from fully committing to their academic pursuits. The men explained how the lack of financial aid made it difficult for them to attend college. For example, 6 of the 10 participants in the study worked full-time or part-time jobs to support themselves while attending college, which impeded their progress in college. While the participants displayed a sense of determination for enrolling in college, some also conveyed their frustrations with having to pay college expenses as well as living expenses. The financial challenges experienced by the participants in this study influenced their ability to engage fully in school, thus making it harder for them to accomplish their educational goals. The participants spoke openly about how the lack of money and financial assistance from grant aid and support programs, presented a major challenge to persist. For example, three participants experienced some academic challenges at MCC and were consequently placed on academic probation. Students who have a history of substandard academic performance are at risk of being disqualified from the institution. Kevin added the following, “I got on probation because I failed a couple of classes and so they sat me out for a semester. . . . I’m only taking one class right now.” Furthermore, students who have a negative academic standing with the institution are subject to the discontinuation of financial assistance from federal grant aid and loans, which can have a precipitous affect
on their ability to pay for classes, attend classes, and achieve academic success. When asked during a focus group interview to describe challenges that impede their ability to achieve academically, Sal offered, “I would say probably financially a lot of guys might not have a computer at home to work on or money to print stuff out.” Sal was explaining how the lack of resources, such as access to a computer, served as barriers to academic achievement. And, Sal emphasized how the lack of resources made it hard to pay for transportation, food, and other basic necessities that are needed to attend school:

I’m very motivated to go to college . . . but if anything it would probably be financially just having to find a way to put gas in my car all the time. Some guys plan to take the trolley every day or something and might not have money for that. . . . Money for food, where I’m gonna eat every day and all that. School is an extra.

Several of the participants indicated that they were the primary provider of their household and did not receive financial support from family, as Charles noted, “really I don’t have no support from my family right now . . . I’m really struggling.” The men ascribed to traditional notions of manhood including breadwinning, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance. Living up to the expectations of manhood sometimes prevented participants from focusing on their academics. As Charles explained, “I need to get some money in my pocket for me to be able to live on this planet.” Likewise, Evan, a single parent of two, noted that he took time off from school to work when his daughter was born, “I was just working. I had my daughter in ’04 and so I had to work.” Similar to Charles and Evan, several participants felt the need to work to support themselves and their families. While their desire for self-reliance is admirable, it often impeded their academic progress.
As noted by several participants, financial aid was essential to their college success as it was needed to support basic needs—school expenses, food, housing, and transportation. By and large, the participants in the study found that balancing financial responsibilities and school was the greatest challenge in college. Some even reported that work often interfered with their ability to commit sufficient time to their studies. Therefore, the support offered by programs, counselors, and mentoring played a crucial role in providing the additional support needed to promote academic and social involvement for the African American men in this study.

**Strategies to Ensure Success**

The second major finding of this study relates to the support that influenced participants’ decision to enroll, persist, and achieve academically. Aside from the challenges, participants discussed how certain institutional processes, and the amount of support received, influenced their decision to attend college. Participants discussed their involvement in programs that promoted academic and social engagement on campus. Additionally, participants commented on their relationship with counselors, who often provided advice on course enrollment, as well as personal and other matters. The participants also discussed mentoring relationships and how they allowed them to make meaningful connections with their peers and other men. The mentors were often of the same race or ethnicity and were further along in their education or professional careers. There were three subthemes that support the larger theme: (a) programs; (b) counselors; and (c) mentoring.

In this section, “they’re giving us the tools” refers to programs that facilitated academic achievement for African American men, “my counselor is like the best” refers
to the importance of counseling support, and “lead by example . . . not selling you some bull” refers to mentoring and its influence in promoting positive student outcomes for African American men.

“They’re Giving Us The Tools”

Given the challenges the participants encountered in their K-12 schooling experiences, the participants needed the assistance of programs to help them successfully adjust to college. Many of the participants commented that they felt lost and needed a sense of direction when they arrived at MCC. Participants explained that they did not understand the college’s processes and practices. Furthermore, their parents, many of whom had never attended college, were unable to help them navigate the college system. Participants noted that program involvement provided a streamlined process that facilitated orientation, assessment, enrollment, and class selection. Specifically, participants explained how their involvement in programs helped them make a smooth transition into college. Michael recalled the following, as he considered enrolling at MCC:

She [Counselor] told us about the Umoja Program, Trio, and everything. . . . I went to admissions, and I filled out everything I needed to do, got my ID card, and I called her [Counselor] and made an appointment. . . . And from there I enrolled in the Umoja Program.

Participants explained that they decided to attend MCC because they were introduced to programs that provided prescriptive steps to enroll in the college, introduced them to campus resources, and helped them get acclimated to the college campus. John elaborated:
I don’t think I would be where I am today if it wasn’t for the Umoja program. I mean I didn’t know how to sign up for classes. A lot of the classes were filled up. I was thinking about just like going into MCC like the next semester. Yeah, it [program] has given me people to look up to. It is just a great experience.

Several participants also discussed how involvement in programs helped to increase their likelihood of academic success. Specifically, participants discussed that program involvement facilitated their academic and social integration into the college. For example, one participant commented that the program enabled him to feel a sense of belonging on campus and made it easier to learn. Andrew noted: “It [Umoja] was a community. I felt automatically accepted, so of course that makes it easier to learn and get along well on campus.” Six of the 10 participants were in the Umoja learning community and were also involved in the Umoja student club. Participation in the Umoja club is an expectation of all Umoja students. John added:

Last semester I was in the actual club [Umoja] where you have like presidents and stuff. I wasn’t there too much, but it was a good experience because you actually get to be a part of Metropolitan Community College. . . . If something is not going right you can have your club talk to them.

Although Sal, a basketball player at MCC, participated in activities with MCC Men’s Basketball Team, he was not involved in student clubs and organizations on campus. Kevin, who attended school part-time due to work responsibilities, was drawn to the Christian student club at MCC because it was a faith based student organization. During the interview, Kevin expressed his strong belief in Jesus Christ, and according to Kevin, the club provided a safe, affirming environment that allowed him to express his religious
beliefs. As Kevin explained, “We just come together as a group and we study Jesus and scriptures.” Moreover, Kevin commented that his involvement in the Christian club allowed him to build a social network with peers at MCC, and he developed a close relationship with the faculty advisor. Furthermore, participation in the club facilitated Kevin’s involvement on campus and in the community, as Kevin added, “I’m really involved in the Christian club at MCC. We go to other campuses, and like we do things with Hillside Community College and California State University.” Three of the 10 participants did not participate in campus clubs and organizations.

Participation in a learning community promoted social involvement in campus clubs and organizations for the African American men in this study. While participation in programs provided opportunities for social involvement, social involvement was not a significant factor that promoted learning and persistence for the participants in this study. Interestingly, involvement in educationally purposeful activities, such as Personal Growth activities and co-curricular activities (conferences, university field trips, community activities), promoted learning and persistence for the majority of the participants in this study. For example, Matthew explained how his involvement in the Umoja learning community facilitated his social integration into the college campus:

In high school I was never a part of anything. . . . I joined the club [Umoja] last semester . . . and that’s what I like about being here [MCC] is because I feel like I can be so involved. I have been to a conference in Orange County, I have never done anything like this, it is crazy.

Fred emphasized that by participating in the Umoja program he developed a network of
supportive faculty members and peers that provided him with academic support. He stated:

It is actually great because once you’re a part of the program you find out which of your classmates, what their strengths are, how they can help. Tutors can help you, too. You can ask your classmates for help with certain problem, or help with English. Even like counselors, they will tell you, go to this person to get help.

Much like Fred, nearly all of the participants talked about the importance of receiving tutoring and counseling support, because many of them entered college lacking the basic skills needed to succeed in college level math and English. The support received from tutors helped supplement participants’ learning in the classroom, thus increased their chances of academic achievement. For many of the participants, involvement in programs that offered counseling support, such as personal, career, and academic guidance, significantly increased the likelihood of their persistence in college and overall success. Michael provided insight about the array of support offered at MCC:

I think Metropolitan does a particularly good job of offering support at all levels for students. Wherever you come from Metropolitan Community College has some type of program or some type of course that you can apply to, and it is gonna give you advice from a counselor, give you support from students that are, you know, motivated like you are. So it’s like, I can’t say I have ever felt a lack of any kind of support because I have gotten everything I need from this community college.

Several participants commented that they received an abundance of support while involved in programs. Furthermore, having the support pushed them to do better. For
example, Andrew noted how having a learning center designated for their learning community helped motivate him to study. He and other participants described the learning center as a place away from home that inspired learning. Frequent study groups, club meetings, and other meetings between faculty and peers were among the many interactions that took place in the learning center. One participant shared that the center was a place where he felt comfortable because he could interact with other Black students, as Michael stated:

I don’t feel like out of place really. I spend most of my time in Umoja [Center], I see way more Black people and way more Hispanic people and it is just like we are all just here in this little area.

All of the participants discussed the significance of support and its impact on their success, although some participants observed that many of their male peers were too proud to seek support. All of the men in the study adhered to traditional notions of masculinity and in some way acknowledged their need for self-reliance and independence to define their manhood. Thus, it is not surprising that for some African American males they would generally prefer to support themselves rather than seek support or assistance from other sources. For example, Michael noted, “But it just seems like African American males are very prideful and they don’t really want to seek support. I think them seeking support is to them like showing their weakness.”

