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## Black Males In Programs For High Achievers At A Community College: Exploring The Qualitative Nature Of Academic Success

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*University of Central Florida*

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BLACK MALES IN PROGRAMS FOR HIGH ACHIEVERS  
AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE:  
EXPLORING THE QUALITATIVE NATURE OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences  
in the College of Education and Human Performance  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2018

Major Professor: Rosa Cintrón

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## ABSTRACT

Most of the literature concentrating on Black males, focuses on retention problems that have gone unresolved. The purpose of this study was to explore qualitatively the nature of the academic success of Black males in programs for high achievers at a community college. A detailed literature review was completed, focusing on educational themes such as motivation, high achievers, persistence, and honors programs. The theoretical framework used was GRIT developed by Duckworth (2007). The researcher used a six-step process as suggested by Moustakas (1994) to determine results. In addition, interviews were conducted with seven Black males who were defined as high achievers. The following six themes were identified from this phenomenology approach: supporting family, starting early, guilt, involvement, no failure, and academic success.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents,  
Abe & Beulah Jones,  
who laid the foundation for me to reach my highest potential.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my one and only child,  
Sydney Moriah Jones,  
whose journey towards academic success should be much smoother.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank Dr. Tom Owens for leading the way in providing me access to pursue my Doctor of Education degree. To my chair, Dr. Rosa Cintrón, thank you for pushing me beyond my reach to think higher, write wiser, and work harder. Dr. C., you are the epitome of excellence in teaching. Thank you also to my dissertation committee, Dr. Tom Owens, Dr. Malcolm Butler, and Dr. Michael Bosley. Your feedback and support was well received.

I also, want to thank the unspoken voices, the participants. I enjoyed hearing your stories. Without your commitment to this study, it would be incomplete. Again, thank you. To all those educational doctors who were my supervisors, colleagues, friends, associates, thank you for paving the way. I am humbled to be a part of such great company of leaders in the field.

To my inner circle of family and close friends, thank you for cheering me on these past four years. To my colleagues in the program (Whitney, Tommy, Joe, Diana, David, Jeff, Danielle and many others), thank you for allowing me to contribute to your educational experience. I'll cherish the small groups, email support, and the back and forth texts forever. Lastly, to my wife, Calandra Jones, many thanks to you for taking good care of Sydney, amid the many hours this program has taken me away from the house. Although this assignment is complete, there is more work yet to be done. So, thank you in advance.

One last thing, To God Be the Glory!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background of the Study .....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
Theoretical Framework .....	4
Significance and Purpose of the Study .....	6
Research Questions .....	6
Definition of Key Terms .....	7
Summary .....	8
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	9
Introduction .....	9
Defining Black .....	10
The Journey Towards Higher Education .....	10
Community Colleges' Mission in Serving All .....	13
Programs Benefiting High Achieving Black Males .....	15
Connecting Retention Theories to Academic Success .....	17
Painting a Better Picture .....	19
Models of Success for High Achieving Students .....	21
Barriers Towards Academic Achievement in Higher Education .....	24
Post-Secondary Giftedness .....	28
Characteristics of Gifted Black Students .....	30
Acting White .....	31
Importance of Self-Confidence and Family Support .....	32
Experience Isolation .....	34
Motivation .....	35
Defining Motivation .....	35
A Review of Motivational Theories .....	36
The Motivation of Black Male Students .....	39
Passion .....	40
Defining Passion .....	40
Models of Passion .....	40
Persistence .....	42
Growing Grit Through Honors Programs .....	44
Community College Honors Programs .....	46
A Model Honors Program for African American Males .....	49
Meyerhoff Scholars Program .....	52
Summary .....	53
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	54

Introduction.....	54
Purpose Statement.....	54
Research Questions.....	54
Methodological Overview and Design .....	55
Moustakas’ Phenomenology.....	56
Research Population and Recruitment.....	57
Research Site.....	57
Sampling Techniques.....	58
Data Gathering.....	58
Confidentiality .....	58
Interview Protocol.....	58
Data Analysis.....	59
Validity and Reliability of the Study .....	60
Originality Score.....	62
Summary.....	62
CHAPTER 4 A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS.....	63
Introduction.....	63
Participant Descriptions.....	64
Darren .....	65
Barry .....	66
Ethan .....	67
Gabriel.....	68
Lemuel .....	69
Antwone.....	70
Josiah.....	71
Summary.....	72
CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS: VOICING THE UNSPOKEN.....	73
Introduction.....	73
Textural Description of Emergent Themes: Expressions of the Unspoken.....	76
Theme 1: Strong Parental Support.....	77
Theme 2: An Early Start .....	78
Theme 3: Guilt.....	79
Theme 4: Campus Involvement.....	81
Theme 5: Failure is not an Option .....	83
Theme 6: Academic Success .....	84
The Essence of the Phenomenon .....	86
Summary.....	88
CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	89
Introduction.....	89
Discussion.....	89
Limitations .....	90



Implications and Recommendations .....	91
Recommendations for Black Male Students.....	91
Recommendations for Higher Education Practitioners.....	92
Recommendations for Institutions .....	93
Recommendations for Future Research .....	94
Concluding Summary: Was it Grit?.....	95
Reflections of the Researcher .....	97
Closing Vignette .....	99
APPENDIX A PERMISSION TO USE AN ILLUSTRATION ON ACHIEVEMENT/EDUCATION .....	100
APPENDIX B PERMISSION TO USE ILLUSTRATION ON LOCAL MODELS OF MINORITY STUDENT SUCCESS.....	102
APPENDIX C INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL.....	104
APPENDIX D PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT.....	106
APPENDIX E INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	109
APPENDIX F HORIZONTALIZATION PROCESS.....	113
REFERENCES .....	115

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Associate and Bachelor's Degrees Attainment Graduate Rates: 2013-14.....	3
Figure 2. Visualization of Duckworth's Grit Theory .....	5
Figure 3. Five key laws influencing African American access into higher education .....	13
Figure 4. Fall 2010 cohort based on race and ethnicity .....	15
Figure 5. Factors contributing to academic success.....	19
Figure 6. Barriers contributing to academic failures .....	26
Figure 7. Triumphs contributing to academic success.....	27
Figure 8. The Indefatigable Spirit: A depiction of a high achiever .....	88

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Research Questions Linked to Duckworth et al.'s (2007) Theoretical Framework.....	7
Table 2	Validation Strategies.....	61
Table 3	Participants' Profiles .....	65
Table 4	Emergent Themes .....	75
Table 5	Relationship of Research Questions to Emergent Themes.....	76

### Opening Vignette

High school had come and gone for Thomas Williams. Raised by a single parent, whose income standards met the qualifications for him to receive federal aid, he was determined to triumph no matter what the disadvantage. With the additional support of his family, faith, campus involvement, and interaction with his faculty, Thomas was well on his way toward academic success.

Thomas stayed home to save money, and attended the local community college, where his first semester of hard work contributed to his being recognized on the Dean's List. In addition, he met the qualifications to be inducted into the college's honors program where he engaged with other scholarly peers. Thomas was the epitome of what it meant to be a successful, high achieving, African American male student. Yet, amidst all the excitement and honors, Thomas remained unfulfilled.

Due to his ability to successfully master his academic coursework at a predominately White institution, Thomas' association in the honors program resulted in feelings of isolation. He felt alone, culturally. Consequently, he had the need to go above and beyond to prove his status as a worthy honors student amid stereotypes from faculty and fellow students. Yet, through it all, Thomas has not waivered, nor quit his quest of a successful graduate. He remains faithful to his academics and graduation target date.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

The path towards access for African Americans into the institutions of higher learning in the United States has come with its shares of challenges and troubles. Although the path was a long, hard fought one, African Americans have been persistent in staying the course until denial was replaced with access. College enrollment increased tremendously for African American students after the 1960s Jim Crow laws were defeated (Love, 2008).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, African Americans are proceeding forward to obtain a quality education equivalent to all other ethnic groups enrolled (Harper, 2012). However, this obtainment of a college degree is a problem for many Blacks, especially among African American males (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). During my 16-year tenure as a higher education professional, I have had the opportunity to serve on a variety of committees and advisory councils, addressing concerns related to student services and academic affairs. However, no issue has been more prevalent than that of student retention among African American males at the community college. As a matter of fact, the literature is consumed with retention studies, addressing this ongoing failure (Harper, 2012; Tinto, 1987; Wild & Ebbers, 2002;).

However, this study, shifted gears and focused on the successes of Black male students, rather than high attrition rates. I believe that the time is now to share the successes of stories similar to Thomas', in an effort to craft efficient outcomes to enhance and improve the academic experiences of Black males in college. In addition, this study was, in part, focused on past issues for the purpose of reporting what was previously written on this topic with the intent of supporting the framework of achieving academic success regardless of the threat or barrier.

This body of research to investigate the academic success of Black males in college was intended to shift the conversation from failure to success. With the assistance of research from notable scholars such as Harper (2012), Bonner (2000), Strayhorn (2010), and Fries-Britt (1997), on high achieving Black males, and the feedback provided directly from Black male students, I am hoping to hear their voices and learn what has contributed to their academic success from their lived experiences.

### Problem Statement

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2010), 50% of all African American males enrolled in college attend community colleges. Unfortunately, these as shown in Figure 2 Black males have the lowest graduation rates of any racial or gender demographic graduating from both community colleges and universities. As a result of this alarming trend, these institutions must develop strategies to increase retention rates of African American males. These alarming facts and themes of failure addressing Black male students in higher education are not scarce within the body of academic literature. As a matter of fact, 98% of scholarly literature, studying African American males in higher education, has addressed staggering low retention rates (Barbatis, 2010; Bonner, 2000; Harper, 2012). As a result, very little is known about how this group successfully maneuvers through the academy of higher education.

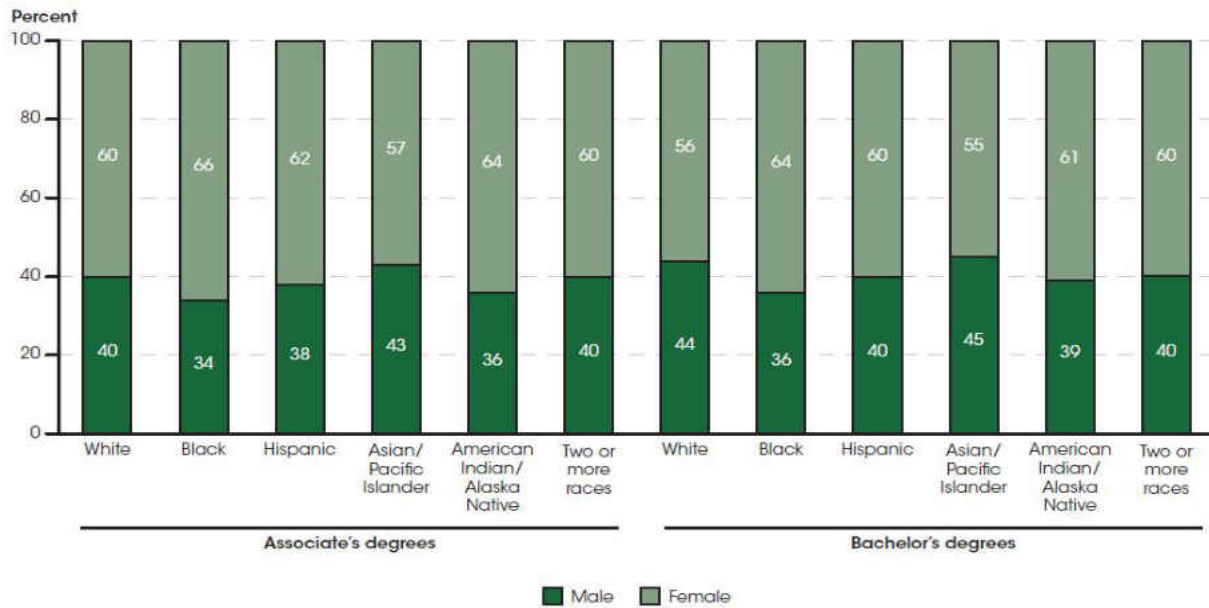


Figure 1. Associate and Bachelor's Degrees Attainment Graduate Rates: 2013-14

Source National Center for Education Statistics, 2017

In the meantime, the stories of successful high achieving Black males in college go mostly untold. Suffice it to say, amid all the hardships (both financial and social), there are Black male students who succeed and achieve in programs targeting Black high achievers. Most are found in honors programs. Unfortunately, this lack of scholarly knowledge on high achieving Black males depicts a problematic collegiate culture for African Americans entering college with the expectation of graduating. According to Harper (2012), we must learn from Black male students who have successfully achieved academic success, regardless of the obstacles they face prior to their graduation. Moreover, there is a lesson to be learned from those who successfully battle through the challenges of institutional characteristics, the feeling of isolation, and the lack of financial and family support.

Grit Theory, as proposed by Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007), provided the theoretical foundation, I used in exploring ways to understand the “who, what, when, why, and how” of high achieving Black male college student’s achievement of academic success. Although Grit Theory has been used in other research studies outside of academia, studying the grit of college students has been limited within the body of research inside academia. Moreover, its application to the success of high achieving Black males at the community college level has been even more limited. Nevertheless, by exploring the grittiness of successful Black males in honors and other programs targeting high achievers, the literature can be expanded by providing academic support solutions for all Black male students enrolled.