Participants’ involvement in various programs had required them to utilize available support, as it was a built-in component of the respective program. Therefore, African American men who are in programs, such as Umoja, Trio, and other student support services programs are more likely to receive support without having to ask for it.
Participation in programs helped ensure participants received the academic and social support that they needed. Moreover, involvement in programs provided participants with positive academic and social college experiences, and played a significant role in their learning and persistence at the college.

“My Counselor Is Like the Best”

Rendón (1994) noted that nontraditional students need active intervention from significant others to help them negotiate institutional life. Validating agents on college campuses, such as teachers, counselors, and peers appeared to have a huge impact on participants’ overall experience in college. Several of the participants supported Rendón’s assertion by explaining that their interaction with a counselor, that took an active interest in them, influenced their decisions to enroll in MCC. Michael noted:

Just being familiar with the school and I think—my start here is what set the tone for everything, for all of the success that I have had, my start here in the Umoja community and with counselors that are extremely interested in my success.

Andrew, a first-year student, explained that he decided to attend MCC because a counselor called him at home and invited him to be a part of the Umoja program at MCC. Many of the participants credited their counselor for playing a role in their enrollment, retention, and overall success in college. For example, Matthew noted:

I think just being in Umoja has helped me, just having Counselor . . . she always tells you to strive to be a scholar, creator and all these terms that help you realize that, you know what I mean? Like you can be successful, and we want you to be successful, and here are the tools. And that’s what they’re giving us are the tools, the foundation to let us strive and be something.
Participants also commented that counselors affirmed the importance of academic achievement. Specifically, several participants noted that counselors in programs (Umoja, Black and Brown Initiative, EOPS, MESA) consistently encouraged transfer to the 4-year institution. For many of the participants, pursuing a bachelor’s degree did not seem like a real possibility. However, with the assistance of counselors, participants were able to learn about degree and transfer requirements. Additionally, counselors provided participants with a detailed educational plan that outlined courses needed to complete their goal. According to most of the participants, counselors played a key role in shaping their aspirations to go beyond community college.

Many participants described their counselors as being supportive and encouraged their potential and intellectual capability. Participants consistently noted validating experiences where counselors affirmed that they could be successful college students. The following statement illuminates how validation is employed by counselors, as John added “she [Counselor] just made me feel like empowered like, like I can do it.” Several participants described their counselors as caring. During the focus group interview, John explained that his counselor always has great words of encouragement. “I feel like my counselor is very supportive. Like I said, she gives like encouraging words and makes you feel like you can do it and she knows you as a person so she can relate more.”

According to the participants, counselors provided emotional support and helped them deal with personal issues that could have impeded their progress in college. In fact, one participant referred to his counselor as his “therapist” and noted that he met with his counselor to discuss personal problems. Andrew explained that during individual counseling sessions, his counselor helped him explore productive ways to deal with his
situation or problem. When asked to describe what he appreciated most about his counselor, Andrew added the following, “My counselor is good. She helps, she’s like the best listener ever. I’ve never had someone listen to me for so long. Like she really listens.” Andrew admitted that his counselor was not able to solve every problem or provide every answer, but he appreciated having a counselor who listened and showed genuine concern for his well being. It appeared that the validation participants received from counselors helped facilitate their ability to deal with challenges, which allowed them to focus on their academics.

According to participants, some counselors took an intrusive approach to interacting with participants in contrast to the more traditional approach of depending on students to take the initiative to seek out the counselor. Michael commented:

A counselor—I don’t remember her first name, but she was just walking by and passing and she was like “are you trying to attend here?” And I told her I was looking at all the colleges. And she said, “You should definitely go here.” And she told me about the Umoja program and to talk to counselor in Trio and everything.

The counselor in the Umoja learning community utilized an intrusive counseling model that closely monitored students’ academic progress. Andrew commented: “This semester started and Miss Ellie [counselor] was not kidding around. If you didn’t have your homework, she would be like where’s your homework. Why didn’t you do it? What were you doing last night?” Participants explained that counselors made timely interventions and provided additional support to ensure that students successfully completed their classes. Furthermore, participants indicated that counselors were
accessible and demonstrated a willingness to build genuine, caring, relationships with students as noted by Fred, “Yeah, because she really cares about us and wants us to be the best that we can, because the stuff that she gives us really open our eyes.”

Overall, participants responded that having a counselor increased their willingness and motivation to perform. According to the participants, counselors motivated them to excel academically and helped them maximize their potential. The challenges and issues faced by African American men certainly suggest how important support systems such as counseling in facilitating academic achievement are. The next section discusses the support offered by mentors that provided opportunities for the men to connect with role models that shared similar backgrounds.

“Lead by Example . . . Not Selling You Some Bull”

In addition to support found through counselors and programs, most of the participants explained how accessibility to role models and mentors helped support their academic success. Participants identified a relationship between mentoring and persistence toward graduation. Several participants also commented on how access to mentors would drive success. Moreover, access to these important networks and relationships functioned as a conduit for transmission of information about jobs and other opportunities. For example, Matthew noted:

I went to a conference [Black and Brown Male Initiative]. It’s just a lot of networking and knowing that these people have been through the same stuff. . . . there’s a lot of people out there who want to help you succeed even if you don’t.

Having mentors who shared similar experiences (e.g., gender, ethnicity, educational background, socioeconomic status) seemed to be important for participants in this study.
Specifically, 3 of the 10 participants had been incarcerated and appreciated hearing from other men who have experienced the same struggles, yet were able to achieve success. Fred noted, “We had speakers come in that have been in jail and talked to us about how they succeeded in life, not just financially but helping the community out.” For several participants, having mentors who were of the same ethnicity and gender appeared to have more impact. John noted, “I think maybe a good idea was maybe if there was like a male African American [Mentor] to inform us it would help us.” Charles also noted that an African American male role model who is successful helped foster a sense of self-efficacy. He explained, “I liked it that they had Black men standing up there talking to us . . . he was about his business, he’s handling his stuff like that is how I want to be.”

When asked how mentors motivate and inspire African American men to succeed academically and personally, Andrew offered the following:

He [mentor] was great. He told us that one of the biggest things that bigger corporations look for when they hire you is your degrees and your skills. He [mentor] said your degree says that you have the skills and that you started something and finished it. That comment stuck with me because when I started high school I didn’t plan on finishing, but I did. Now, I want to get my doctorate. It may take a long time but I just don’t see any other option but to finish because I want to start something and finish it. That was the biggest message I got from him and that is why I liked him [mentor] so much.

Participants also indicated how critical being respected was to them in making a connection with mentors. Furthermore, the men reported that they do not like a hierarchical relationship that would position them below mentors, or anyone for that
matter. Interestingly, respect appeared to be central to affirming their manhood. Michael elaborated:

Every mentor that I have had that was successful, that I liked and took information from, was somebody who wasn’t talking to me in an academic or business setting. They would go with me, like one guy that was a mentor of mine, I skateboarded with. He was just an older guy and he owned his own business . . . I have learned the most from people who have went out of their way to show they respected me, first of all, and that I had to respect them and then they went on to take interest on what I’m doing and to advise me.

Participants commented that they are inspired and motivated by having examples of African American males who are doing what they want to do, as Matthew added:

Somebody that is gonna be a real brother who is real, not faking it out there, whose been through the same things, who is making impossible seem possible. Because the things you see that, like when I was younger I was not thinking, I’m gonna get a doctorate. That’s weird, impossible only smart people do that. But . . . I can really do this, I just have to work hard.

Participants also suggested that mentors could play an important role in promoting the importance of education. Participants emphasized the importance of being exposed to African American men who achieved success because of obtaining an educational degree. The men in this study defined success as being able to support family, give back to the community, travel, and live a comfortable life. For many of the participants, they did not have examples of African American men who obtained a degree and achieved some level of success, according to the aforementioned definition. Contrarily, most participants had
examples of African American men who acquired success without a degree, and some through engaging in illegal activities. Evan explained that for some African American men they have learned that selling drugs or engaging in other illegal activities are ways to make quick money. As Evan stated:

They are still trying to think I’m gonna get money quick by doing this [selling drugs] . . . eventually you’re gonna get caught by the law and when you look at the jail cells, they are over populated with African American men because they are trying to get money fast.

In sum, exposure to African American male role models who have similar career objectives, common background experiences, and have obtained a college degree, have profound implications for African American male participation and attainment in an urban community college.

**Pedagogy of Engagement**

The third major finding relates to classroom factors. Participants discussed effective classroom practices and positive interactions with faculty that promoted their learning and achievement. The men were able to make a connection between engagement in educationally purposeful activities and academic success. Participants provided examples of practices that were important in facilitating their own engagement across the curriculum. According to participants, instructors who used pedagogical practices such as cooperative learning, active learning, and other practices that actively engaged students in the learning process, helped facilitate deeper learning. Moreover, meaningful interactions with faculty significantly influenced their desire and ability to perform well
There are two subthemes that support this theme: (a) faculty-student interactions and (b) practices that promote student engagement.

In order to present subthemes in the participants’ voices, “I had no intention of speaking to my professor” refers to faculty-student interactions, and “I used to hate math” refers to practices that promote student engagement.