### Theoretical Framework

Grit Theory has been acknowledged as a critical element of successfully achieving long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). More recent studies have utilized personality traits to predict academic performances of students in college (Duckworth et al., 2007). In addition, researchers have concluded that students who possess higher levels of grit tend to outperform their peers (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al., (2007) defined grit as a trait-level of perseverance and passion as one pursues long-term goals. Students who obtain grit are not moved by failures or setbacks. Rather, they stay focused on achieving their long-term academic goals by completing assignments and pursuing their academics with intensity. The academic success of high achieving Black males can be better understood by reviewing Grit Theory.

Grit Theory is new in researching the academic achievement of college students. Nevertheless, the literature is encouraging. By researching the grittiness of individuals, the long-term goals they possess can be predicted. Duckworth et al. (2007) discovered this outcome in



several studies within various areas of education. Grit was reviewed in a recent study in exercise behavior. It was determined that when controlled for age, gender and competitive sports, having grit was a predictor of persistence with the exercise (McCutcheon, 2014). In this way, grit was also used to understand the persistence in programs such as those at West Point, thereby opening the door for institutions of higher learning to study high achieving African American males. As a result, I planned, in the present research, to add to the literature of academic success within higher education by extracting concrete data that promotes student success. In addition, this study should assist in increasing retention rates of all students, especially the target audience, Black males.

Passion, persistence, and perseverance are the three tenants of grit I planned to examine. From these constructs, Duckworth et al. (2007) suggested that when passion and perseverance are combined to pursue long-term goals, the concept of Grit is produced. These constructs are explained in more detail in Chapter 2.



*Figure 2.* Visualization of Duckworth's Grit Theory

*Note:* Artwork Copyright 2018 by Gerald Jones

### Significance and Purpose of the Study

Student persistence in higher education has been an ongoing challenge, especially for minority students enrolled at community colleges in the United States (Barbatis 2010; Bonner, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). Barbatis (2010) indicated that more than 50% of all ethnic minorities attended community colleges. However, low attrition rates from these students provides a problem for college administrators. Thus, focusing on solutions to achieve higher retention rates has remained a greater challenge for African Americans, community colleges' largest constituency.

With this background information, it is important to add to the body of research that addresses high achieving Black undergraduate students (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2000, 2002). Furthermore, it may be time for campus administrators to begin to view this problem through a set of new lenses, by focusing more on the academic successes of Black males rather than the failures of these students. More importantly, this researcher has attempted to do what very few others have, and that is focus on the successful journeys of those Black males who achieve in college.

The purpose of this study was to explore the qualitative nature of academic success for Black males in programs for high achievers attending the community college. In addition, the targeted institution's academic programs focused on high achieving Black males were reviewed.

### Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences and subsequent stories of high achieving Black males enrolled in community college?

2. What are the strategies high achieving Black males have developed when faced with challenges while pursuing post-secondary education at the community college?

Table 1 contains the research questions linked to the components of Duckworth et al.'s (2007) theoretical framework. Data for this study were collected based on themes from Duckworth et al.'s (2007) Grit Scale.

Table 1

*Research Questions Linked to Duckworth et al.'s (2007) Theoretical Framework*

Research Question	Theoretical Framework
1. What are the lived experiences and subsequent stories of high achieving Black males enrolled in community college?	Passion Motivation
2. What are the strategies high achieving Black males have developed when faced with challenges while pursuing post-secondary education at the community college?	Perseverance

Definition of Key Terms

Academic Success. In this study, academic success is represented by students' perspectives on grade point averages and successful completion of classes towards their degree goals (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997).

African American or Black. African American and Blacks are one in the same. They are defined as persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (NCES, 2014).

Grit. Grit is defined as trait-level of perseverance and passion as one pursues long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Honors Programs. These are scholarly programs at two- or four-year institutions where students receive a rigorous education designed to prepare them for graduate school and the workforce as well as personnel endeavors (Achterberg, 2004).

Heuristic Knowledge. This is knowledge one receives from experiences (Harmon & King, 1985).

High-Achieving Students. For the purpose of this study, high achieving students are defined as those maintaining a 3.0 GPA (Harper, 2005).

Retention. Retention is the act of retaining students at the two-year community college level in order for them to successfully complete their two-year academic program and/or successfully complete the necessary credits and GPA to transfer to four-year institutions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Persistence. Persistence refers to students' continuation toward their previously established academic goals, including graduation and college transfer (Arnold, 1999).

Theoretical Knowledge. This type of knowledge refers to that which is learned from within the classroom on campus (Harmon & King, 1985).

### Summary

High achieving Black males exist in the community college education system and play an important role in the overall academic student experience. It is essential that their successes are highlighted in order to provide guidance for under-achieving students and leadership in the global society. Exploring the lived experiences of these successful students helped frame a more perfected model of academic success for African American students.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

The task of this literature review was to review the scholarly research on the experiences of African American males who were enrolled in programs targeting high achievers at a community college. In addition, this literature review was concerned with this group's success at an institution where they were not the majority and where research has normally been focused on their failures (Fries-Britt, 2002). This research focused on Black male students due to the lack of research focusing on experiences contributing to their student success when compared to their other with-in race male peers (Fries-Britt, 2008).

The literature review begins with a brief summary of the terminology Black/African American followed by a historical overview focusing primarily on the educational experiences of African Americans attempting access into higher education. Historical Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their existence as gateway institutions in providing access for Blacks to pursue higher education are discussed in detail. This is important to establish the historical element of access, and these institutions contributions to America's higher education culture. Next, the researcher has explored the role of community colleges in serving the needs of its community, focusing on the experiences of minorities in higher education. Finally, the researcher has reviewed the tenets of the theoretical framework of grit and how they apply to the academic success of high achieving African American males.

### Defining Black

Over time, racial labels of Americans with origins from Africa have changed. Throughout history, these labels were used in the form of attitudes of majority groups toward minority groups in America (Sigelman, Tuch, & Martin, 2005). These labels have gone from Negro to colored to Black to African American (Smith, 1992). At the time of the present study, Black and African American were used interchangeably. The term Black has been defined as obtaining origins from Black racial groups in Africa (NCES, 2014); whereas, African American defines Black people whose origins are from North America, but traces their cultural tutelage to Africa (Berlin, 2010). When considering these two definitions, it is important to remember the diversity of Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa in the 1990's (Berlin, 2010). These immigrants' history and cultural experiences are different from those whose immigration to the states was involuntary. There is research on this conundrum which is shared later in this study.

Nevertheless, whether Black immigrants arrived in America voluntarily or involuntarily, institutionally, they have all been categorized in the same classification (Berlin, 2010). In this study, the researcher has mainly used Black versus African American due to the preference of the interviewed participants whose cultural journey to America has been voluntary. The following section captures the journey of these students into higher education in the United States.

### The Journey Towards Higher Education

Before I embark on this journey of reviewing what makes high achieving Black males successful in higher education, it is important to take a brief trip to review the historical, educational and legal challenges of African Americans in our nation which shaped their lived

experiences in higher education. This review will remind you of those challenges and case laws which opened the door for these students and their peers to access higher education in the United States.

During slavery, it was illegal to teach African Americans how to read and write (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Blacks had to face the pessimistic belief that they were not considered to possess the same academic abilities as Whites. Since the late 1800s, segregation laws were passed through a vehicle known as Jim Crow (Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). These laws, aimed to segregate the races, became a way of life (Yosso et al., 2004). Many critical institutions in the United States were in support of the Jim Crow system which oppressed African Americans (Taulbert, 2004).

In 1892, Homer Plessy challenged the Jim Crow laws. As a result, the popular case *Plessy v. Ferguson* was born. This case established the separate but equal law which provided the basis for fairness in separate facilities divided by race (Marable, 2005). Since school facilities attended by African Americans lacked sophisticated resources in comparison to their White student peers, Homer Plessy's premise was that segregated public schools based on race and the deprivation of Black children was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment (Marable, 2005).

Although institutions of higher education were segregated, it did not stop Blacks from attending college. With the support of federal assistance through the Second Morrill Act of 1890, these students mainly obtained degrees at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Furthermore, these institutions were the only choice African Americans had to pursue higher education until 1954 (Hill, 1985).

However, there was still a gap in institutional quality and resources between HBCUs. In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown V. The Board of Education*, decided that separate was not equal and was unconstitutional (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). This change in law provided the civil rights movement with new wings to challenge the status quo in providing equal rights for African Americans (Gasman & Hilton, 2012).

Today, HBCUs continue to provide access for many Black students to attend college. They exist to engage the world, improve the experiences of Black people as well as challenge the nation to realize its highest aims (Allen, Jewel, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). They have been instrumental through the years in awarding degrees to the nation's greatest doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers (Albritton, 2012). The characteristics of these diverse institutions include poor, rich, public, private and denominational colleges (US Department of Education [USDOE], 1991).

The case laws embedded within this literature review are important for today's high achieving African American males to understand the road traveled for them to have access to higher education. Furthermore, it helps bring forward ongoing issues in America's institutions of higher education around race and access.



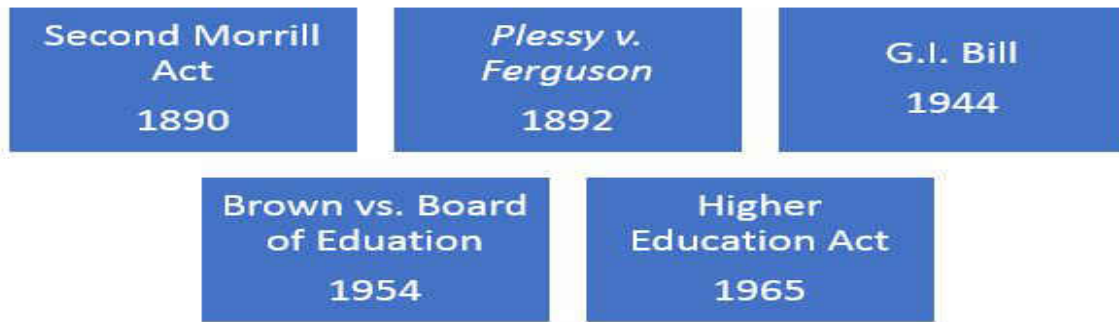


Figure 3. Five key laws influencing African American access into higher education

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#### Community Colleges' Mission in Serving All

Community colleges have their place in the history of America's higher education system. In 1901, Joliet Junior College became the first community college in America's higher education system (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Since 1901, these institutions have not only grown in student population, but diversity as well. Several laws, including the Truman Report, Higher Education Act of 1965 and G.I. Bill have played a role in this growth and access.

The Truman Report, released in 1947, was instrumental in providing access for all students, making college more affordable, especially for those attending community colleges. More importantly, the Truman Report focused on expanding enrollment for students entering college, while eliminating financial barriers (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). This was followed by the Higher Education Act of 1965, which benefited minority students attending Predominately White Institutions [PWIs] (Albritton, 2012). Moreover, in 1944, the G.I. Bill assisted servicemen returning home from the Vietnam War (Albritton, 2012).

Traditionally, community colleges have served their local communities by leading initiatives on social justice, providing vocational training for unskilled employees, and meeting the needs of the unemployed (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Furthermore, these institutions lead initiatives which provide strategies that build the local economy by offering academic support programs, certificates, and degrees (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

According to the National Commission on Community Colleges (2008), each year more than five million students were enrolling in noncredit coursework at community colleges in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, more than half of all nurses, first responders, and healthcare providers were taking courses at the community college in the same time period (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008)

Community colleges continue to serve as a pipeline for students of all backgrounds to get degrees (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). They continue to serve their many constituents by offering an education to traditional and non-traditional students, students with disabilities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as ethnic minorities. As a matter of fact, by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than 50% of all Hispanic and Black students who attended college did so at the community college (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2010). However, community colleges have been struggling to retain these students. This is especially true for minority students, especially African American males, a key component of this study (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). Figure 4 presents National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017) data on the Fall 2010 cohort based on race and ethnicity. The figure shows that 48.5% of Black students attending two-year public institutions were enrolled at the community college

level. This student population was the second largest ethnic group enrolled within any higher education college or university.

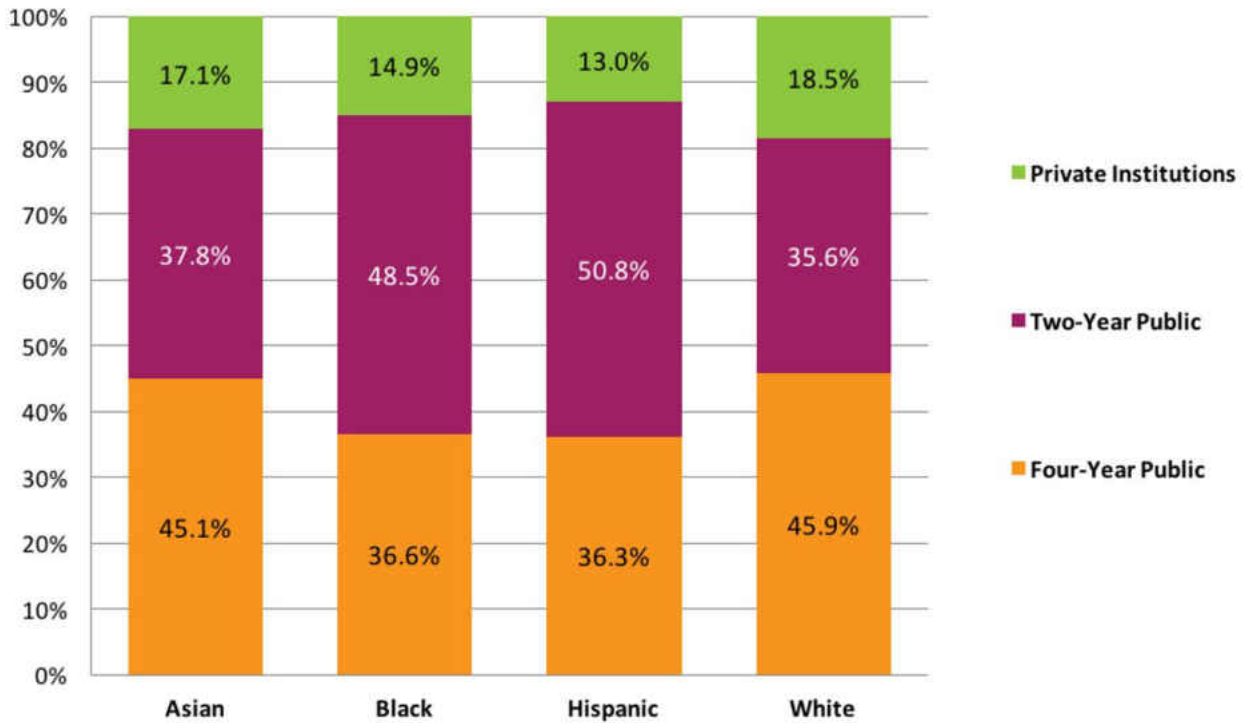


Figure 4. Fall 2010 cohort based on race and ethnicity

Source. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017

### Programs Benefiting High Achieving Black Males

Black students are a prominent part of the constituents of the community college student population. For the purpose of this research, it is important to understand that not all community college students, including African Americans, attend these institutions because they are underprepared or do not meet requirements for four-year institutions (Gandara & Orfield, 2010)

High achieving Black males attend community colleges to take advantage of the many programs designed to meet their high standards in education. These programs include those targeting increasing minorities in STEM careers and honors (Treat & Barnard, 2012).