“I Had No Intention of Speaking to My Professor”

All 10 of the participants discussed the link between helpful and encouraging faculty members and academic success. It appeared that supportive relationships with major validating agents on campus (peers, faculty, and staff) helped facilitate a sense of belonging and connection to the college campus for the African American males in this study. Several participants noted that faculty members supported them by displaying genuine concern for them both academically and personally. Fred shared the following about his Personal Growth instructor, “Yeah, because she really cares about us and wants us to be the best that we can.” Participants who participated in a learning community commented that faculty members tried to motivate students and help them maximize their potential. Several participants explained that professors at MCC really cared about students mastering the subject matter. They emphasized that professors extended themselves by offering additional support to students to ensure academic success. This approach seemed to motivate participants to believe in their own academic capability, and encouraged academic excellence. Michael noted:

I think the basic thing is that the professors that I have taken so far in my learning communities and in Chicano studies and things of that sort, they have all been really interested in seeing that their students are mastering the subject, not just
teaching a class and giving out grades; they really want you to succeed and they extend themselves even further than a professor to see a student do better.

Evan commented on how his professors offered additional support because they believed that he was capable of doing better:

Like I said, just walking by and seeing a teacher telling you, “oh, good job” . . . I mean I did my best but them letting me know look, you got it, you can do it, just keep it up, come for extra help, just keep being motivated, just keep going on and doing it.

Participants also explained that faculty members were there for them and took the extra time to make certain that they understood the information presented in class. Participants noted that they appreciated faculty members who made themselves available and accessible, as Fred noted, “Instructors give you [office] hours and say I could tutor you and what do you need help with. I’m here for you.” The African American males in this study tended to do well in classes where sufficient help and assistance was provided.

During a focus group interview, Charles indicated that his professors were available to help him when he struggled in his classes: “They help me with everything I do. If I really struggle then they will be there to help me.” Furthermore, the participants valued having various means of access to instructors such as office hours, phone calls, and email. Evan stated, “I can call my teacher and say you know I missed class. I’m sorry, I didn’t miss it on purpose. Me and my friend and my teachers always had a good relationship.”

When asked how faculty expectations of their performance in class have influenced their ability to learn, several participants commented that the high expectations set by professors inspired them to do better. Andrew explained:
Last semester I was kind of disappointed because I aced my math, I got a B in English, I got a B in personal growth or A, one of them, and then I took a Black studies class that had two parts to it, both 8 weeks. I went to one and got a C and then my last one I kind of bummed it because I got really sick and couldn’t go back, so I failed it which gave me like a 2.8 or a 2.9. And I was really close to a 3.0.

Michael added the following, “I was gonna say like the Umoja community and the MESA community, when the advisors and the professor around you project high standards, students do better.” Likewise, high expectations set by professors facilitated student development and personal growth. Consequently, participants acquired confidence in their academic ability and in turn they began to see themselves as capable learners. As Matthew explained:

“It’s easier to do work academic work when you believe that you are a learner. It’s not just a task to do, it’s something that I’m gonna take with me to the next class and to the next degree program. Everything that I’m learning, I’m taking it with me. I’m not just taking the class to get an A, I’m taking this class to become a better learner—to move towards my goal.

Moreover, high expectations set by faculty led to a change in participants’ academic behavior. Through the research, it becomes apparent that participants began to trust in their innate capacity to learn. Therefore, they began to model behavior that promoted academic excellence. As Fred added:
Well, I feel great because last semester I used to just sit in the back but now I’m like I need to be in front of the class, because if I don’t sit in front of the class I’m not gonna learn nothing.

Likewise, John made adjustments to his study habits in order to increase his chances for academic success: “I’m trying to get in the habit of studying, because if I don’t study now the classes are only gonna get harder, and I have the same attitude and I don’t want that.”

Furthermore, students wanted to do better, as they felt accountable to their professors. To this point, Matthew noted:

She [professor] expects so much. You have to give it to her. You don’t want her to feel like she’s failed because she is gonna put it on herself. So you don’t want her to feel bad. If you don’t do anybody’s homework, you did Mrs. Elle’s homework.

Many of the participants conveyed that they were able to build relationships with faculty members in learning communities. They explained that the faculty members developed an interest in their academic and personal lives and made attempts to relate to students’ experiences. When participants perceived that faculty members had the ability to relate to them, it strengthened the faculty members’ overall rapport with the students. Michael explained, “I’ll have a good relationship with them [professors] because of, you know, I have realized that I can talk to these people.” Andrew commented on how relating to instructors created a learning environment that inspired his learning: “for starters I feel like I could relate to them, which made settling into the class easier and probably learning. Like it would be easier learning because of the learning environment.”
Faculty members who went beyond their professional duty to form supportive relationships with participants, helped influence participants’ motivation to excel academically. Several participants reported that learning communities helped facilitate close-knit relationships between faculty and students. Participants in learning communities reported feeling a greater sense of belonging and fostered a better connection with the college community. Furthermore, faculty members who believed in their ability to succeed, set high expectations, and tried to maximize their potential, helped encourage participants in this study to succeed academically.

“I Used to Hate Math”

Participants commented that they were able to achieve academic success when instructors employed pedagogies of engagement, different approaches to classroom instruction, and provided additional academic support. When asked to describe different approaches to classroom instruction that helped increase their desire to learn, Michael shared the following:

Totally different approach . . . he [Math professor] has soul, he [Math professor] is more human. He’s got his own swagger so in tune to math. . . . He finds joy in making other people laugh about it [Math]. And sometimes when he is teaching, I wouldn’t understand it at all, but he will help me work through it . . . and he is really good at relating things that are very abstract to a basic situation or basic examples that I can understand.

Participants also commented that effective teaching required that professors appeal to students with different learning styles. Thus, finding different ways to deliver
information helped to increase participants’ comprehension and acquisition of knowledge. Michael elaborated:

If you are a math teacher, you know that not everybody is gonna get it, it is hard for us to understand, so if you’re coming at it from a different angle we can see it where we’re like, wow, I never heard it like this before, then that’s where you get everybody’s attention. Because even though we might not like math but if the teacher teaches it in different ways, we don’t have to like it, but we will understand it.

Participants in the study tended to acquire knowledge and understanding of course content when professors used active learning methods. Andrew noted, “If anybody wants to have any motivational class activities, our personal growth is at 8:00 in the morning Mondays and Wednesdays because Mrs. Elle has the best activities.” When asked to describe the “best” activities, participants shared this example: “Close your eyes and pretend you’re jumping off a building. And you actually feel like you’re jumping off a building. She would have us pretending like we have wings and we were flying.” The participants valued active rather than passive forms of classroom practices because it connected them to the learning experience. As participants described their active involvement in the learning process, I asked them to explain how the activities promoted learning. Matthew explained:

It is not just the activities, but at the end she [Professor] ties it into what we are learning, and what we have to do in life, it makes you like, I need more of that, because it is so much fun.
All participants noted that they needed clear directions, ongoing feedback, and additional classroom support (e.g., tutoring) when completing an academic task. When provided with the necessary direction and support, African American males in this study found it easy to achieve academic success. The participants also valued having structured assignments that were easy to follow. Moreover, participants enjoyed deep approaches to learning that were intellectually stimulating and actively engaged them in class. While not a salient theme in the findings, it is important to note that the participants’ remarks reflected undertones of the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum. For example, the men commented that they enjoyed taking ethnic studies courses that were inclusive of diverse experiences and identities. Further, ethnic studies courses affirmed their cultural heritage, and it allowed them to deepen their understanding of other ethnic groups. When asked about their overall learning experience at MCC, participants conveyed that they enjoyed academic experiences that were relevant and where they were able to make connections with what they were learning to their real life experiences. Moreover, participants noted that collaborative learning practices promoted academic engagement thus increased their chances for achieving positive student outcomes.

**Deconstructing Stereotypes**

The fourth major finding relates to stereotyping which is referred to as, “I guess I am lazy.” For several participants in this study, racial factors stood out as particularly salient during their early schooling experiences. For example, several of the participants reported that being an African American male made them suspect in the eyes of some teachers. Although participants discussed negative racial experiences in college and their
effects, they did not routinely encounter stereotypical attitudes at MCC due in large part to the diversity at the college. The following section further discusses the effects of campus racial climate.

The African American males commented that they had been subjected to discrimination based on stereotypes that portrayed them as criminals, gang members, and athletes. The participants recounted stories of when negative stereotypes perpetuated lowered expectations from teachers. When asked to give examples of how negative stereotypes perpetuated lowered expectations from teachers, Fred offered the following reflection from his years in high school:

They all thought I was like a gang member . . . they really got to know me, and the whole high school got to know me, they really saw, he’s not even like that, he’s just an average person, which I am.

Evan recalled a similar situation in high school where he was falsely accused of being a gang member based on his appearance:

You all are gang bangers, you all gonna go to Juvenile Hall, and you are not gonna graduate. But yet you pull my record up on my school file, and you see my GPA is a 3.5 all through high school, so just because you have one riot at school, I’m labeled as a gang member. . . . I still walked and graduated on top of my class with a 3.67 GPA, and I made them [teachers] all feel bad, and I told them, “Now look at me. Remember I was considered a gang member to you all 2 years ago. Are you all surprised to see me here?”

Andrew recalled several incidents in high school where school personnel told him that he would not graduate:
People were actually telling me that I wasn’t going to graduate or make it to college. It kind of stuck to me, so it became something negative, but it was also my motivation. Which is probably why I’m here today. I didn’t do it necessarily because I wanted to, I just wanted to put it in their face, so I believe that’s why I came to college.