Currently, 40% of community colleges provide honors programs designed like those of four-year institutions. (Baker, Readerdon, & Riordan, 2000). They consist of the development of an honors ideology with curriculum options as well as formatting their own organizational entities (Treat & Barnard, 2012). Students participating in honors programs do so mainly in a totally separate environment known as an honors college (Baker et al., 2000). During the 1960s, state land grant universities launched honors colleges to compete with private institutions (Treat & Barnard, 2012). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, honors colleges moved from the land grant institutions to community colleges (Baker et al., 2000). Initially, these programs were not well received by critics due to the mission of community colleges to provide an inclusive learning environment for all students (Treat & Barnard, 2012).

Community colleges have begun to address the shortage of minority students entering the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields. One program is the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP), funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). This program partners community colleges and other institutions of higher learning whose aim is engaging minority students in STEM (LSAMP, 2017). In addition, the Meyerhoff Scholarship Program (2017) also aims at increasing diversity in science, technology, engineering and other related fields (Meyerhoff, 2017). These two opportunities, along with honors programs, are designed to enhance the academic experiences of high achieving Black males.

These programs provide standards of excellence within the community college system. They are addressed in more depth later in this report.

### Connecting Retention Theories to Academic Success

Studying high achieving Black male students at community colleges is relatively new. When searching for literature on “high achieving Black students,” most of the literature was found at the k-12 level (Greene, 2016). It was focused on the relationship between high school AP courses and college readiness among African American males, hence, contributing to academic success at the college level. Greene (2016) determined that with guidance and preparation in high school, along with a willingness to personally succeed, high achieving Black males were able to successfully transition into college.

Also, most of the literature relating to the experiences of Black male students has been boxed into one monolithic group. As a result, the experiences of intersecting identities within a race of people have been ignored (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Renowned scholars have, in recent years, been contributing to the literature on high achieving Black males (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997 Griffin, 2006; Harper 2005; Strayhorn, 2010)

Within the academy, retention is theoretically associated with the work of Tinto’s social integration and attrition model (Tinto, 1993). This study of retention was concentrated on how deeply connected students are to their college communities. Tinto’s model suggested the rate at which students are retained is dependent upon how engaged academically and socially they are with their institutions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Other earlier models included Astin’s (1984) framework of connecting retention to high levels of academic involvement and

faculty-student interaction. As stated earlier, African American students have very low retention rates when compared to other ethnic groups (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

In previous years, there have been other studies on retention aside from the earlier models of Tinto (1983) and Astin (1984). They include Hagedorn's (2006) individual factors that predict/influence retention, Bean & Eaton's (2000) psychological process that leads to academic and social integration, and psychological model of student departure, and Kuh's (1985) theory of student engagement which looked at retention through the lens of pre-college characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and entering ability levels (Kuh, 2009). These theories have paved the way for increased qualitative studies confirming the effect student engagement has on the retention of high achieving Black males.

Harper (2012), a leading researcher in the study of the academic success of Black males, stated that "the achievers attributed much of their college success to their engagement experiences" (p. 12). These engagement experiences for high achieving Black men were accomplished through their involvement in student organizations as well as advancing their practical skills. Harper (2009) is one of many researchers who have conducted qualitative studies on high achieving Black males and the implications of their engagement outside of the classroom. Another researcher, Hebert (2002) concluded that as a result of outside the classroom engagement experiences, students gained additional skills and strengths. Harper's (2009) results of study of high achieving Black males were similar, adding the gain in leadership skills through campus involvement.

This retention overview of the various student theories when applied to the academic success of Black males has proven to play key roles in their success (Hebert, 2002). However,

these findings must be expanded to shine a more positive light on the overall success of Black male student academic achievement. Figure 5 displays the factors contributing to academic success.

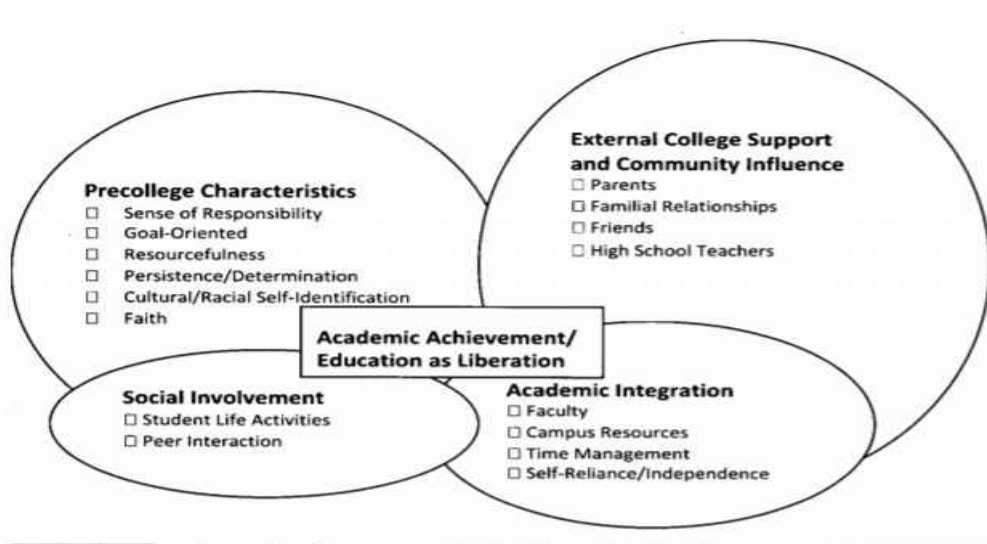


Figure 5. Factors contributing to academic success

Note. Adapted with permission from “Underprepared, ethnically diverse community college students: Factors contributing to persistence,” by P. Barbatis, 2010, *Journal of Developmental Education*, 33(3), 16-20. (See Appendix A).

### Painting a Better Picture

For decades, we have been focusing on narrowing the achievement gaps between African American students and White students in Grades k-12, and college (Bonner, 2000). In doing so, the achievement problem has been framed in a way that places all Black students in the same category, low achieving. However, Duke (2017) emphasized, in his article discussing within-race achievement comparisons, the call to understand the achievement gap between African American

students within African American groups. Duke called this within-race or group achievement gap framing. By explaining academic achievement using this method, he believed one could help to dismantle the societal generalization suggesting all Black students are failing in college when comparing the low retention rates of African Americans to those of other ethnic groups (Duke).

Duke (2017) offered two compelling arguments for addressing within-race or group achievement gap framing of a problem. First, he acknowledged the greatest benefit when studying within-group achievement provides a deeper analysis of a problem by explaining the existence of the problem as well as excluding other explanations through a process called framing (Duke). The concept of framing has been utilized by communication studies professionals to explore the variety of ways social and/or political problems are delivered to the public (Duke). The framing of a problem is often turned into a casual story.

Unfortunately, the stories of high achieving Black male students have been lost in the storyline of the failures of Black students in education at all levels (Harper, 2012). Nevertheless, changing how the story is reported could bring great light to the success of African American male students. For example, understanding the within-groups gap of African American students could be analyzed by reviewing factors such as income and parent's educational levels. This attempt could help add to the reasoning behind the factors which contribute to college success aside from the traditional retention theories previously discussed. More importantly, this method could provide scholars with additional understanding as to why some African Americans are successful and why some are not (Duke, 2017).

This method is just as important as comparing between-group gaps. Framing is helpful in attempting to understand or explain achievement gaps within-groups as well as between-groups.



Framing denotes the many different contributing factors to the gaps, not to mention providing an in-depth analysis between the two gap groups.

The second important recommendation in developing an understanding of the achievement gap of African Americans could be in “how” the problem is framed (Duke, 2017) as well as agenda setting (Mezquita, 2016). How a problem is delivered determines the significance of meaning and impact to its audience. When problems are framed, they have the potential of painting a powerful picture which can influence the audience. A good example is the Coleman Report (1966), commissioned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The results of the report presented a true but skewed generalization of African American student success. The Coleman Commission aimed at addressing inequalities in public schools, mainly in the south. However, when the report was released, the storyline reflected the very large achievement gap of African American students when compared to White students. Since this time, America has been interpreting the problem in a broader sense without considering within-group analysis.

#### Models of Success for High Achieving Students

Padilla et al. (1997) conducted a study to explore strategies utilized by successful minority students who achieved academic success. The researchers concentrated on the steps successful students take when in possession of knowledge to overcome roadblocks or barriers towards academic success (Padilla et al.).

Padilla et al. (1997) explained the actions used to eliminate or defeat barriers prohibiting academic success. Minority students were selected for a qualitative action research study designed to better understand the formula for academic success of minority students who graduate. Prior to this research, most studies occurred on problems addressing the departure of

minority students from the grounds of the academy. These departures have been labeled negatively, characterizing students as dropouts, pushouts, and stop outs (Padilla et al.). As a result of the data and differentiation from past studies, the researchers wanted to develop a local model of student success patterned on Harmon & King's (1985) expert systems theory.

Prior to reporting Padilla et al.'s (2017) findings, it is informative to consider Harmon and King's (1985) work illustrating the informal knowledge necessary for minority students to achieve academic success. These constructs delineate behaviors of high achieving African American men who demonstrate this study's theoretical framework, grit. Harmon and King, using expert systems theory, determined two key types of knowledge which influenced student success: theoretical and heuristic.

Theoretical knowledge is described as the knowledge that comes from the classroom and/or books. As students grow through academic learning, so does their theoretical knowledge. Students obtain this knowledge through their coursework, examination scores, and comprehensive assessments. Theoretical knowledge is measured by the success of one's ability to obtain a degree (Harmon & King, 1985).

The second factor Harmon and King (1985) discovered was heuristic knowledge. This knowledge measures informal experiences (Padilla et al., 1997). In addition, the expertise model suggests the necessity for a student to gain heuristic knowledge (Padilla et al.). This knowledge is connected to a student's ability to progress towards graduation or not. For example, a student making the choice to not party the night before an examination, due to the consequences of not performing well, is an example of heuristic knowledge. Students taking the initiative to seek appropriate academic advising to confirm their paths towards graduation is another example of

heuristic knowledge. The heuristic concept is important for making decisions regarding meeting deadlines relating to registration and financial aid (Padilla et al., 1997).

Students develop heuristic knowledge in many ways (e.g., through peer to peer and student involvement (Padilla et al., 1997). The earlier students gain heuristic knowledge, the better are their chances of graduating. In addition, when they acquire this knowledge, they become aware of the challenges or barriers needing to be met as they persist to graduation. Too, successful students can identify the behaviors and knowledge successful students used to achieve their goals.

I have concluded that theoretical and heuristic knowledge defines the drive high achieving African American male students who possess grit. These students' grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher and their mastery of program entrance examinations reflect the knowledge received through their studies (theoretical).

As noted in the earlier review of the retention theories and the success high achieving students have during their academic journey, the heuristic factor confirms the validity of the traditional retention studies. Harmon and King (1985) posited that students who possess heuristic knowledge are involved outside of the classroom with their peers. These students understand the importance of faculty engagement through their willingness to ask questions outside of the classroom regarding the curriculum. Furthermore, they understand their limits and are confident that they can make the right judgements in their academic environment that will not detract from their reaching their completion goals. Researchers have confirmed that these constructs regarding both the theoretical and heuristic knowledge reflect the stamina of high achieving African

American students who achieve academic success on the grounds of institutions of higher learning in the United States (Barbatis, 2010; Bonner, 2000; Harper, 2012).

### Barriers Towards Academic Achievement in Higher Education

As Padilla et al., (1997) sought to understand the factors which make students successful, they developed a qualitative data set, the "unfolding matrix" (p. 126). Once the data were collected from the participants, it was later used as a qualitative data set for analysis of what contributed to student success within the local college.

Participants in the study consisted of 28 ethnic minority students from a local college who were recruited by faculty representatives of multiple disciplines. Students were asked to consider a successful student at the institution—one who had completed a degree or was on the road to completing one (Padilla et al., 1997).

After the data were collected and analyzed from the produced matrix, a local model outlining the barriers facing successful minority students was established. Barriers identified consisted of discontinuity, lack of nurturing, lack of presence, and resource barriers (Padilla et al., 1997). The first barrier was defined as the obstacles that prohibited a student's ability to easily adjust from high school to college. Those students who were successful in achieving academic success understood this problem early on and developed strategies to adjust easily.

A lack of nurturing was the second barrier to graduation challenging successful students. These students understood the importance of creating a "supportive family" consisting of a family away from home or their biological family (Padilla et al., 1997). They were able to connect with cultural student organizations, as well as finding other relational networks with close friends, university employees and peers.

The third barrier was a lack of presence. This challenge can be explained as the absence of experiences within the curriculum, faculty and staff, and just simply being the minority on a majority campus (Padilla et al., 1997). As a result, being saturated within their cultures allowed the students to deal with the lack of presence by the university.

The final barrier was resources. This barrier consisted of the financial limitations prohibiting students from achieving student success (Padilla et al.,1997). By developing a strategic plan prior to attending school, these students were able to communicate with professionals who understood the financial aid system, and they were prepared to take advantage of it. Moreover, these students had worked hard prior to enrollment, for example by receiving merit based scholarships.

The results proved the importance of human development among all people and challenged previous work on student retention theories. As it related to the concept of human development, the importance of one's desire to be confirmed by others, as well as to have security or safety, was reinforced. Figure 6 summarizes Padilla et al.'s (1997) barriers to academic failures.

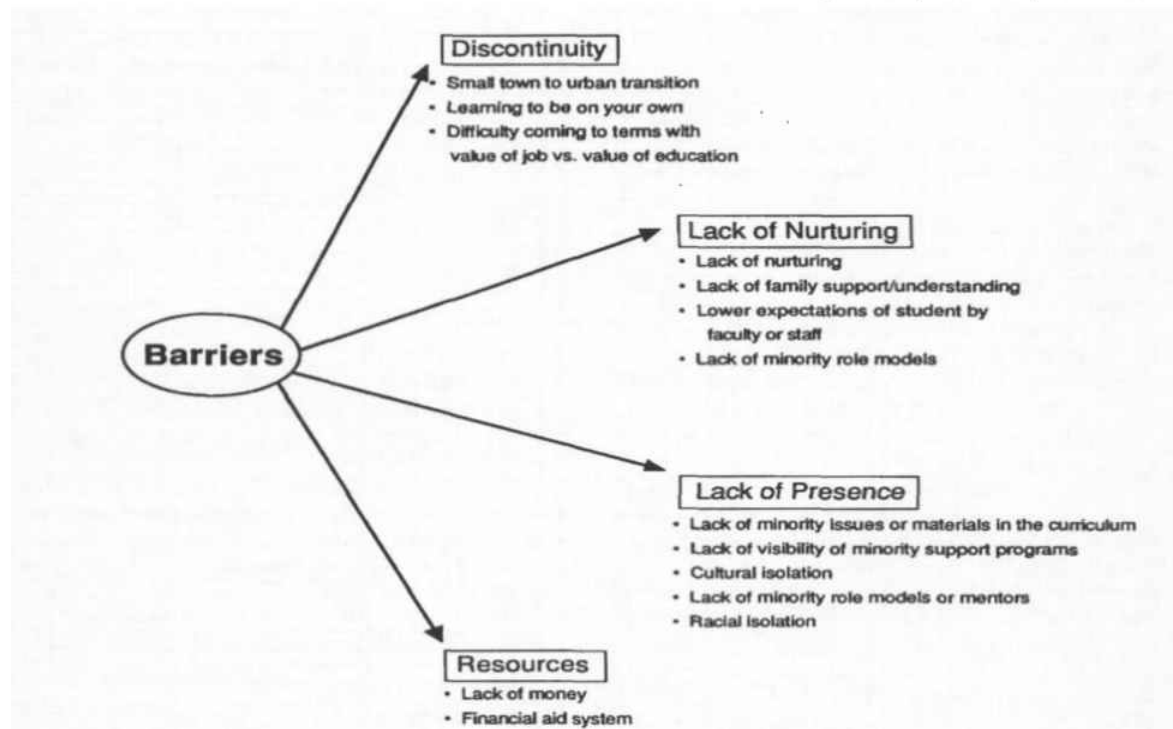


Figure 6. Barriers contributing to academic failures

Note. Adapted with permission from “Developing local models of minority student success in college,” by R. Padilla, J. Revino, K. Gonzalez, & J. Trevino, 1997, (2), 125-135, (See Appendix B).

In Barbatis’ 2010 study on factors contributing to persistence, he collected data on 22 students of color who exceeded 30 credits hours and those who did not at a community college in the southeast. Tinto’s First Year Experience (FYE) Learning Community, which focused on retention, was used to facilitate the research. It was confirmed that contributing factors to students’ success included critical pedagogy, co-curricular activities, and student-faculty engagement.

There was a correlation of results among those who reported positive interactions with faculty and graduation versus those who did not. This confirmed again the importance of faculty

in student retention, especially minority faculty whose service to students often goes far beyond the classroom experience as noted in the second study analysis (Tinto, 1993). Other common themes included faith, parents, and personal characteristics. The study was consistent with Tinto's work in connecting student involvement, precollege characteristics, and academic integration contributing to student persistence (Barbatis, 2010).

However, researchers such as Barbatis (2010) have shown academic integration must be defined further than suggested by Tinto and Austin whose populations were mainly White students. For example, Barbatis concluded minority students must complete a challenging schedule, access financial aid, and interact with a diverse student body, staff and faculty all contributing factors influencing persistence to graduation. Figure 7 presents the complex factors contributing to academic success.



*Figure 7.* Triumphs contributing to academic success

*Note.* Artwork Copyright 2018 by Gerald Jones

### Post-Secondary Giftedness

The following section is centered on the concept of giftedness and its relationship to high achieving African American males. The sub-sections discussed include: defining gifted, associated peer pressure, characteristics of gifted students, and the experiences of isolation.

Before I explore the term giftedness, it is imperative that readers understand the meaning of Black, male, and gifted as well as the concept of high achievement as defined in this study. Throughout the review of the literature, I have offered examples of behaviors of students who fit into the characterization of high achievers. Traditionally, high achievement has been associated with academic achievement which has a direct connection with the concept of giftedness. However, being a high achieving student can be associated with a variety of elements of the academy. For instance, Harper (2005) connected high achievement to a student's willingness to be involved outside of the classroom. In contrast, Strayhorn (2008) defined high achievers as those who exemplify a high intelligence deriving from their IQ, as well as participation in honors programs and admission examination scores. In essence, this dissertation defines high achieving students as those students who maintain a 3.0 GPA, are connected with a college program, and are on a path towards graduation.

The term, giftedness, is one of those terms whose meaning at times appears objectionable. On one hand, people praise its title due to the nature of the students it benefits. At the same time, there is a tendency to separate the non-gifted from the gifted. Regardless of how it is viewed, people historically have been fascinated by men and women who have the intellectual abilities of giftedness (Bonner, 2001). Describing students who are gifted used to be limited to



those who were high achiever. Nevertheless, as time moved on, so did the limitation describing those who academically achieve (Bonner, 2001).

Though the excitement of studying giftedness has grown, relating giftedness to individuals from minority groups has not progressed as quickly as for other groups (Fries-Britt, 1997). Black students have a greater chance in being in a class for the mentally retarded than in a class of students recognized for their giftedness (College Board, 1985). This problem in previous years has resulted in several groups blaming each other. Parents blame the school; the school points to the staff, and the staff blames testing agencies (Bonner, 2000). However, to better comprehend giftedness of African Americans, more resources are needed to provide balance to the literature, where less than 2% focus is placed on the academic success of African American students (Bonner, 2000).

Defining giftedness is rather complex and adds to the problem of lack of African American students connected to gifted programs. Throughout the body of research, many definitions of giftedness appear. Earlier definitions of giftedness involve measuring one's intelligence through testing to assess a person's ability (Fries-Britt, 1997). Gardner (1983) invoked a new understanding of giftedness through his theory of multiple intelligences. Renzulli (1981), too, added to the definition by embedding his "three ring" clusters. Giftedness has also been defined by the federal government. More recently, the definition has changed to address the problem of underrepresentation based on race (Bonner, 2001). Currently, giftedness has been defined by the USDOE (1993) as:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, unusual leadership capacity, or excel in

specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all area of human endeavor. (p. 26)

Gifted students encounter many challenges. Their interactions with their peers and family seem to be the greatest problems (Bonner, 2000). Having to juggle between the home culture and campus life serves as a barrier for African American students as well (Bonner, 2000). They contend with the labeling of acting White, resulting in a non-expansion of their giftedness (Fries-Britt, 1997). Many African American students inherit what is known as survival conflict. This occurs when one exceeds the accomplishments of family/peers (Whitten, 1992). Characteristics associated with this behavior are anxiety, guilt, ambivalence, and depression (Bonner, 2000). As a result of attempting to maintain balance, students may procrastinate, decrease productivity, and devalue their self-concepts (Whitten, 1992).

### Characteristics of Gifted Black Students

Although understanding what giftedness is appears to be rather complex, so too is the literature on gifted minority student populations and their needs. Most of the research on studying giftedness has been conducted through the lens of the White middle class (Fries-Britt, 1997). The literature on Black gifted students is almost nonexistent. Only about 2% of all literature written about giftedness has been focused on minority groups (Ford & Harris, 1990). In an attempt to seek an understanding of the experiences of gifted Black men, it is important to understand the similarities that appear with characteristics of the general population (Bonner, 2000). Gifted Black students are very successful and ambitious, and they have the ability to accomplish goals. These gifted Black students must make decisions regarding careers and

college majors like all other gifted students. Despite similarities, however, major differences cannot be ignored.

### Acting White

What separates minority gifted students, in particular African Americans, are the experiences of racial hostility as well as stereotypes (Bonner, 2000; Fries-Brit, 1997). This is one fundamental difference. Many of the experiences that African American males encounter are generated based on factors from their own communities as well as outside of their communities (Fries-Brit, 1997). Gifted Black students experience a great deal of peer pressure from other non-gifted Black students regarding “acting White” (Fordham, 1988). This labeling, initiated from one’s desire as an African American to pursue academic excellence and intellectual knowledge, has been associated with the White middle class (Fries-Brit, 1997). To avoid acting White, many Black students do not expand their giftedness (Fries-Britt, 1997).

The acting White, as it relates to pursuing academic success started because of the opposition from Whites to acknowledge the intellectual will of African Americans (Fordham, 1988; Fries-Brit, 1997). Suffice it to say, Black students who pursue academics often receive backlash. This may explain Blacks buying into the self-proclaimed theory of academic failure and pursuing anything more than academics, including sports. Joining an athletic team has proven to be more favorable than pursuing academic excellence (Fries-Brit, 1997).

Unfortunately, high achieving Black students who may not want to be labeled as acting White by their peers often appear to reject certain types of events, behaviors, and symbols categorized as White (Fries-Britt, 1998). Going to college and excelling academically is associated with Caucasians (Fries-Britt, 1998). Those minorities who want to be accepted by

their peers may adopt an oppositional attitude against the academy. As a result, they study less, pursue education privately, or engage in isolation (Fries-Britt, 1998).

### Importance of Self-Confidence and Family Support

The literature suggests there are many characteristics which contribute to the success of gifted minority students. One of these characteristics is their strong self-confidence (Fries-Britt, 1998). High achieving students' self-confidence is much higher than average students due to their high levels of academic self-concept (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). These students out perform their peers in adjusting socially, intellectually, and emotionally (Fries-Britt, 1997). Having a strong self-concept is usually a high mark for Black students when compared to that of Mexicans and Chinese Americans (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). However, racial identity makes developing a higher self-concept more challenging as they shift into their adolescence. The problem develops when gifted Black students attempt to integrate their concepts of racial identity with issues wrapped around them as gifted students. Many Black gifted students struggle with juggling between their giftedness and racial identity (Bonner, 2000). Giftedness is associated with the mainstream culture and makes it more difficult for these students to adjust.

Another important element in the lives of gifted students is their parents. Researchers have confirmed that the more involved parents are with their children education, the better are their chances of graduating (Bonner, 2000; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998). The same applies to gifted Black students as well. Parents of gifted Black students are heavily involved in their child's educational well-being (Fries-Britt, 1997). This is especially true at the precollege period. During this time, parental focus is on educational equality, ensuring that schools are treating their

children fairly in the classroom, that they are perceived as gifted, and that they remain free from misjudgments as a troublemaker (Ford as cited in Fries-Britt, 1997).

Education has played an important role regarding the experiences of African Americans (Fries-Britt, 1997). Black students historically have struggled at predominately White colleges. Much of what has been studied about this population has focused on stories of academic difficulty versus triumphs of success (Fleming, Nettles, & Allen, as cited in Fries-Britt, 1997). Mainly what has been known about gifted African American students has been derived from what has been studied in Grades k-12. Unlike other gifted ethnic groups, gifted Black students face the challenge of embedding their ethnicity in the meaning of gifted (Cooley, Cornell & Lee as cited in Fries-Britt, 1998). Many times, these students are accused by their Black peers of acting White or not being Black enough (Fordman as cited in Fries-Brit, 1998).

From earlier studies of African Americans, we have learned that Blacks move through many stages of identity development (Carter & Helms, 1987). As a result of these stages, they develop an array of attitudes both positive and negative, healthy and unhealthy about African Americans (Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Ogbu, 1993; Steele, 1995). Through racial identities, Blacks compare themselves to White Americans, resulting in celebrating White's characteristics while devaluing their own (Fries-Britt, 1998).