Some participants perceived that some teachers had lower expectations of their abilities and performance in the classroom because of negative stereotypes about African American males. Furthermore, it appeared that the negative stereotyping and tracking from early schooling experiences influenced the educational aspirations for the African American males in this study. For example, Fred recalled the following incident in high school:

I had this one teacher, she really didn’t like me. Like I sit in the front of class and I just like write my notes and everybody would be talking around me, and she would think it was me and move me to the back of the classroom. I would get mad and be like “why are you doing that? I’m not even the one talking. So that really set in my mind that this teacher doesn’t like me, and she is not really even helping me pass so why am I here in this class?

Kevin added that during his early schooling year’s teachers would call him lazy. When I probed deeper into the affects of the teacher’s comments and how they made him feel, Kevin stated with a somber expression, “I probably laughed it all out, but I probably cried inside.” He also stated that the negative stereotyping influenced his placement into programs that taught less demanding curriculum, which had a profound influence on his disposition toward learning and confidence in his ability to learn. Charles commented
that he felt invisible in the classroom. He described the following treatment from his instructors, “Some [instructors] would help you, some would not, some would just ignore you and just pass you over, don’t say nothing, just looking away, you know.” Andrew recalled feeling awkward in class because he feared that he was being judged on the basis of his race. He stated:

   It’s sometimes awkward, strange, and I say that because I want to be able to like chill in class and be comfortable learning. It’s kind of like I don’t want to step on his [student in class] bag or say, excuse me do you have a pencil or paper. It’s like everything is kind of awkward. So learning is sometimes kind of awkward.

Fred offered an explanation of how a class that focused on identity development for men of color inspired a sense of African American pride and social awareness. He stated, “The Black and Brown Male Initiative class was amazing because it showed me who I really am you know and why I am really here.” The class seemed to help facilitate a commitment to an African American heritage while also shaping his academic identity.

While most of the African American men in the study experienced negative associations based on negative stereotypes, it did not appear to influence their choice to go to college. Notwithstanding negative discriminatory experiences in high school, participants were highly motivated to pursue their academic and personal goals. Indeed, participants recognized an awareness of the low expectations and stereotypes associated with their racial and gendered group, but they did not let these messages affect their self-image or influence their behavior.
Diversity and Supportive Learning Environments

The fifth major finding relates to institutional factors, which are referred to as, “I feel normal because it is pretty diverse.” All of the participants commented that the diversity at the college, as well as the supportive environment, influenced their ability to achieve academic success. Further, the men indicated that the environment created by the representation of students from diverse backgrounds was not only positive, but helped them feel a sense of belonging. Participants seemed amazed to be in an environment where the campus community embraced diversity and tried to help students maximize their potential.

In contrast with how they described their experience in high school, most of the participants reported feeling welcomed when they arrived at MCC. Specifically, participants frequently commented on the diversity at the college, which made them feel a sense of belonging on campus. John noted the following about the diversity at MCC:

Being an African American male at Metropolitan Community College, I feel normal because it is pretty diverse. There’s more people of color, Hispanics, because in high school it is more like Caucasians and then it was Latinos and then Black people or African Americans. It is pretty diverse here and being in the program Umoja, I don’t feel like a minority.

Michael commented on the diversity and welcoming atmosphere at MCC. Specifically, he explained that the diversity at MCC was reassuring, and it changed his perspective on school environments as he was used to attending schools that were predominately White:

So, it was really assuring to come to this school because I got the welcome from the counselors and just seeing the diversity in students here it just felt welcoming
all together, so it changed my whole perspective of what school is, you know, what it’s like to be in school.

He elaborated:

It was a totally different experience from high school and that caught my eye in particular . . . the whole look of the campus and the people was really interesting because I saw every facet of, you know, ethnicity and basically every walk of life.

A number of students commented on the positive encounters with college faculty and staff, and considered the campus to be more accepting of different racial groups.

Matthew echoed this sentiment during the focus group interview:

Everybody’s just nice and welcoming, so I’m just glad, like I found a place where it’s just, you know, everybody’s not looking, it’s nothing, racism. It might be under the table, but nobody—you know what I mean? Nobody’s really out there like that.

Several participants reported feeling comfortable on the college campus, because they felt that they were not being judged based on their race or gender. Moreover, the campus diversity facilitated interracial interactions on campus, as Michael noted, “There’s us [African Americans], there’s Whites, there’s Asians, everybody’s here. So, it’s just like a big salad bowl.” He further explained how interracial interactions promoted a positive racial campus climate. “But since it is [racially] mixed, nobody is really like, oh, look at them or look at them. It’s just—you know what I mean? It is just everybody is together kind of.” Michael expressed how being at MCC he did not have to assimilate to the campus’s culture, but that the campus embraced his African American identity. Michael
stated, “It made me feel more comfortable because prior to that high school is predominantly White, so it kind of felt like I had to assimilate to their culture, too.”

Participants also described the campus as supportive and caring. Participants described caring relationships involving respectful dialogue and open exchange among students and validating agents on campus such as counselors, teachers, staff, and administrators. Participants’ perceptions of institutional commitment to the quality of life on campus were associated with perceptions of low racial tension and the environment of support for students. Matthew provided insight about his experience with the positive campus climate:

I just have a good feeling when I walk around. I mean I’m not scared of anything. I know that nothing is gonna happen. I’m safe, I’m with my friends, and I’m always meeting new people . . . I feel like socially it is just great. People are nice, it’s just an overall good thing. And then academically I think it is great because you guys are really teaching us and embedding in us that academics can come first.

Several participants commented that the environment created by the presence of different ethnic groups, as well as the support and encouragement received by faculty and staff, was not only positive but helped them feel safe as well. During the focus group, Fred noted the following, “Like I could be on this campus and be safe around everybody and not care.” Andrew added the following about the campus environment:

I think I would feel more comfortable, more confident that there’s like, not exactly like a support system because I might not know them, but I would be like well, this is where you belong because you know, we’re naturally here. We did what
we did in high school and now we’re here. We’re progressing and so it’s a good thing and it makes me more comfortable to just walk around campus.

He elaborated:

It’s been pretty good. I don’t have any issues with anybody, with like no fights, I’m like—I like it. I like it because even though I don’t, there isn’t a lot of Black males on campus, it’s still, it’s still able to function like I can still do things around here safely like. I enjoy myself here. I mean it’s good.

Participants frequently discussed the linkage between helpful and encouraging faculty and staff and a positive campus climate. Specifically, Matthew explained that, “They [faculty and staff] have been great. I haven’t met anybody that is really rude or disrespectful or anything.” The positive campus climate experienced by participants at MCC seemed to sustain their motivation and desire to succeed. Participants commented that the diversity on campus was reassuring, welcoming, and promoted a greater sense of belonging or fitting in on campus. Furthermore, participants noted that the diversity, as well as the supportive campus environment, inspired confidence in their ability to successfully navigate through college and succeed in their classes. Michael explained, “To navigate successfully through, but here just seeing so many different people it was kind of reassuring you know that I can fit in here, it was just what everybody else does.”

Matthew summed up his experience with the supportive environment at MCC:

At this school there is so much for everybody, everything you want to know, or like if you want to be a doctor, or you want to be a veterinarian, or you want to be anything you want, there’s different programs for this, so many programs and clubs and people who just want to help you with this stuff. It is almost
overwhelming. So when you come here and it is like, well, why are there so many
people trying to help you?

Several participants explained that the institution seemed to hold high academic
expectations of all students and provided a supportive environment to ensure students
received equitable opportunities to be successful. Kevin noted:

Just like the way they teach also you know, they take a little bit extra time, you
know with the students and what it would be like, professors that telling me to
come meet with them after class and they really, you know, it seems like here they
really care about, you know, the students passing, graduating.

Participants also commented on the benefits that diversity provides, as Matthew
explained of his experience with diversity and supportive environment at MCC:

I just think Metropolitan Community College as a school is so accepting just
racially or ethnically, but they’re just—because everyone is just so nice and so
accepting . . . but you could really walk up to anybody and you could just really
talk to them about something or ask them something, where is this at? Or how
can I get here? And they will be able to help you. And everybody is so accepting
here as a school, and when we are in this learning community it makes it 10 times
easier, you’re not as stressed about, there is nobody here to help me. Everybody is
so nice and willing to help you.

During focus group interviews, some participants reported some feelings of
isolation on campus, and fear of not succeeding in college as a result of the lack of
representation of other African American males. One participant’s comment is
representative of what a few participants expressed. Matthew observed:
And also it also like makes you kind of like, man, if none of us [African American males] are gonna make it here, how can I make it here? If you’re not playing sports or you’re not really smart, if you’re just average, how am I going to get there if I don’t do anything? It motivates me to want to do more and want to be like, well, I don’t play sports, but I’m socially active and I’m going to focus groups and see that.

The participants in the study yearned for more representation of African American males, and many of them chose to attend MCC because they were likely to encounter other African American males on campus, as Sal explained: “Yeah, I think it is little bit more diverse than like our neighborhood college, Hilltop. I was up there the other day to work in their computer lab and it is not like MCC . . . here there’s more brothers.” In sum, diverse and supportive learning environments emerged as important factors that promoted persistence and overall success for the African American men in this study.

**Summary of Findings**

The primary research question that guided this study was, “What are the experiences of African American men enrolled at an urban community college?” In this chapter, I presented the qualitative data of the social and academic experiences of 10 African American male students who attend an urban community college. The data were organized by themes according to reflections made by participants. The themes are: (a) barriers to academic achievement; (b) strategies to ensure success; (c) pedagogy of engagement; (d) deconstructing stereotypes; and (e) diversity and supportive learning environments. As reported throughout this chapter, the themes reflect student perceptions
of their own experiences and those of their African American male peers as community college students. Table 1 provides a description of the thematic categories and findings.

Table 1

**Thematic Categories and Findings**

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Barriers to Academic Achievement</td>
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<td>• Prior academic preparation</td>
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<td>• Financial hardship</td>
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<td>Strategies to Ensure Success</td>
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<td>Pedagogy of Engagement</td>
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<td>Deconstructing Stereotypes</td>
<td>• Negative stereotyping in primary and secondary education</td>
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<td>Diversity and Supportive Learning Environment</td>
<td>• Sense of belonging</td>
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<td>• Validating experiences</td>
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<td>• Abundance of support</td>
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The 10 participants identified three challenges they experienced that influenced their participant and attainment in postsecondary education. Precollege challenges were based on behavioral issues that often led to their placement in programs that lacked the academic rigor needed to prepare them for college level course work. It appears that the participation in special education programs and continuation schools have profound implications at the postsecondary level for participants in this study. Moreover, all of the participants reported financial hardships that prevented them from fully engaging in their academics. Participants explained how the lack of financial resources posed a challenge to support basic living, family, and school. For many of the participants, financial
hardships influenced their decision to work while attending school, which often impeded their progress in school.

The men commented on the support they received that increased their likelihood of academic success. The men discussed the array of programs offered at the institution, as well as their learning community involvement that facilitated their academic and social involvement. Furthermore, all of the men reported that they worked with a counselor who provided support, motivation, and words of encouragement that helped them succeed academically. In addition to program and counseling support, many participants explained how access to mentors emerged as a significant factor supporting academic achievement.

Participants reported having significant relationships with classroom faculty that promoted academic engagement. The participants also discussed effective pedagogical practices that promoted learning for the African American males in this study. However, the men recalled examples of negative stereotyping that led to unfair treatment and lowered expectations by teachers in middle and high school. Notwithstanding the negative experiences participants encountered in primary and secondary educational settings, the men shared positive experiences at MCC and noted that the campus was supportive, caring, and made them feel a sense of belonging. Participants noted that it is hard to identify just one institutional factor at MCC that has enabled them to succeed. However, the diversity of the college campus surfaced as a significant factor that influenced their motivation to succeed.

The findings signify that these African American males experience significant challenges in community college. However, the necessary support has enabled them to
become academically and socially integrated into the college community, thus facilitating learning and persistence for the African American males in this study. In Chapter 5, I further elaborate on the connections between the findings and literature. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research also are discussed.
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More insight is needed about the factors that promote academic success of African American males who attend community college. While there has been extensive research on the academic achievement of African American males in postsecondary education, the research literature has focused primarily on the experiences of African American men who attend 4-year institutions (F. Harris & Harper, 2008). Yet, community colleges are generally the first point of entry to higher education for most students, especially African American men, because of low tuition and open admission requirements (Dowd, 2007; Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010; Piland & Wolf, 2003). The present study grew out of this context.

This study provided an overview of published literature and research that have explored the academic achievement of African American male students. Drawing on research that examined the K-12 experience of African American males, the study began with an analysis of the barriers that influenced the academic outcomes of African American males. This was followed by a review of literature that highlighted trends in enrollment, academic performance, and degree attainment among African American males in postsecondary education. Finally, literature that explored institutional climate and classroom practices that promote success among this student group was presented.

This study explored the social and academic experiences of African American male students in an urban community college to gain insights into the activities that promote success among this student group. The primary research question that guided
this study was: “What are the experiences of African American men enrolled at an urban community college?” Additionally, the following related subquestions were explored:

1. How does academic involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
2. How does social involvement help student learning and persistence for African American male students at an urban community college?
3. What learning activities are most meaningful in college experiences of African American male students at an urban community college?
4. How do African American men perceive their in-class and out-of class experiences at an urban community college?
5. What institutional factors facilitate and serve as barriers to academic success for African American men?

The theories that were used to guide this study were Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation and Steele and Aronson’s (1995) theory of stereotype threat.

Qualitative research methods were used to explore the social and academic experiences of African American male students in an urban community college. This qualitative study utilized the phenomenology tradition as a model to provide insight into the academic and social practices that promote participation and success among African American male students in an urban community college. This research design sought meaning and descriptions of experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and involved exploring a small number of study participants through extensive and prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The data were triangulated through multiple methods, including a minimum of one recorded interview with each participant and two
focus group interviews. Ten African American males who attend an urban community college were selected purposefully to ensure a participant pool comprised of individuals who would potentially have the most insight into the research questions and examined phenomena. Data were collected until data saturation was achieved. Saturation occurred when no new or relevant information emerged from the data (Creswell, 2009).

The sample was comprised of 10 African American males varying in age, marital status, and experience. The participants ranged from 18 to 27 years of age. All of the participants were first generation college students and received financial aid. African American male participants were identified and recruited based on their involvement in the Umoja and/or the Black and Brown Male Initiative learning communities at the community college in this study. Counselors nominated African American men who met the following criteria: (a) have self-identified as an African American male; (b) is a current student at the college in this study; (c) has participated in the Black and Brown Male Summit or Umoja Program. Each participant was invited to participate in a 90-minute to 2-hour individual face-to-face interview and one focus group interview. The individual and focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Coding was used during the analytical process. Coding involved grouping textual data into categories or themes that are labeled based on language used by participants (Creswell, 2009). The individual and focus group interview transcripts were analyzed using three strategies proposed by Charmaz (2006) including initial, focused, and axial coding. The planned analysis for this study also included the use of epoche and bracketing practices. I bracketed out any presuppositions, opinions, and ideas I have
about the study (Moustakas, 1994). As I read each line of the transcription data from interviews and focus groups, I bracketed out my thoughts and assumptions into the margins of the transcripts. Last, I used the research software, HyperREASEARCH to assist with synthesizing larger segments of the data and linking thematic categories with subcategories to make better sense of the data. The analysis process resulted in the identification of five thematic categories and eight subthemes that captured the essence of the participants’ shared experiences. The categories are: (a) barriers to academic achievement; (b) strategies to ensure success; (c) pedagogy of engagement; (d) deconstructing stereotypes; and (e) diversity and supportive learning environments.

The participants identified several challenges that impeded their participation and degree attainment in postsecondary education. However, support offered by programs, counselors, and mentoring in college played a crucial role in reversing the negative effect caused by the challenges they experienced. Moreover, positive interactions with faculty members helped participants build confidence in their academic ability, thus participants began to see themselves as capable learners. Furthermore, pedagogical practices that engaged the men as active participants in the learning process, and allowed them to make connections to their life experiences, inspired deeper learning among participants. Clear directions and constant feedback also emerged as practices that enabled participants to achieve success in their classes. Although participants reported positive social and academic experiences in postsecondary education, negative stereotyping experienced in primary and secondary education influenced their disposition toward learning, confidence in their ability to learn, and educational aspirations. Through the research, negative stereotyping during their early schooling years appeared to have a precipitous affect on
their participation and attainment at the postsecondary level. However, diversity and a supportive learning environment on the college campus emerged as significant factors that promoted academic and social involvement for the African American men in this study.

**Discussion**

Davis (2003), Noguera (2003), Strayhorn (2008b), Swanson and colleagues (2003), and Thomas and Stevenson (2009) all recognized problems that exist along the educational pipeline that contribute to outcome disparities between African American males and their peers. The findings from this study are consistent with the existing body of literature. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, most of the past literature regarding the experiences of African American men in higher education focused primarily on the 4-year institution, while documenting little to no information on African American men who attend community college. Yet, community colleges serve 46% of all African-American students in higher education (Freeman & Huggans, 2009). Therefore, qualitative findings from this study contribute to broadening the discourse and informing the field of education of the perspectives and challenges facing African American men who attend community college.

Davis (2003), Noguera (2003), Strayhorn (2008b), and Swanson and colleagues (2003) suggest that early educational experiences of African American males have a profound influence on postsecondary enrollment. The participants in the present study faced specific challenges related to their precollege experiences including behavioral and classroom adjustment issues that led to their placement in special education programs and/or continuation high schools and academic disengagement. Studies by Davis (2003),
Thomas and Stevenson (2009), and Thomas et al. (2009) noted a relationship between lowered teachers’ perceptions and expectations of African American males’ abilities and classroom behavior and their overrepresentation in special education programs. Three participants in the present study attributed their academic challenges in college to their participation in special education programs and continuation schools that lacked the academic rigor needed to prepare students for college level coursework. However, most participants reported that they entered college lacking the skills needed to successfully complete college level coursework. Farkas (2003) found that African American males experience lower cognitive gains in primary and secondary education due to their placement in special education programs, lower ability groups, and lower track course that teach less demanding curriculum. Participants also cited financial hardships as a challenge that prevented them from fully committing to their academics. Six out of 10 participants worked full- or part-time jobs to cover the cost of living and attending school. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006), F. Harris and Harper (2008), and Gardenhire-Crooks and colleagues (2010) suggested that working full-time and attending college are factors that can prevent students from persisting in school.