However, Steele's theory (1995) of minority underachievement was somewhat different than Ogbu's theory on cultural frame (1993). Steele attributed the lack of academic success of minority students stems to disruptive pressures which happen in the lives of many minority students. One of these pressures is the internalization of negative stereotypes which they accept as their own. Although these stereotypes are untrue, many Blacks become tired of arguing

against them. As a result, this leads to students who do not want to connect themselves to academic success (Steele).

### Experience Isolation

Gifted Black students experience the same subtle and overt racism as do non-gifted students (Fries-Britt, 1998). In addition, they also spend time reconciling their racial, cultural, ethnic, and gifted identities (Griffin, 2006). They also must contend with the isolation that comes from the association of being Black and gifted. These challenges serve as opportunities to derail students' academic success and diminish their stamina to proceed forward (Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998).

This body of knowledge is important to this research as it explains the isolation associated with the culture of giftedness in high achieving African American males. One of the most crucial components for Black gifted collegians is family (Hrabowski, 1998). Family may have both a positive and negative effect on the student's academic achievement.

Fries-Britt (1998) conducted a study based on Black achiever isolation and the impact of race and a race-specific program. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program (n.d.), launched to assist Black gifted college students in hopes of eradicating isolation, was utilized to collect data. The findings of this study confirmed past research on Black achiever isolation. Not only did the students studied experience isolation as a minority in a majority institution, they also were more likely to experience isolation within the Black community (Fries-Britt, 1998). One common theme was that the lack of interaction with other Black students was not uncommon. This is the outcome of being enrolled in college centered courses in high school that were mostly occupied by White students (Fries-Britt, 1998). The Meyerhoff Scholars Program taught these students

how to communicate and study with other Black students. This was not the norm. The lack of contact with other high achieving Black students in high school left students feeling they were alone as a “small minority” of Black gifted students (Fries-Britt, 1998). The Meyerhoff Scholars Program confirmed that these students were not alone in achieving academic success.

### Motivation

The following sections address motivation, a key component of this study’s guiding framework. They include the working definition for the purpose of this research, motivational theories, as well as factors that motivate African American males. More importantly, the literature reviewed in the following sections provides an in-depth understanding of motivation and its correlation to academic success.

#### Defining Motivation

The myth that African Americans do not value college education is just that (Bonner, 2000). If this is true, why are they enrolled? Why do high achieving minorities enroll in honors or participate in STEM? What motivates them to achieve such high standards of excellence in higher education? This study’s guiding framework derives from the family of motivation.

The general definition of motivation, as studied by scholars, is understanding how one’s beliefs and thoughts are associated with actions and behaviors (Ames & Ames as cited in Griffin, 2006). Motivation is a dynamic force that contributes to individuals’ taking action, thinking, and behaving (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). When considering this driving force related to academic achievement, it appears to correlate those who achieve versus those who do not (Griffin, 2006). For example, what makes some students achieve from similar ethnic backgrounds and economic

demographics in spite of shared hardships and challenges, compared to those who do not finish college due to using small or large problems as excuses?

How motivation influences a student's achievement, learning, and self-esteem has been studied by scholars within the academy of higher learning (Ames & Ames as cited in Griffin, 2006). Three traditional motivational theories were previously used to understand a student's academic success: (a) self-determination, (b) socio-cognitive, and (c) attribution theories (Griffin, 2006). However, these theories alone are not able to determine the motivation of the giftedness of Black high achievers (Bonner, 2000). As a result, they must merge to form a multidimensional framework, highlighting both internal and external sources of motivation to reflect the student's journey (Griffin, 2006). Nevertheless, I thought a thorough review of these traditional, and previously tested theories, would be useful as they belong to the same family of motivation as the contemporary Grit Theory, the driving theory for this study. Furthermore, these theories were utilized as part of qualitative research conducted by Griffin (2006) and reported in an article comparing theories of high-achieving Black college students' academic motivation.

#### A Review of Motivational Theories

The theory of self-determination was studied to understand the role internal and external factors had on student motivation. The scope of the model presented was based on a scale ranging from most intrinsic to most extrinsic. Those who are engaged intrinsically do so at their own risk. These individuals get confirmation from their tasks. They proceed with the task and are not motivated by rewards or recognition. On the other hand, extrinsically motivated persons are motivated knowing that there are consequences for their actions. Both intrinsic and extrinsic have three measurements. The measurements include one's decision as personal choice and



locus of causality (internal) or one's decision based on compliance and locus of causality (external). Regulation styles are introjected, identified, and integrated between the two (Griffin, 2006).

Those students who were motivated through introjected regulation succeeded not because they had a passion to study or obtain a degree but because they were driven by the benefit of academic success. These students internalized the rules that formed their academic motivation (Griffin, 2006). Students employing identified regulation motivation style play a more active role in their education. These students are not completely guided by external factors or rules and regulations to pursue their education (Griffin, 2006). Their drive to continue comes partially from external factors.

The most advanced motivation according to Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) is integrated regulation. This occurs when a student's behavior becomes completely internalized. Integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation patterns are very similar (Griffin, 2006). What sets them apart is that integrated regulation motivation comes from esteem outcomes related to academic success. However, higher levels of intrinsic motivation are more positive as well as connected higher to academic success, retention, and one's self-confidence (Deci et al., 1991).

The socio-cognitive theory proclaims the goals of students are tied to their motivation and achievement (Griffin, 2006). In this theory, one's goals are established based on their beliefs and trust in their abilities to produce results. This standard of belief results in the type of goals or level of goals individuals establish for themselves. In addition, the amount of time or effort they impart into the goal, as well as the ability to persist through challenges, is influenced from the drive within. Students who fall within this model of achievement are usually proactive self-

motivators who exert high standards of motivation to complete academic goals. These individuals are also called self-regulated learners (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Attribution theory is the final theory. This theory has been studied to understand the relationship of students' causal attributions and academic motivation (Graham, 1994). In this theory student's motivation, thoughts, and success come from their understanding of unfamiliar circumstances. Weiner (1992) addressed three attributional dimensions in his study: locus of causality, stability, and controllability (Griffin, 2006). In locus of causality, it was determined that a student's understanding of outcomes was driven by internal factors such as drive or intellect or driven by external factors such as being lucky or level of difficulty. Students who were motivated through Weiner's stability dimension were different from the locus of causality. Stability views outcomes resulting from circumstances that are connected to something permanent or something that is short-lived. In Weiner's final dimension, controllability, individuals view outcomes as something they control, such as effort, or do not control, such as luck or sickness.

A complete synthesis of the three would be demonstrated when internally based beliefs regarding agency and control are present, one's confidence, achievement and motivation is affected in a positive away (Griffin, 2006). On the other hand, goals and beliefs influenced by external factors' impact are less positive (Cokley, 2003; Deci et al, 1991). According to Graham (1994), the lack of motivation patterns in African American students has been linked to the achievement gaps between Black and White students. Though researchers have concluded that

Black students have low achievement motivation from externally based motivation patterns, Graham suggested these outcomes are misguided, flawed, and incomplete.

### The Motivation of Black Male Students

Researchers have found that African American students' motivation is influenced by external factors which sustain their self-esteem as well as motivate them towards achievement (Cokley, 2003; Griffin, 1994, 2006; Husman & Lens, 1999). As it relates to African American males, Gardibaldi (1992) reported, African American students depend on higher levels of external motivation which result in an increase in academic success and abilities. Moreover, their self-confidence and self-esteem is increased and adds to the motivation to be successful. In another study conducted by Hwang, Echols, and Vrongistinos (2002) on gifted high achieving Black college students, the results indicated that students depended on both internal and external forces for academic motivation and the will to be successful (Graham, 2006). These students expressed that successful careers, as well as positive social and societal outcomes, were available to them upon completing their degrees; thus, driving their motivation towards completion.

It has also been reported that Black students use their race as a form of motivation. Cokley (2003) reported that Black females' (at HBCUs) motivation was related to their intrinsic motivation and academic self-concept. However, this was not the case for African American males, who tended to distinguish their academic success from their race (Fries-Britt, 1998). In conclusion, it is determined that both internal and external motivators play significant roles in the academic success of Black students.

## Passion

Aside from understanding that motivation is a result of the guiding framework, it's important to focus on its constructs as well. These include passion and persistence. By explaining these tenants within this literature helps reveal the "why" high achieving African American males achieve.

### Defining Passion

Passion can be defined in many ways. According to Vallerand et al. (2003), passion is defined as a strong inclination or desire toward an activity that one likes and finds important and in which one invests time and energy (Vallerand et al., 2003). When an activity which one likes and engages in regularly becomes a part of a person's identity, the activity is one that is highly valued (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). As a result, a form of passion is developed. Such passion for the activity becomes the core of who a person is.

### Models of Passion

According to a dualistic model of passion derived from self-determination theory, two forms are discussed. First, harmonious passion is when one internalizes the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand, 1997). When harmonious passion develops within, one fully deems the activity as important. For high achievers, learning becomes a part of their DNA, thus birthing a motivational desire to engage in the activity naturally (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guam, 2008). Moreover, individuals engage in the activity of their own freewill, and the task does not interfere with life's demands. The passion is controlled by the individual. Studying becomes natural for the student and is not a burden. Overall, harmonious passion is attributed to positive processes, outcomes, and characteristics (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The other type of passion is obsessive passion. It develops from a controlled internalization of an activity into the identity of oneself (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Unlike the harmonious passion, obsessive passion interferes with life's other demands. The person is being controlled by the passion (Carbonneau et al., 2008). Although a high achieving student may enjoy learning, his choice to be obsessed with learning becomes a desire to be socially accepted or an increase in self-esteem. Subsequently, being a student is something the student views as a necessity to experience self-worth.

Individuals who are obsessively passionate are controlled by their passion (Carbonneau et al., 2008). Furthermore, this passion could lead to neglect in other areas of one's life such as family, friends, and hobbies (Carbonneau et al., 2008). Students who are high achievers could easily fall into the category of one who has an obsessive passion for learning. Obsessive passion is associated with negative processes, emotions, outcomes, and characteristics (Vallerand, 2008).

In an effort to conceptualize the various forms of passion and academic achievement, several scholars have studied burnout as a means to understand low academic performance of students (Carbonneau et al., 2008). When students are engaged academically, it is the outcome of a process where the university offers an environment in which the student feels competent, autonomous, and related (Connell & Wellborn as cited in Carbonneau et al., 2008). This form of engagement could be behavioral or emotional. Indicators such as effort and intensity make up the behavioral engagement, while interest and enthusiasm make up emotional engagement (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009).

For college students, academic engagement is viewed as a core part of student engagement, the "outcome of a combination of intentions and successful academic and social

integration within the university” (Horstmanshof & Imitated, p. 705, as cited in Stoeber, Childs, Hayward, & Feast, 2011). This engagement for students captures their level of involvement. Moreover, this type of engagement is related to how much students enjoy their program of study and the time and effort invested in their academic coursework.

A study on academic achievement was conducted by Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker (2002) and compared employee engagement and employment burnout (2002). Academic engagement is viewed as a positive and fulfilling experience, consisting of an absorption, determination, and vigor (time invested in studies) to complete tasks (Griffin, 2006). These three aspects of engagement are directly connected to higher levels of academic achievement, proactive and preventive coping with stress, and higher levels of higher personal standards (Griffin, 2006).

### Persistence

Strayhorn (2013), sought to connect the Grit Theory to grades, utilizing a sample of Black males attending predominately White institutions. He sampled 140 Black male students who were enrolled at a large university located in the southeastern part of the United States. A total of 61% of those studied were first generation college students, and 34% were raised in an urban neighborhood (Strayhorn). Utilizing a Black Male Student Success Questionnaire designed by Strayhorn, data were collected during the 2008 spring term. Surveys were administered using the internet in hopes of generating a higher response rate. With the assistance of the university’s registrar, additional recruits were targeted through a random list of students who met the survey’s criteria.

Utilizing Duckworth and Quinn's (2007) Short Grit Scale, participants' grades (dependent variable) were measured using the Grit Scale (Grit S) as the independent variable. After the data were analyzed, it was determined that a correlation existed between the Grit-S scores and Black male college students' grades. The results showed Black students with grit, those who had passion and stamina, had higher college GPAs than their peers who were of the same racial background (Strayhorn, 2013). In addition, it was determined that these Black males with grit, demonstrated higher grades in high school and maintained higher test scores.

Strayhorn (2013) concluded with two main points. First, the grades of Black males at predominately White institutions were associated with grit. Although other Grit assessments conducted had predicted persistence at West Point, as well as with elementary and middle school student's self-efficacy, this study remained one of the first to predict academic outcomes for Black males. This work contributed to the small body of literature on minorities, specifically Black males and what makes them successful at completing college. Secondly, this study confirmed that possessing grit goes far beyond having a gift, stressing the importance of stamina. Moreover, it confirmed that not only did Black male collegians with grit out perform their peers with higher GPAs; when the GPAs of the Black male collegians were compared to the GPAs of their peers, their college grades were much higher.

These results serve as a model for college administrations, as they aim to serve Black males amid the challenges of retention and persistence barriers. Further assisting Black males to obtain grit, by persevering through rigorous challenges of academic life with passion, may see an increase in Black males obtaining their college degrees. With this known the success of the Grit-S in predicting academic outcomes for Black males, the message of perseverance and dedication

to one's task should overshadow the myth of "natural talents" as a means to success (Strayhorn, 2013).