Gardenhire-Crooks and colleagues (2010) found that bringing counseling services directly to students helped improve community college success for the men of color in their study. Similarly, support offered by counselors played a crucial role in reversing the negative affect caused by the challenges participants experienced in their early schooling experiences. Participants commented on the intrusive counseling approach that emphasized relationship, holistic support, and a counseling model that strived to support the whole student, with attention to life situations outside the classroom. Similar to
research by Rendón (2002), the participants in this study achieved higher levels of success because of the academic and interpersonal validation received from counselors. Many participants explained how, in addition to program and counseling support, access to mentors emerged as a significant factor that supported academic success. This finding is consistent with Palmer and Gasman’s (2008) findings. Additionally, participants’ discussion about how involvement in programs that provided prescriptive steps to enroll in college facilitated their successful adjustment to college is consistent with other research findings (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010). Moreover, given the academic challenges experienced by participants, involvement in learning community programs provided students with the additional support needed to succeed academically. This finding is consistent with Tinto (2008) who noted learning communities as an effective practice that can improve the success rate of students who lack the basic skills needed to complete college level courses.

Dancy and Brown (2008), and Flowers (2003) found that positive faculty interactions are linked to academic achievement and success for African American males. Likewise, participants in this study credited their professors for encouraging them to believe in themselves and work toward their full potential. The high expectations set by professors inspired confidence in participants’ academic ability. Moreover, participants began to see themselves as capable learners. This finding supports Flowers (2003) who argued that student-faculty interactions enhanced African American students’ academic development and aspirations. Participants commented on the amount of academic support they received from their professors. Rendón (2002) argued that validating actions
such as professors reaching out to students to offer academic assistance is critical to the success of nontraditional students.

In addition to the abundance of support received from professors, the role that involvement in learning communities played in impacting participants’ academic and social integration into the campus was discussed and supported by Tinto (1997, 2008). As discussed by the participants in this study, learning community professors took a more active interest in their academic success than professors who were not involved in learning communities. Furthermore, participants’ interactions with learning community professors were frequent and more meaningful. They also explained that they were more motivated to learn in learning community classes and noted that the collaborative pedagogy employed in these classrooms enabled them to develop a supportive community of classroom-based peers. These relationships extended beyond the classroom and consequently facilitated participants’ integration into the broader social communities of the college. Similar to this study, Laird and colleagues (2008), and Kuh, Nelson Laird, and Umbach (2004) found a link between collaborative learning practices and student outcomes including persistence and graduation. The use of collaborative pedagogy engaged both the professors and participants, which added richness to their overall learning experience. Specifically, participants’ described course activities that allowed them to connect their personal experiences to course content. Although participants reported examples of nonlearning community professors who also incorporated collaborative pedagogy in their classroom, these practices were less likely used in nonlearning community courses.
Swanson et al. (2003) contended that African American males are the most stigmatized and stereotyped group in America. Furthermore, Swanson et al. suggested that negative stereotyping experienced in primary and secondary education influence African American male achievement. Similarly, participants in the present study reported negative encounters with stereotyping by teachers during their early schooling experiences that influenced their academic aspirations. Several participants commented that teachers had lowered expectations of their academic abilities based on negative stereotypes that describe African American men as lazy and uneducable. Furthermore, participants recounted experiences of negative expectations and judgments by school personnel that were associated with social stereotypes that portray African American men as gang members and criminals. These encounters with negative stereotyping interfered with their adjustment to school and eventually led to academic disengagement for the African American men in this study. This finding is consistent with previous research regarding the psychosocial challenges that have an effect on African American male participation and attainment (Cuyjet, 1997; Davis, 2003; Foley, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2006b; Noguera, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 2000).

Another theme that emerged from this investigation was the impact that diversity and a supportive learning environment had on helping to enhance success for these participants. Participants in this study found the diversity and supportive learning environment of the campus to be encouraging, motivational, and an important factor in prompting their success. While this study confirms previous research about the influence of campus climate on student outcomes (e.g., Fleming, 2001; Flowers, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000), it also provides insight into how campus diversity
fostered a supportive campus climate for academically underprepared African American males in a community college. Metropolitan Community College is not a homogeneous campus, which helped create a campus atmosphere that was accepting, and where participants felt like they “fit in.” Additionally, interactions with like-type peers and faculty members engendered academic success for African American men in this study. Although African Americans made up 7% of MCC’s student population, the diversity that was reflected in the general student population seemed to compensate for the low rates/absence of like-type peers that attended MCC. Furthermore, participants frequently acknowledged the abundance of support they received from various agents of the campus community. Participants indicated that all segments of the institution worked collaboratively to support and encourage their success. Specifically, they noted that everyone on the campus (e.g., faculty, administrators, staff, and peers) went beyond their prescribed roles to provide support and promote academic achievement. Similar to conclusions by Rendón (1994, 2002), participants emphasized the role that active intervention and support received from validating agents on campus had on facilitating their persistence and overall success at the college.

Steele and Aronson (1995) contended that the threat of conforming or being judged by a negative stereotype impairs the intellectual performance of African American students. The experiences of the 10 African American men in this study did not support that claim. Instead, negative teacher perceptions and expectations that led to their participation in special education programs and other programs that taught less challenging curriculum impeded the academic performance of the African American men in this study. Additionally, the findings from this study suggest a shift from previous
research by Astin (1987), Tinto (1993), and others that argued the importance of involvement in campus activities in promoting academic achievement. By contrast, the majority of the participants in this study worked while attending school, which made it difficult for them to participate in activities on campus. It appeared that learning community involvement was the significant factor that helped integrate the men into the academic and social communities of the college and facilitated their academic success.

**Conclusion**

The central research questions that guided this study, and a summary of the emergent themes that addressed each question, are included in the next section. Theoretical considerations are also provided.

**What Are the Experiences of African American Men Enrolled at an Urban Community College?**

Participants’ precollege educational experiences had a profound influence on the college experiences of the African American men in this study. Negative stereotyping and tracking in their early schooling experiences led to their participation in special education programs and continuation schools that taught less rigorous curriculum. Thus, participants entered college underprepared for college level work and needed additional support (e.g., counselors, tutoring, supplemental instruction) to succeed in their courses. While the threat of being stereotyped has been found to affect the intellectual performance of African American students (Steele & Aronson, 1995), it did not emerge as a significant factor that interfered with the academic performance of the African American men in this study. Instead, discriminatory classroom practices that resulted from negative teacher perceptions and expectations were the salient factors that affected
the academic performance of African American men in this study. Interestingly, the
diverse and supportive learning environment of the college campus helped to reverse the
negative effects of the stereotyping experienced during their early schooling years.
Therefore, diversity and supportive learning environment are crucial factors that
influenced the overall college experiences of African American men in an urban
community college.

How Does Social Involvement Help Student Learning and Persistence for
African American Male Students at an Urban Community College?

As mentioned in Chapter 4, social involvement was not a significant factor that
promoted persistence for African American males in this study. Most of the participants
worked to support themselves and family, which impeded their ability to be involved
socially on campus. However, involvement in a first-year learning community program
emerged as a significant factor that helped integrate participants into the social
communities of the campus. Specifically, involvement in learning communities that
linked academic courses with a personal growth course enabled participants to develop a
network of supportive classroom-based peers. Groups that formed in the classroom often
extended beyond the classroom in informal meetings and study groups. Moreover,
participants in a first-year learning community were required to participate in a campus
club and attend co-curricular activities such as conferences, university field trips, and
community activities. Therefore, involvement in first-year learning communities
promoted learning and persistence for the majority of the participants in this study.
How Does Academic Involvement Help Student Learning and Persistence for African American Male Students at an Urban Community College?

The qualitative analysis yielded evidence of the impact of academic involvement on African American male learning and persistence. Specifically, positive interactions with faculty members in the classroom created a learning environment that supported learning for the African American men in this study. Participants noted the additional classroom support received from faculty members (e.g., office hours, tutoring, and supplemental instruction) that aided in their academic success. Furthermore, faculty members inspired learning and persistence through academic validation in the classroom. Participants credited faculty members for encouraging them to believe in themselves and work toward their full potential. Moreover, high expectations set by faculty members promoted academic achievement, inspired confidence in participants’ academic ability, and encouraged academic behavior conducive to academic success. These results provide insights into the important role that validating classroom experiences, and positive interactions with faculty members, play in prompting learning and persistence for African American men in community college.

What Learning Activities Are Most Meaningful in College Experiences of African American Male Students at an Urban Community College?

It was apparent through the research that participants were influenced by the use of collaborative pedagogy that actively engaged both the student and faculty member in the learning process. Participants described classroom activities where active participation was encouraged through group projects, role-playing, and open discussions. Participants discussed course activities that allowed them to connect their personal
experiences to the course content. Specifically, they commented on class discussions that affirmed the value of their personal voice by allowing them to bring their knowledge and experience into the classroom. Furthermore, learning information that was relevant to their professional and personal goals seemed to inspire learning among African American males in this study.

**How Do African American Men Perceive Their In-Class and Out-of-Class Experiences at an Urban Community College?**

Participants in this study found their in-class and out-of-class experiences at MCC to be validating, which enabled participants to achieve success. In-class academic validation allowed students to experience themselves as capable learners. Participants described specific out-of-class validating experiences where instructional faculty, counselors, administrators, and staff took an active role in promoting their academic and personal development. Participants commented that both in-class and out-of-class validating experiences helped them acquire the confidence they needed to become a successful college student. Furthermore, participants credited their counselor with playing a role in their enrollment, retention, and overall success in college. Many participants described their counselors as being supportive and encouraged their potential and intellectual capability. Additionally, access to mentors helped drive success among the African American men in this study. Moreover, access to mentors helped participants build important networks and relationships that functioned as a conduit for transmission of information about jobs and other opportunities.
What Institutional Factors Facilitate and Serve as Barriers to Academic Success for African American Men?

A positive racial collegiate climate helped facilitate success for African American men in the present study. The diversity of the college campus helped participants feel a sense of belonging on campus. Further, the diverse environment facilitated their willingness to excel academically. Additionally, the men in this study found the supportive learning environment to be an important factor in promoting their success. The men credited various validating agents (faculty, administrators, staff, and peers) on campus for providing a source of support, motivation, and words of encouragement. Participants also commented on their involvement in programs that provided prescriptive steps to help them successfully adjust to college. Specifically, participants noted that program involvement provided a streamlined process that facilitated orientation, assessment, enrollment, and class selection. However, financial challenges made it difficult for the participants in this study to fully commit to academics. Many participants struggled to balance the demands of school with work. Although 9 out of the 10 participants received financial aid, it was not enough to cover the total cost of living and attending school. Therefore, 6 out of 10 participants worked full- or part-time jobs to support themselves and their family, which impeded their academic engagement in college.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study bring attention to the ways in which community colleges can promote persistence and academic success for African American males. Several practical implications for practice are derived from this study. Recommendations
for postsecondary administrators and faculty are provided in the next section. Successful strategies to support African American men in community college are also discussed.

**Transitional Programs**

As the numbers of students who are underrepresented and underprepared for college continue to grow, institutions will have to implement innovative strategies and practices to retain this student population. Prefreshman summer bridge programs have been noted for being an effective practice that improves educational outcomes of Black males in higher education (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010; Harper, 2006c). Summer bridge programs can assist African American males in their transition from high school to college. The men in this study commented on the positive impact that participation in a learning community had on their transition from high school to college. For example, participants who were in a learning community attended a summer orientation and worked with a counselor to select their courses before the start of the fall semester. Summer bridge programs can help African American men prepare for college by providing information regarding student services, academic departments, degree requirements, transfer information, and college success skills. Furthermore, they can help introduce students to college life before the start of the fall semester. Additionally, summer bridge programs can facilitate students’ integration into the college campus through participation in functions such as campus tour, freshman orientation, and other student activities.

**Reconstruction of Developmental Education**

According to Tinto (1998), 4 out of 10 students enter college needing some form of remediation, and in some cases remedial students make up the majority entering study
Because of the growing number of students who begin college with limited academic skills, most colleges and universities will have to offer some form of developmental education. Tinto (1998) argued that colleges have to undergo a reconstruction of remedial education in higher education in order to meet the needs of students who are entering college with developmental education needs. Similarly, the African American men in this study commented that they entered college underprepared for college level work. The findings in this study yielded evidence that supports the need for creating developmental education curriculum that considers ways to engage students with skill gaps and academic needs. In 2009, the Faculty Inquiry Network, a team of California faculty members who investigate complex problems in basic skills education, noted accelerated curriculum and contextualized education as innovative approaches to improve student learning outcomes. The accelerated model addresses the high rate of attrition among basic skills students by cutting out levels in the basic skills sequence so that students move into college English and Math in one semester. The contextualized education model can be used to teach basic skills courses within a context that is relevant to students’ lives. For example, institutions can offer developmental English/reading with career exploration as the context for building content into the curriculum. Aligning curriculum with students’ career interest teaches students how to apply their skills and knowledge in the real world. By connecting the learning with students’ professional interest, and providing real world context for the application of these skills, the contextualized learning model is expected to help promote positive outcomes for academically underprepared students (Zachry & Schneider, 2010). This claim is consistent with the findings from the present study. Additionally, Tinto (1998)
argued that the answer to addressing the remediation needs of students is through the adaption of alternative approaches to developmental education, such as the learning community model. There is growing recognition of the potential of the learning community model to improve educational outcomes of underrepresented and underprepared students (Engstrom, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; B. L. Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Tinto, 2008).

**Curricular Learning Communities**

This study makes clear the important role that programs play in improving educational outcomes of African American men, specifically, programs that assist students in their transition into college and provide them with the academic and social support needed to succeed in college. Therefore, academic programs like curricular learning communities are an effective strategy that can facilitate academic achievement for African American men in community college. Curricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build learning communities and are intended to restructure the students’ time, credit, and learning experiences (Engstrom, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 1997, 2008). Furthermore, students are able to build community among students and between students and their teachers. In many learning community models, a counselor is assigned to provide personal, career, and academic support. Learning community models that structure co-curricular activities (student clubs, university field trips, and conferences) can facilitate social involvement on campus. The men in this study reflected on the amount of support they received from learning community programs that influenced their
decision to enroll, persist, and achieve academic success in college. Other research (Engstrom, 2008; Tinto, 1997, 2008), similar to this study, reported that students in learning communities experienced meaningful and deep learning through collaborative pedagogical practices that are incorporated into this model. Deep learning ensures students understand key concepts and ideas, and promotes long-term retention of information learned.

**Learning-Centered Classroom**

Barr and Tagg (1995) noted, in the past, a college was an institution that existed to provide instruction. However today, a college is an institution that exists to produce learning. During an era of accountability, there is increasing pressure for institutions to improve the quality of learning for all students. As African American men continue to lag behind all other student groups in retention and graduation rates (Hagedorn et al., 2001), implementing promising instructional practices will help institutions improve the educational outcomes of this student population. For example, learning environments that promoted validating, affirming interactions between instructional faculty members and students helped the men in this study maximize their potential and achieve academically. Furthermore, collaborative learning strategies that actively engage students in the learning process emerged as an effective practice that promoted learning for African American men. Additionally, incorporating a wide range of learning modalities helped address the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Providing systematic feedback was also cited among participants as a classroom practice that promoted academic success. Last, faculty members should be encouraged, and provided incentives, to attend professional development activities to learn effective classroom practices that
promote deep learning. Institutions can invite experts from the field to facilitate training sessions regarding pedagogical practices that engage African American males.

Additionally, faculty members can work collaboratively on campus in Faculty Inquiry Groups (FIGs) to explore and share best practices, syllabi, and classroom activities to improve the quality of learning for students.

**Counseling and Mentor Support**

As noted in Chapter 4, the participants in the study credited counselors for encouraging them to believe in themselves and strive for academic excellence. Harper (2004) suggested that counseling services could help promote healthy psychosocial development among African American male students in college. Furthermore, counselors can provide personal, academic, and career counseling to ensure timely completion of transfer and/or degree requirements. Lack of an educational goal and plan are key factors in student attrition (Tinto, 1993, 1996). One strategy that is growing in popularity among student success initiatives is the early alert intervention, which helps counselors identify students who are at risk of failing courses. This proactive approach to counseling monitors student attendance and progress through progress reports that are sent to instructors. Finally, some colleges offer personal growth courses, typically taught by counselors, that teach student success skills. Personal Growth courses can teach students the tools and skills needed to address nonacademic factors that have a negative impact on academic success. Furthermore, the class format of personal growth course lends itself to relationship building among peers and personal growth instructors.

Mentoring relationships are another important factor that promoted success for the African American men in this study. The participants noted the importance of having
access to mentors who have achieved success because of obtaining a college degree. They also explained that having mentors with similar backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) could play a significant role in inspiring African American men to achieve success in college. Colleges should consider faculty-mentoring programs to help support African American male success. Faculty mentoring programs provide opportunities for students to establish meaningful relationships with faculty members. Furthermore, faculty mentors can support, encourage, and serve as role models to students. Additionally, they can provide men with advice and guidance concerning career options, resources, and other information that can assist students in their professional pursuits. Moreover, positive student-faculty interactions are linked to academic success for African American students (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Flowers, 2003). Therefore, faculty-mentoring programs can aid in promoting academic success, thus helping to improve the educational outcomes of African American men.

**Institutional Transformation**

The demographics of students pursuing higher education today have changed significantly over the years. The student population is more diverse, and many of them are entering underprepared for college. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges colleges face today is improving the institutions’ capacity to meet the needs of a changing student population. Key to improving institutional effectiveness is the use of student data as a means to drive institutional change. Therefore, colleges and districts need to make student outcome data easily assessable to faculty and administrators, specifically disaggregated data by race and gender. Accordingly, institutions must evaluate how certain structures and systems serve as barriers for African American males and other
students from underrepresented backgrounds. Community colleges are realizing that the traditional structures, and systems that were established when colleges first opened, today limit their capacity to survive in today’s changing environment (Flannigan, Greene, & Jones, 2005). For example, this study revealed that African American men found it challenging to navigate within the college system. Rendón’s (1994) validation theory supports this assertion. Community college leaders are challenged with developing structures and systems that help students from diverse backgrounds successfully adjust to college, and ensure equitable opportunities to succeed. Therefore, structures that provide prescriptive steps for college application, assessment, orientation, and access to resources will promote retention and overall success of African American male students. Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that institutions should aim to create a campus environment that is diverse, validating, supportive and affirming of a student’s experience. This will ultimately assist in the academic achievement of African American men and other students from underrepresented backgrounds.