When Black males in college who possess Grit set out to achieve long-term goals, such as a college degree, they are deemed successful (Strayhorn, 2013). Regardless of setbacks, whether they be institutional, family, or others, these students are determined to be successful if they persevere. Strayhorn's confirmed that the formula for achievement consists of both talent and effort. Moreover, completing the work requires long-term consistency, combined with the stamina necessary to complete these goals which matters most (Strayhorn).

Duckworth et al. (2007) defined individuals with grit as possessing perseverance and passion for long-term goals. What sets people with grit apart from others in the same category on the grit scale is its focus on one possessing stamina. Embedded in grit is conscientiousness which requires one to maintain physical and mental strength as well as an appreciation of achieving goals, regardless of obstacles or setbacks. "The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088). Those with grit are known to become obsessed with the intended goal or project, sustaining focus over a long time. During this process, they are achieving goals. In contrast, those with less grit are side tracked or distracted by new projects and goals. These individuals allow setbacks to discourage them. In addition, they fail to achieve the goals they initially establish. They lack consistency when attempting to focus on long term assignments.

### Growing Grit Through Honors Programs

Many programs exist for high achieving students to nurture and grow their grit. They include honors, STEM and several other programs targeting gifted students, which include



African American males. Historically, honors programs were the only places for these students to be among other gifted students, collegially (Rinn, 2003). For the purpose of this study, most of the exemplary literature focused on the historical origins of honors programs and their implications for high achieving African American males. To showcase other programs targeting the nurturing of high achieving Black males, I have included a brief overview of the Meyerhoff Scholars Program as well as STEM.

Honors programs have been evolving since the 1920s by developing into two waves midway through the 20th century (Rinn, 2003). Ayddelotte, known as the founder of Honors education, established the first honors program at Swarthmore College (Rinn). Addressing the audience at his inaugural address, he concluded with these words:

Perhaps the most fundamentally wasteful feature of our educational institutions is the lack of a higher standard of intellectual attainment. We are educating more students up to a fair average than any country in the world, but we are wastefully allowing the capacity of the average to prevent us from bringing the best up to the standards they could reach. Our most important task at the present is to check this waste. The method of doing it seems clear: to separate those students who are really interested in intellectual life from those who are not. (Rinn, in Wood, 2011, p. 43)

During the time of this address, institutions of higher education were growing along with their students; thereby increasing the number of “intellectual abilities” (Rinn). Ayddelotte believed that colleges should offer all students the opportunity to develop their greatest potential intellectually while studying (Rinn, 2003). As a result, honors colleges and programs grew throughout other institutions of higher learning.

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, honors programs and colleges were established in over 60% of four-year institutions and 40% of two-year colleges (Baker et al., 2000). Honors students are selected to participate in the various programs in which they are enrolled. They are

categorized by selection criteria which normally consists of grade point averages and ACT or SAT scores (Baker et al., 2000). There is no consistent benchmark by which a student is brought in to an honors program. Each school's cut-offs vary depending on the institution (Geiger, 2000). The established criteria of GPA and test scores measure academic aptitude in a single day and over time.

Another word used to describe honors students is advanced. These students have proven their ability by taking challenging college level courses based on their high school transcripts. According to work conducted by Pflaum, Pascarella, and Duby (1985), honors participation has a direct connection to the academic success of its students. Furthermore, Achterberg (2004) studied two groups consisting of honors student and honors caliber students. He reported that freshman who were connected to honors programs had higher contact with faculty, resulting in higher science and technology scores and persisting toward their second year (Achterberg).

### Community College Honors Programs

It was not until the 1980s that community colleges began nurturing their honors program students (Byrne, 1998). Traditionally, there was not much effort by community colleges to serve this population of students (Byrne). Their mission was to assist the students with careers, while serving the economically disadvantaged. In the process, highly motivated, highly skilled, and well-prepared students were ignored. Over time, community colleges have shifted, paying more attention to students seeking academic success (Byrne).

Honors programs at community colleges aim to “serve the dual purpose of meeting the needs of a significant segment of the two-year college student body and of meeting increased public demand for educational quality” (Behrendt, p. 2 as cited in Byrne, 1998). As honors

programs are developed for review, they consist of the following rationales: (a) to assist in meeting the needs of all people; (b) strengthen program quality, specifically in education; (c) recruit and retain great students and excellent faculty; and (d) provide a better reputation within the community (Behrendt as cited in Byrne, 1998). Having honors programs at community colleges was a way all students could be served. This included average students, as well as the high achievers.

One big task honors programs have is preparing their students to transfer to prominent bachelor programs (Achterberg, 2004). This success helps increase the community college reputation of providing academic excellence (Achterberg). According to the Ford Foundation, an honors program plays an integral role in successful transfers of its students, while creating an enhanced reading and writing environment designed for four year institutions (Achterberg).

Throughout the years, goals have been formed to define the mission of honors programs. In 1974, St. Petersburg's honors program goal was to inspire students towards a higher plane of academic success, doing more than average students (Byrne, 1998). At Motlow State Community College, its honors program enhances the standard curriculum using interdisciplinary strategies that have proven successful (Byrne). Miami Dade College's program aims to challenge, stimulate, and involve excellent students with "high academic standards and ambition aspirations" (Thomas, as cited in Bryne).

Honors colleges bring three patterns and/or outcomes to the community college culture. These outcomes are patterned on four-year institutions (Treat & Barnard, 2012). First, these colleges engage in intuitional isomorphism by shifting their culture to adopt policies and practices more in line with four-year colleges (Treat & Barnard). Secondly, the community

college status and credibility within the family of higher education increases (Treat & Barnard). Finally, by including honors within its curriculum, a community college increases the opportunity for high achieving students to rise in the socioeconomic strata (Treat & Barnard). Although these three patterns were copied from other institutions (mainly private), the structure of the honors programs at community colleges is uniquely designed to adapt to its student population (Treat & Barnard).

Because the community college was launched to increase access for many students, developing honors programs at these institutions has come with much criticism. Honors programs utilize a very selective process of admitting students, and this contradicts the environment of access for all which has helped sustained community colleges throughout the years. One critic, Outcalt (1999), stated that honors colleges embed a form of elitism due to this selective admission process which, when mixed into the egalitarian goals of community college, sends a different message opposite of its mission (Outcalt).

How does the community college uphold its true mission of “all being created equal,” when, in fact, honors programs are meant to be a distinguished society, operating in a secluded environment (Outcalt, 1999)? For example, honors students usually receive advanced nurturing by the top-rated faculty (Treat & Barnard, 2012), thereby ensuring an excellent education to advance their educational careers. However, those favoring honors programs have suggested students gain access to higher caliber courses as well as opportunities (Outcalt). As a result, students are more equipped to transfer to more prestigious four-year institutions.

## A Model Honors Program for African American Males

According to Pattillo (2015), many minority students in honors programs may be first-generation students. As a result, their family support or understanding of the academy is limited. Nevertheless, these students are aware of the benefit of a college education and are determined to succeed against the odds (Pattillo, 2015). Stephen F. Austin (SFA) State University in East Texas, where Pattillo served as President at the time of this study, has developed a plan to increase persistence of its minority student in honors programs by embedding transformative learning experiences into the mission of the honors program. The goal is to ensure academic success by increasing graduation rates as well as promoting the program with a proven record. Rather than offer rigid program requirements only, the institution is introducing a mixture of other opportunities, designed to excite students towards a love for education (Pattillo). According to Pattillo, this practice allows for the students to not just succeed academically at the institution, but to continue success beyond college.

Recruitment into SFA Honors is quite engaging. It includes the students in every stage of the process. The students are contacted by mail from a list of interested qualified students. Other entrance into the honors program at SFA is through admission offices as well as faculty recommendation. Students' educational experiences are impacted tremendously as a result of honors programming (Pattillo, 2015). Many honors programs reside in a distinguished community within its academic setting. Students experience smaller class sizes with specialized innovative learning from faculty (Pattillo). For example, honors programs offer semester long study abroad opportunities for students, increasing their cultural exposure. In addition, at SFA,

honors students have the opportunity to obtain experience in research through the Undergraduate Research Conference (Pattillo).

One key benefit to first generation students enrolling in honors at SFA is its commitment to simplifying the admissions process through priority registration (Pattillo, 2015). This is early registration which normally occurs with other unique groups within the college such as athletes, seniors, and student government students. Another academic advantage for these students is the honors computer lab. This benefit helps support students financially who may not be able to afford funds for printing or may not own a personal laptop. In addition, at residential universities, honors students have the luxury to study within quiet areas in their own honors residential halls. Opportunities to collaborate are another key benefit of transformative learning within the honors program at SFA (Pattillo). Students engage in small groups, which enhances their communication and ability to work collaboratively in the workforce. These groups typically take place within the honors hall. Honors students have the opportunity to be employed through various tutoring centers on campus.

Like most honors programs, the end of the year for SFA students culminates with some sort of banquet. For example, students look forward to attending SFA's University Scholars Dinner. At the awards dinner, they are presented with a medallion as well as honor cords to wear at graduation. Families, as well as students, are valued, and their attitudes regarding the value of higher education are often changed. This value is expanded beyond the honored student, spreading to younger siblings as well, who have just been given reason to attend college (Patillo, 2015). SFA's honors program serves its minority population well by providing strong programs geared towards their academic success.

Thomas Haas (2015), President of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) stressed to his institution the importance of providing an education for students that is relevant, rigorous, and offers a great return on their investment. Offering an education that is high quality, while providing students with great concepts and skills, is the surest way to achieve such goals (Haas). At GVSU, the Honors College is helping the institution fulfill this goal by creating an experience for students where they thrive. Its outcome is achieved from the following benchmarks: student learning, co-curricular involvement, and civic engagement (Haas).

Honors enhances education at GVSU by supporting its mission of offering students a relevant education. Students gets the opportunity to team-teach. According to Haas (2015), this practical method provides students with a hands-on approach to learning. Topics include practice of rights, food for thought, and social product innovation. These skills benefit students as they prepare for a global and competitive workforce. Graduating students from this honors program report being better prepared for graduate school as a result of the program (Haas).

The student's experience in honors at Grand Valley State University includes the opportunity to build connections with future employers. For example, Haas (2015) mentioned students are required to complete senior projects which often lead to employment opportunities upon graduation. As a result, these students promote rigor in education by producing excellence in the classroom (Haas).

Other successes for students participating in the honors program are that 42% of Grand Valley State University departmental awards have gone to honors students. In addition, these students' GPAs are higher than the students who were eligible for honors but chose not to participate (Haas, 2015). According to Haas, students cannot lean on their prior abilities alone to

achieve success; an environment, such as an honors program provides, is needed to provide the challenges needed for students to do well. Students who participate in honors at GVSU are “passionate about their research, their study abroad program, their internship and their service learning project (p. 47).”

At Grand Valley State University, 40% of the tutors for mathematics and science are honors students (Haas, 2015). These students serve as model students, promoting and supporting academic and student success on behalf of the entire community.

This example of the honors program at Grand Valley State University is important because it provides concrete examples of how students benefit from a structured, well-designed honors program. More importantly, it promotes the role honors programs play in increasing the value of a college education for all students, including non-honors students (Schreiner, 2010).

#### Meyerhoff Scholars Program

Aside from opportunities they have to enroll in honors programs, African American males also have the ability to be a part of programs which traditionally have underserved ethnic minorities. One program, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program has served as an outlet in reducing isolation of high achieving Black male students as they advance their college careers (Fries-Brit, 1998). This program has been providing opportunities for minority students interested in STEM since 1988.

The Meyerhoff Scholars Program mission is to assist African American male undergraduate students in obtaining Ph.D.'s in math, science and engineering (Meyerhoff, 2017). Assistance was provided in the areas of financial aid, mentoring, advising, as well as research (Meyerhoff, 2017). In 2004, Maton and Hrabowski conducted a study on the Meyerhoff Scholars



Program to determine problems high achieving African Americans were having in the program. These scholars wanted to explain the factors which played a role in retention and graduation of Black STEM majors. The researchers concluded that the following factors contributed to students' success: academic and social integration, strong skill base, consistent support and motivation, and superb advising (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004).

Treisman (1992) conducted an ethnographic study of 20 Black and 20 Chinese students. His findings revealed that the Chinese students were more successful as a result of combining group study with individual study. Researchers also determined that many African American students drop out of STEM related courses due to a weak skill base (Treisman; Williamson, 2010). Unfortunately, they often have not been prepared in high school or have been denied opportunities to enroll in higher level mathematics courses (Williamson, 2010). Nevertheless, according to Williamson, students are able to triumph over adversity by relying on financial support, improving their academic skill set, decreasing the feeling of isolation, and leaning on a strong support system. These common success factors are illustrated through this literature review.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the literature pertinent to the academic success of high achieving African American males. In doing so, I highlighted the historical journey which provides access for Black students to attend college. Next, factors influencing academic success of high achieving Black males were discussed. Finally, the theoretical framework has been discussed, focusing on its tenants, passion, and persistence, as well as an overview of its originality from the family of motivation.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research methods embedded within the dissertation. The chapter begins with a review of the purpose statement and research questions used to guide this study. In addition, it provides the research methods selected for conducting a phenomenological qualitative design to understand factors contributing to the academic success of high achieving African American males in community colleges. Also, the research site is described, as well as the researcher's role, selection of participants, and the importance of building a strong rapport between the researcher and interviewee.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the qualitative nature of academic success of African American males in programs for high achievers at a community college. This study was conducted to examine the internal and external factors which contribute to the persistence of high achieving African American males. In addition, the researcher reviewed the programs targeting undergraduate African American males at the institution attended by participants in the study.

### Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences and subsequent stories of high achieving African American males enrolled at the community college?
2. What are the strategies high achieving African American males have developed when faced with challenges while pursuing post-secondary education at the community college?

### Methodological Overview and Design

This study's purpose relates naturally to the design of qualitative research. As a result of a qualitative research method consisting primarily of interviews, I attempted to explore the qualitative nature of academic success of African American males in programs at a community college.

According to Creswell (2013), utilizing a qualitative research design assists the researcher in gaining an in-depth understanding of the problem. To provide a deeper understanding of the academic success of high achieving African American males at a community college, Duckworth's Grit Theory (2007) was utilized as the principle theory guiding the study's drafted questions and conceptualization. Typical of a qualitative research design, the format of questioning was provided through several rounds of interviews (Creswell, 2013). This contributed to increasing interviewees' comfort levels with the researcher as well as build trust. More importantly, this format provided participants time to deliver a deeper synopsis of their experiences. The qualitative approach was intended to increase the researcher's ability to produce accurate assessments regarding participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

By using a qualitative approach, data are gathered mainly via voice from the participants in a natural environment. Capturing this voice is important when understanding the lived experiences of participants. This approach allows for the explanation of the experience's subjective voice to occur without bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Moreover, qualitative studies provide the opportunity for both predicted and unpredicted outcomes from the voice of the marginalized participants (Denzin & Lincoln).

When utilizing a qualitative design, there is no right or wrong method, technique or procedure to use (Denzin & Lincoln). Many researchers conducting studies through a qualitative design have used methods including cultural studies, ethnography, observation, phenomenology, and surveys. When using qualitative research, the data are collected and analyzed through illustrations and words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). A hypothesis is formulated after it is learned why and how an event occurs. (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

### Moustakas' Phenomenology

The goal of conducting qualitative studies is to comprehend a phenomenon among the participants (Creswell, 2003). By using a phenomenological, qualitative approach I attempted to understand interviewees' points of view from which they were motivated to achieve despite many circumstances and challenges.

Phenomenology was the design strategy guiding this study. This approach studies the nature of the lived experiences of participants as well as focusing on their worldview and perception of reality (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers, who conduct a phenomenological study, have as their end goal the creation of an environment where participants revisit their experiences, thereby creating an opportunity for reflective analysis (Moustakas).

The phenomenological research design is one of five human science research methods utilized as a part of a qualitative study. Ethnography, heuristic research, grounded theory, and hermeneutics comprise the other four (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas, the goal of a phenomenological study is to understand the meaning of the participant's experience. The data are collected from the participants and packaged by the characteristics of their lived experiences (Moustakas).

Creswell (2013) agreed with Moustakas' (1994) opinion that in order to present a sound analysis from collected data, the researcher should ask the following: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts and experience of situations have influenced or affected your experiences?" (p. 81). It is important to understand and know that qualitative research is time consuming, that it requires detailed gathering of data and exploration, as well as finalizing reports (Creswell, 2013).

### Research Population and Recruitment

Students selected to participate in the present study were degree-seeking Black males enrolled at a community or state college in Florida. These students had maintained at least a 3.0 GPA, and were members of the Honors Program, or other program, designed to nurture the academic development of high achieving students. Participants were referred for participation in the study by the various faculty and staff members who worked directly with them inside and outside of the classroom.

### Research Site

This study took place at a large state college in the southeast region of the United States whose mission relates historically to community college education. At the time of the study, the college's population consisted of over 30,000 students and was one of the nation's fastest growing two-year institutions. It was one of the fastest growing colleges, with multiple locations and a diverse student body, exhibiting the following racial demographics: 17% Black, 4% Asian, 26% Hispanic, and 3% two or more races, 48% Caucasian and 2% Unknown. The college's gender make-up was 54% female, 43% male, and 3% who did not declare gender.

### Sampling Techniques

This study used purposive sampling. This allowed the researcher to identify participants who met the requirements of the study's framework. In addition, this sampling method relied on the judgement of the researcher in selecting participants who could assist by providing the most important data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

### Data Gathering

Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received (Appendix C), I recruited all participants for this research. Recruitment was supported by Honors and STEM related faculty and staff. The goal was to interview at least seven students who met the design criteria and who agreed to participate. In addition, a meet and greet was held prior to the interviews to develop a greater rapport with the participants (Cresswell, 2014). Targeted recruits were forwarded an email detailing the study and asking for their participation.

### Confidentiality

Prior to conducting the interview protocol, participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix D). In addition, I provided them an overview of the interview schedule and process and emphasized their privacy and confidentiality of responses. For this study, pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of each participant. In addition, information collected was stored and secured in a private, locked office.

### Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was created from critical elements of the literature review as well as constructs from the theoretical framework. The interview was guided by the pre-established

questions listed in Appendix E, and asked in a manner where each participant could easily comprehend to allow for detailed and descriptive responses (Creswell, 2013). In addition, prior to the start of the interview, participants were encouraged to take their time with their responses and to reconnect with the researcher within the established interview protocol if clarifications or additional responses were needed.

Questions for the interview protocol were developed from the literature review, focusing on the internal and external factors contributing to the persistence of high achieving African American males. Questions were also developed from tenets of the theoretical framework. The complete interview protocol is found within Appendix E.

#### Data Analysis

A digital audio recorder was used to record the interviews. They were then uploaded to an external and online device. Once uploaded, the data were transcribed by a professional transcription organization. Confidentiality agreement forms were also administered. In-depth reading of the transcripts took place following transcription. In addition, a journaling process occurred to collect additional data. This method helped me understand further, the experiences of the participants as well as offer support and confirmation of the information from the interviews. After all the steps were completed, I utilized the follow Moustakas' six-step process of analysis:

Step 1 (Bracketing). Prior to coding my data, I formulated my personal beliefs regarding my research through a method known as bracketing. This helped eliminate any preconceived bias and previous knowledge of the population studied. Moustakas (1994) named this process the epoche. After reading and listening to the transcripts, I obtained the main idea by bracketing key statements and phrases with the hopes of defining them.

Step 2 (Horizontalization). This step allowed me to capture the participants “lived experiences” through a format called horizontalization. Given (2008) defined this process as eliminating words and replacing with synonyms or similar vocabulary which are of equal value to the original. An example of the horizontalization process is included in Appendix F.

Steps 3 & 4 (Clustering and Themes). Once the horizontalization was completed, statements of similar meaning were grouped. One benefit of these two steps was to recognize patterns and correlations within sentences. In addition, I organized the statements and structured them based on the various themes and/or labels from the actual words of the participants (Creswell, 2014).

Step 5 (Contextual and Structural Description). In this step, I established a connection between the themes which emerged, followed by developing a contextual description utilizing the primary meaning of the themes. As a result, the experiences of the participants were summarized (Stemson & Dumas, 2013). In addition, I shared the variables that influenced their experiences within the analysis.

Step 6 (Composite Description). This process painted a picture of the shared experiences of each participant studied. Moustakas (1994) described this as the process of developing a creative synthesis.

### Validity and Reliability of the Study

According to Creswell (2014), validity and reliability helps increase the value of the study. Furthermore, this process confirms its worthiness among professional reviewers (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). It remains the strength of qualitative studies and determines if the study results are valid on behalf of the researcher, interviewees, and the study’s readers



(Creswell, 2014). Although Creswell (2014) recommended embedding at least two of these strategies within one’s study, I utilized four of them. They included: triangulation, member checking, external audit and rich, thick description. Table 2 contains the four validation strategies that have been performed in this study along with the description of each and their relationship to the study.

Table 2

*Validation Strategies*

Validation Strategies	Description	Relationship to Study
Triangulation	Utilization of multiple sources, methods and theories to ensure evidence is accurate	Various sources were acquired by interviewing seven participants who experienced the same phenomenon
Member Checking	Researcher seeks participants’ views on the findings, so they can assess accuracy and credibility.	Participants of the study were allowed to review the transcripts to check for accuracy.
External Audit	External auditor examined the process and product of account.	Dissertation chair served as external auditor and assessed whether the findings were supported by the collected data.
Rich, thick description	Description may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences.	Description was provided in the discussion portion of the last chapter of the dissertation outlining the meaning extracted from the conceptual framework and how it related to the findings.

*Note:* Adapted from “Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches” by J. W. Creswell, 2014, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

As recommended by Creswell (2014), the reliability of the study was confirmed by reviewing the transcripts to check for any errors that could have been made during the

transcription process. Also, I wrote field notes during the interviews to record the non-verbal cues and other observations during the interview process.

#### Originality Score

This manuscript was submitted to iThenticate and my dissertation chair shared the report with my committee during my scheduled defense.

#### Summary

This research was intended to seek an understanding of African American males in programs targeting high achievers at a community college: exploring the qualitative nature of academic success. Pertinent information regarding the proposed population, research questions, data collection, and approach to analysis as well as other information related to collected data has been presented in this chapter. Based on the research population, the phenomenological method was the best approach to consider. The outline presented, serves as a model for further research and studies on this topic.

## CHAPTER 4 A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the profiles of the seven high-achieving community college Black males who participated in this study. This panoramic view is derived from my experience with the participants as a researcher and the direct quotations capturing their lived experiences, challenges and opportunities. These descriptions will allow the reader the opportunity to learn about the participants' backgrounds and personalities. Unfortunately, this format does not allow me to share in narrative form the non-verbals the participants exemplified throughout their interviews. However, I hope to provide an unambiguous portrayal of each individual, thereby allowing the reader a better opportunity to develop a visualization.

Once the participants were recruited via email, each of them responded within 48 hours, confirming their participation in this study. After receiving their confirmation, each participant was contacted immediately to schedule an interview. Prior to interviewing each student, I decided to invite them all to a "meet and greet" to establish rapport and review the purpose of the study and their involvement. This extra prelude to the interviews proved to be helpful, allowing the individuals to meet those who exemplified similar characteristics and had a passion for learning. In addition, this extra time with the participants enhanced trust between them and me. Also, it was good for them to know they were not alone in an environment which very seldom highlighted their academic successes. More importantly, the initial meeting opened the door for an honest and open dialogue.

Each participant attended the same institution and was a part of the college's honors and STEM programs. I had the privilege of working with two of the students directly in my role at the institution and the remaining five were referred by faculty and staff.

### Participant Descriptions

The study consisted of seven males who were all enrolled at the community college during the time of the interviews. Each participant attended the same institution but had limited knowledge of each other. All the students were of African descent and had a 3.0 or higher GPA at the time of the interview. Profiles of each participants are described in Table 3. Each individual participated in one personal interview which lasted 320 minutes combined. Six of the seven attended the meet and greet. The interview protocol afforded me the opportunity to collect data relating to their upbringing and educational experiences as well as factors motivating their academic success. In an effort to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms that are used throughout the remainder of this study.

Many of the students had a lot in common. For example, five of the seven students came from households where both parents resided. For the other two participants, one had a relationship with his father, while another one did not. The students' ages ranged from 19-26, and all but one were first-generation college students. This range was consistent with the average age of 25 at the institution studied. However, the most interesting shared characteristic of the participants was that more than half were of Caribbean descent. Also, one of the seven participants was married. All participants were a part of the Honors Program and had been involved in gifted programs, taking AP and honors courses throughout high school.

Table 3

*Participants' Profiles*

Participant's Pseudonym	Honor or STEM Student	Age	Year in School	Ethnicity	Raised by
Darren	Honors and STEM	22	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Bahamian	Mother
Barry	Honors	25	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Black	Both parents
Ethan	Honors and STEM	20	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Haitian-American	Both parent
Gabriel	Honors	26	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Black	Both parents
Lemuel	Honors	19	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Black	Both Parents
Antwone	Honors	23	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Black	Mother
Josiah	Honors	20	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Black	Both Parents

Darren

(uhm) I went to seven different high schools--or, not high schools, seven different elementary schools because we're moving a lot. And then (uhm) one of them was from getting accepted into the gifted program. And we had a dual school. So, our school didn't have a gifted program so they would send five of us on a bus to go to another school every single Tuesday.

And then middle school, I went to one and then I got expelled. And I went to another. And then, high school, I just kind of skated by because I was really bent on going into the military. And then I got a--it turns out I couldn't join the military because I got a--arrested when I was 12. (Transcript D, Page 4, Lines 79-86)

Darren was my fourth student to interview. I had known him prior to our meeting, as he was a student leader in my department. Although, he and I chatted previously above the surface of his life's journey, we never conversed below the iceberg of his lived experiences and challenges this interview provided. As a result, I was anticipating this conversation. Darren

always seemed busy. His life story is a constant battle of overcoming obstacles, influenced by ongoing personal challenges. This day was no different. I gathered from his body language his effort to conceal this trouble, but I commended him for showing up to the interview.

Darren comes across as being optimistic and kind. Although his interview was not the longest, lasting only 32 minutes, the depth of his story was quite intriguing. Darren's father abandoned him and his family at a very early age, leaving his mother as a single parent. His mom raised him and his six siblings in the southeastern region of the United States. As one could imagine, his journey was not easy. Being the youngest of six, transitioning from house to house became the norm.

At an early age, Darren witnessed adversity head on. Two of his older brothers were convicted of murder followed by an older sister addicted to drugs and another sister giving birth to a child while a teenager. Despite all these distractions, his mother didn't stop promoting education as the key to success.

### Barry

And for years, it's in middle school with change or I said to myself, "I'm going to try to do my best." Since then, I went to the lowest grade but I also was one of the top people in my class. I was very surprised of the results.