**Entrepreneurial College**

In light of the findings that emerged from this study, responding to the unique needs of African American men will require colleges to look at new and creative ways of securing resources to fund programs and services for students. During a time when public resources are at historic low levels, institutions struggle to find ways of maintaining services to support community college students, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The students pursuing higher education today are more diverse and have diverse educational needs. According to Flannigan et al. (2005), community colleges must become entrepreneurial organizations that are adaptive,
responsive, and financially secure. Flannigan et al. further noted that community college entrepreneurship represents creative ways of securing resources and generating revenue such as strategic partnerships, fundraising, grants, and college foundations. Roueche and Jones (2005) suggest community colleges explore partnership as a way to enhance and expand college resources to support effective practices that ensure the success of diverse students. Furthermore, colleges should also consider resources (partnerships, grants, college foundations) that can provide funding directly to students. One possible strategy is to offer grants and performance based scholarships as a supplement to existing financial aid. This practice is currently being evaluated in several states and is already showing positive effects on student outcomes for low-income students (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2010). In short, community colleges can no longer depend on state resources as the only means for supporting programs and services for students. Therefore, community college entrepreneurship is vital to implementing and maintaining services to students during a time of limited funding.

Implications for Future Research

This study is one of few to explore the experiences of African American males who attend community college. While this study begins to address the factors that facilitate and serve as barriers to success for African American men in community college, more research is needed to identify effective strategies to improve educational outcomes such as graduation and transfer rates. According to the findings, learning communities emerged as a significant factor that helped integrate the men into the academic and social communities of the campus. However, more information is needed to assess the effectiveness of learning communities in facilitating academic success that
leads to successful degree and transfer completion rates of African American men in community college. Furthermore, the men in this study ascribed to traditional notions of masculinity including breadwinning, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. Although gender role socialization and its affect on African American male behavior and attitudes on campus have been documented in the literature (F. Harris, 2010; F. Harris & Harper, 2008; F. Harris et al., 2011; L. Harris, 2009), additional effort should be devoted to exploring ways in which men can bridge the divide between meeting gendered expectations and academic engagement in community college. For example, Harper (2004) found that alternative conceptualizations of masculinity, active campus involvement, and leadership in organizations aided in the academic engagement of high-achieving African American male students who attended 4-year institutions. However, a similar study should be conducted for African American men who attend community college. Finally, participants in this study credited counselors and mentors for encouraging them to believe in themselves and to strive to meet their full potential. However, more research is needed on the role that counselors and mentors have on facilitating African American males’ persistence to graduation and transfer.

**Closing**

The reflections offered by the 10 African American men in this study mark one step toward understanding and addressing the challenges that African American men face in community college. Over the course of completing this study, it became apparent that the voice of African American males is the missing link to improving the educational outcomes of this student group. While interest on improving the success rate of African American males appears to be high, a number of participants noted that they are still
lacking the support they need to be successful in college. As noted earlier in the chapter, I currently coordinate a program that is designed to promote academic success for men of color in community college. Therefore, identifying strategies that ensure equitable opportunities to succeed is central to my work as a student services employee. Specifically, this study provided me with an opportunity to hear from African American males the barriers that make it difficult for them to achieve success. Additionally, the men provided useful insights into the kinds of practices and services that facilitated their success. The findings presented herein confirm the need to generate resources such as grants, foundations, and fundraising to help improve community colleges’ fiscal capacity to support the success of African American men and other diverse students. I hope that the findings from this study will assist educational institutions in improving college participation and attainment among African American men and other underrepresented student groups.

President Barack Obama noted community colleges as a vital factor in providing Americans with the training and skills needed to compete for the jobs of the future. Improving the academic success of African American men in community college will ensure social mobility, economic equality that is critical not only to their future, but also the future of the nation’s economy. Providing equitable opportunities to succeed, and the support to ensure success, will help promote a college going attitude among African American men that can be passed down over generations. As President Barack Obama said during the NAACP forum in 2007, “We have more work to do when more young black men languish in prison than attend colleges and universities across America.”
REFERENCES


Obama, B. (2007, July 12). Speech given at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) forum. Detroit, MI.


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

General Introduction:

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study. The interview should take approximately 90 minutes. There are several questions that have been prepared for this study. I may ask additional questions for clarification such as, “Can you elaborate on that issue?” or “Can you provide examples of when you had that experience?” If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions asked, please let me know and I will move to the next question. Your response will help provide insights into the experiences of African American males social and academic experiences of African American male students at Metropolitan Community College, specifically your involvement in Black and Brown Male Initiative sponsored activities such as the Black and Brown Male Initiative Conference, Black and Brown Male Initiative mentoring, learning community, Black and Brown Male Initiative student organization. Please understand that your responses to any of the questions will in no way negatively impact your standing with the college or with the Black and Brown Male Initiative Program. Do you have questions before we begin?

I would like to begin with a few Personal questions about you:

1. How old are you? __________ Years
2. How do you describe your ethnic /racial identity? _______________
3. Did you graduate from high school? ________________ Or, achieve your G.E.D.?
4. Are you the first in your family to attend college?
5. Do you receive financial aid? If not, how to you pay for college?

6. Are you married?

7. Do you have children? ________ If yes, how many? ________

8. Are you the primary provider for your household?

9. How far do you live from the campus?

10. What method of transportation do you use to travel to and from school?

11. Whom do you reside with?

12. Do you work while attending school? If so, how many hours do you work a week?

13. How many semesters have you completed at MCC?

Now I would like to ask you a few background questions about how you arrived at MCC?

1. Please tell me about yourself and how you arrived at where you are today.

2. What was high school like for you in terms of your academic experiences? How did your teachers treat you?

3. How does your family feel about you pursuing a college education? How much support do you receive from them?

4. What do your peers from high school or your neighborhood react when they first heard that you were going to college?

5. What factors make it difficult for you to pursue a college education? How are you able to overcome these barriers?

6. Who is your most important role model? What have you learned from this individual? FOLLOW UP WITH: “male role model”
7. How do you define success (academic and in general)? How has the way you define success changed over time?

8. Where do you hope to be in terms of your life and career 5 years from now? 10 years from now?

Now I would like to ask you questions about your college experiences as an African American male student at Metropolitan Community College:

1. What reasons motivated you to enroll in college? What are your academic goals?

2. What has it been like for you as an African American/Latino male at this institution?

3. What social and/or academic activities have you found culturally affirming and have helped you feel a sense of belonging on campus?

4. What out-of-class activities have you been involved in at this institution? How have these activities contributed to your success?

5. Describe your interactions with your professors at this institution? FOLLOW UP: How often do you visit your professors during office hours or go to them for help or clarification on an assignment?

6. Can you talk about your interactions with your instructor, counselor, and mentors? What (if any) type of support have you received from them? How important has their support been in helping you achieve your goals at this institution?

7. Are there any other important insights you would like to share about your experiences at this institution?

8. What (if any) support and encouragement have you received on the campus? How important has this support been in helping you persist at this institution?
9. What has played a significant role in your ability to become academically successful?

10. When African American/Latino men do not achieve academic success, what are the primary factors you think make it difficult to achieve success?

11. Describe your own experiences (social and academic) as an African American/Latino male at this college?

12. What are the primary institutional factors you think make it difficult/easy to achieve success?

Now I would like to ask you questions about your college experiences as a participant in the Black and Brown Male Initiative Conference, Black and Brown Male Initiative student organization, learning community:

1. Why did you decide to join Black and Brown Male Initiative or attend Black and Brown Male Initiative sponsored activities (Will provide clarification if needed.)?

2. In what (if any) ways does the Black and Brown Male Initiative program and/or other programs help enhance your experiences at this institution?

3. Describe the activities that you have enjoyed most in the Black and Brown Male Initiative program and/or other programs? Enjoyed least?

4. How often do you interact with faculty in the Black and Brown Male Initiative program and/or other programs? Can you give some examples of what those interactions look like?

5. Please describe your interactions with peers in this program.

6. Please describe your relationships with mentors in this program. How important have mentors motivate and inspire you to succeed academically and personally?
7. In what (if any) ways has this program provided a learning experience that is culturally affirming, supportive, and encouraging?

8. One important goal in this program is to help students develop as individuals and discover their own “voice”? How (if at all) has the program done this for you?

9. Another important goal in this program is to help students develop self-awareness. How (if at all) has the program done this for you? What have you learned about yourself as a person through your involvement in this program? About yourself as an African American/Latino man?

10. What are some ways the program can be improved?

11. Are there any other important insights you would like to share about your experiences in this program or at this institution?
Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. What positive and negative experiences in high school have influenced your decision to attend college?

2. I’ve examples of when racial stereotyping in educational settings has influenced your ability to fully engage in academic activities.

3. Give examples of experiences that make you feel like you don’t belong here at MCC.

4. How has the support you receive from counselors helped or hindered you from achieving your goals at this institution?

5. Give examples of how the lack of services has made a negative impact on your ability to achieve academically.

6. In what (if any) ways do the student support programs you are involved in help enhance your academic experiences at this institution? Please give examples.

7. Describe the classroom activities that have helped increase your desire to learn? What were the least effective activities?

8. Please explain how faculty expectations of your performance in their classes influence your ability to learn in the classroom. Give examples.

9. Please explain how faculty perceptions of you as a black male influence your ability to learn in the classroom. Give examples.

10. Give examples of how mentors should motive and inspire African American men to succeed academically and personally?
11. How important are your interactions with peers at MCC in influencing your
decision to continue your studies at MCC? Please explain.