My parents, especially my father, really pushed me to continue with school. Everyone told me, "You see [inaudible 00:06:20] whether I have the ability to do things. But me, I didn't really believe in myself, ey, I didn't really like school. So, I tried in the middle school, really tried and--yeah, I was really--I was really surprised of the results. When you really put your effort into that because I'm not naturally smart. I need to study. (Transcript B, Page 4, Lines 87-95)

Barry was my third student to participate in the study. He attended the open house. He was very eager to continue forward to the next phase of the interview process. I noticed earlier on Barry's shyness. During the meet and greet, he was one of the quieter ones. However, during

our interview, Barry was ready to talk, and share his story. Barry and I had met briefly in the semester, but the interview was the most time we have shared. Like many of the participants, Barry came recommended from faculty. His dialect was quite strong as he was raised in France.

Barry was a very polite individual. He knew in advance he would be late for the interview, so he took the time to call. I enjoyed this interview, because I knew this was an opportunity for his voice to be heard of his journey all the way from France to the United States to pursue education. What was most intriguing in this interview were the sacrifices made in reaching his goal.

Although Barry's interview was not the longest, the 32 minutes spent was quite insightful. He was born in Haiti but was raised by both parents where education was pushed, especially by his father in France. Though his parents are fluent in Creole, Barry is not. His father led his family to France to pursue a better life and education for his family. It was this same drive and sacrifice which guided his mother and brother to the United States higher education system, while leaving his father behind to work. I gathered from my conversation with Barry, it was challenges such as these that motivated him forward.

Barry has maintained a 3.0 at his institution. However, his desire to pursue academic excellence started prior to his enrollment in the community college. He learned the results of hard work while in middle school when he was placed in gifted programs. This same hard work propelled him to graduate in the top 10% of his high school class, as well as participate in his school's honors program.

Ethan

Haitian parents can be kind of strict. My parents are the most strictest of people but they're really on top of me, especially my mom. My mom's constantly watching over me,

making sure that I do things right. She wants--like they both want to make sure that I'm going what they consider to be what's best for me. My dad, he's also watching over me but my mom, I feel like, is a lot more strict about a lot of things. (Transcript E, Page 3, Lines 89-93)

When I realized I would be studying this population, Ethan was one of the students I had introduced myself to earlier. Believe it or not, he would be the last to confirm his participation. Ethan was quite edgy, cancelling the first appointment, and was late to the actual interview. Of the seven participants, he was the only one who was unable to participate in the impromptu gathering. I wanted Ethan's voice for the mere fact that he was of Haitian descent, and I have not heard a lot about Haitian academic successes, recorded or written.

Ethan's parents were both born in Haiti and raised him and his brother in New Jersey. When Ethan called and said he was on his way, I asked Darren, who was waiting for his scheduled interview time, if Ethan could have his slot. Thankfully, he agreed.

Ethan arrived in my office, appearing very tall and wearing glasses. To me, he reflected the epitome or aura of someone who was serious about his education. Once we started our conversation, like the rest, Ethan too was grateful his story was being told. Though his interview was the shortest of the seven, lasting only 21 minutes, it was quite informative. Ethan answered each question enthusiastically and optimistically.

#### Gabriel

I am currently employed. And I work about 40 hours. It's a contracting job so I can kind of have the flexibility because it's engineering contracting so it's assigned jobs. (uhm) I kind of have the freedom to schedule like when I'm going to do a site visit with a customer and to do the construction that they need necessary. But generally, in the office, I'm there from 36 to 40 hours. (Transcript G, Page3, Lines 85-89)

Gabriel was the oldest and last student to be interviewed. Before inviting him to participate in the impromptu meet and greet, we had not interacted previously. At first, he was



quite quiet during the meet and greet, which was understandable, considering everyone had not known each other prior to. For both meetings, Gabriel was prompt. On the day of the interview, he arrived 15 minutes ahead of schedule. He was preparing to leave for the military within weeks. The time had arrived to listen to Gabriel's story. He was very detailed in his responses. The interview began promptly and lasted longer than any other participant's interview, 33 pages and 87 minutes later. The once quiet student had a lot to talk about. Gabriel placed his motorcycle helmet to the side and began answering every question in detail. The dialogue went on as if we had known each other for over a decade.

Gabriel grew up in Queens, New York. His parents birthed him at a very early age. His mom was 16 and his dad was 17. His parents never married but established a great relationship and partnership in raising him. Although his parents were not together, he still grew up in an environment that was loving, supporting, and promoted success. Also, he was a "mama's boy." After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the military. He didn't enroll in college until he was 24. Gabriel was the only participant who was married.

### Lemuel

And just after talking to a couple of people, talking to my dad, talking to my mom, talking to a couple of my friends, they we're kind of telling me that, "You get a more hands-on experience by going to a community college." (Transcript C, Page 7, Lines 166-168)

Lemuel was my sixth student to interview, as well as my first participant to respond. I have never in my life met someone who enjoys learning as much as he and his brother do. The fire for education that Lemuel possesses can be seen from within his eyes. Lemuel was waiting on me for the interview--that's how excited he was to share his story. Earlier in the semester, I presented my study concept to Lemuel. After all the approvals had been confirmed through IRB,

I expressed my interest in his participation. After months of silence, I received a text from him inquiring about the interviews.

Lemuel attended the meet and greet as well. Therefore, the protocol and rapport were established earlier on. Since it was during lunch, he wanted my permission to eat his lunch while recording. So, crunching on an apple and other vegan related foods, it was time to talk. His answers were very clear and direct. He did not shy away from any responses. His interview with me lasted 40 minutes and 35 seconds. Lemuel is a second-year student.

Lemuel was raised by both his mother and father in the same household (three boys and four girls). He learned early on how to share and save (food and money). He grew up in a very religious and structured environment. Lemuel's thirst for knowledge began at an early age when he was studying the scriptures. His mother played a crucial role in his excitement for education. When the children were smaller, she worked non-stop to introduce Lemuel and his siblings to newer ways of learning. This investment paid off.

Currently, Lemuel has a 3.9 GPA in college. Consistent with other members of the study, Lemuel's desire to pursue academic excellence began during his K-12 years and his attendance at a charter school. Pursuing higher education was something Lemuel had always inspired to complete.

#### Antwone

So, my mom is a single parent. I don't know my dad. And she lives with her parents. And then her brother, who was a victim of a drunk driver, didn't kind of get pieced back together properly, lives with us, too. And it's always been the five of us. (Transcript A, Page 2, Lines 194-196)

Antwone was the first student to be interviewed. Antwone was a student leader in my office, and I approached him when I realized what kind of study I would complete. He responded

to my formal request quite quickly and was on time and ready to talk. I knew that for this interview I needed to reserve additional time, since he is quite talkative. His interview was the second longest, lasting 64 minutes. He is a two-time SGA President, who is never short on words. All we needed was a rocking chair, a front porch, and some old-fashioned southern ice tea. Antwone has been waiting a long time for this moment. Finally, it appeared.

Antwone was raised in the country in central Florida by a village which consisted of his mother, uncle, grandfather, and the matriarch of the family, his grandmother. Antwone never met his father. He credited his grandmother as his motivation, as she always encouraged him to continue to make progress. With the absence of his father, Antwone was very close to his mother as well. This mother/son friendship bond is one of the reasons he decided to stay locally to pursue his Associate in Arts degree at the community college. As a first-generation college student, the odds were stacked against him, upon arriving at the institution. As a result, he understands the importance of networking and relationship building.

#### Josiah

(Uh) I've lived in the same house since I was born, so the past 20 years. (Uhm) Yeah, literally, I've never been anywhere else so much. We've traveled a little bit but my entire life has literally been an hour--an hour from here. I've never grown up or raised anywhere else other than right here in Central Florida. (Transcript F, Page 1, Lines 19-22)

Josiah was the older brother of Lemuel. He too had a fire for education. Like his brother, he had that academic presence. He was tall, wore glasses, and always walked as if he knew where he was going. Our interview occurred around 6 pm in the evening, and lasted 45 minutes. Prior to it starting, he had a phone call from his girlfriend, with whom he had not spoken all day (not to mention that she did not know he was staying later than usual for an interview). Nevertheless, Josiah kindly indicated to her that he would call back.

Josiah took academics very seriously. Although his brother received only one B, Josiah has earned all As throughout his academic studies. Josiah came across as very mature. His Hebrew religion, growing up, was very important to his family. It was a part of his early childhood upbringing. However, by the time Josiah entered college, he was not so sure that Hebrew was the path for him.

Josiah's college experience has been about exploring new ideas. These new experiences have matured Josiah far beyond his years. As we entered the interview, I noticed how important education was to him. In addition, like all the participants, Josiah was very hopeful and optimistic. At this point, nothing seemed to stop his momentum of pressing forward towards completing all his educational goals.

### Summary

This chapter was aimed at providing a description of each participant, along with a few descriptive adjectives to enhance their profiles. Their expressions conveyed through their communication embodied students who value higher education enough to keep pursuing their goals. Their voices are captured in more depth in the upcoming chapter.

## CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH FINDINGS: VOICING THE UNSPOKEN

### Introduction

My goal as a researcher was to offer an in-depth descriptive analysis focusing on the lived experiences, challenges and opportunities of high achieving Black males at the community college. This chapter allowed me to analyze the participants' voices descriptively. As discussed in Chapter 3, this was achieved using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology approach, utilizing his six-step process: (a) bracketing; (b) horizontalization; (c) clustering; (d) themes; (e) contextual and structural description; and (f) composite description. First, prior to coding and reviewing the data, I wanted to eliminate any potential biases or assumptions, as well as prior information relating to the topic through a process known as bracketing I may have had regarding the problem and its target population (Moustakas, 1994). I wanted to review the data from an open place and thought this process was important in establishing the voices of the participants. Furthermore, I wanted to step back and make sure what I perceived high achievers to be was not what was characterized within my coding.

As mentioned in chapter 3, I hired a professional transcriptionist who carefully transcribed the participants' voices verbatim. Once the transcripts were received, I was able to begin reading them. I was able to extract emerging themes, thus completing Steps 2 through 6 (Moustakas, 1994). As I worked to complete the second step, I began highlighting key phrases and themes while reading. This method allowed me to decrease the data and extract meaning from the highlighted key phrases and themes. Moustakas called this process horizontalization.

I read through the data repeatedly to ensure that I was thoroughly understanding all of the information. Any compelling statements directly equated to the studied phenomenon regarding

the lived experiences and subsequent challenges of high achieving Black males enrolled at the community college in any way were highlighted as significant (Creswell, 2013). An example of the horizontalization step appears in Appendix F. Once important phrases were underlined, key words defining the phrase were listed next to each statement.

As I attempted to cluster important phrases into themes (Moustakas, 1994), I reduced the data by deleting statements that were duplicated or incomplete along with those that overlapped. Once confirmed, the themes were organized within a table (Table 4) along with all of the participants' views that could be associated with each theme.

The transcripts contain the direct verbatim quotations cited in this dissertation. In an effort to maintain privacy, certain words were altered in order to preserve the anonymity of each participant. The quotations cited are verbatim in order to capture the true essence of the participants' words and meaning. Once the steps were completed, the themes were reduced from eight to six. These final six themes were: (a) Strong parental involvement, (b) Campus involvement, (c) An early start, (d) Guilt, (e) Failure is not an option, and (f) Academic success (Table 4). The other two themes which emerged from the original list of eight included work and the joy of learning.

Table 4

*Emergent Themes*

Theme	Antwone	Barry	Darren	Ethan	Gabriel	Josiah	Lemuel
1) Strong parental support	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2) Campus involvement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3) An early start	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4) Failure is not an option	X		X		X	X	X
5) Guilt	X		X	X		X	X
6) Academic Success	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Textural Description of Emergent Themes: Expressions of the Unspoken

The primary research questions which guided this study were concerned with (a) the lived experiences and subsequent stories of high achieving African American males enrolled in community college and (b) the strategies high achieving African American males have developed when faced with challenges while pursuing post-secondary education at the community college. By utilizing an arrangement of sub-questions divided into categories relating to demographics, the literature review, and theoretical framework, I was able to find answers to the primary questions. The collected data produced the responses to these questions and has been summarized by emerging themes. The themes were then examined through both textural and structural lens as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Table 5 contains the emergent themes and the association of each with the two research questions which guided the study.

Table 5

*Relationship of Research Questions to Emergent Themes*

Research Question	Emergent Themes
1. What are the lived experiences and subsequent stories of high achieving Black males enrolled in community college?	Strong parental support Campus involvement An early start Guilt
2. What are the strategies high achieving Black males have developed when faced with challenges while pursuing post-secondary education at the community college?	Academic success Failure is not an option



## Theme 1: Strong Parental Support

### Textural Description

Support from family was an emergent theme among all the participants. Throughout the transcripts, participants described their mother and father's influence on their academic success. All but one participant who grew up in a single-parent home, were raised by both parents. As a group, the participants conveyed the value their parents, single mom, grandparents, church, and friends had on their mission in achieving academic success. For instance, Gabriel had this to say about his family support: "My family was very supportive, you know, it was a community raising me" (Transcript G, Page 4, Lines 137-138). Despite any challenges that came from their upbringing, family remained their primary support group. Barry described how his parents, especially his father, played a significant role in encouraging him to pursue academic success.

And it's--both my parents encouraged me to go to school. But like I said, specifically my father because my father come from Haiti and he came to France to study. And he was really on his own. He was--he clearly was working. At the same time, he had a family, he went to school. He's finished with a master's in finance, a bachelor's in accounting. So, he know--he told me he know that "The college in university is not easy but you must keep it going. Even if you fail the class two or three times, you must keep going, keep going--" (Transcripts B, Page 3, Lines 82-87).

Ethan, too, mentioned how much influence his parents had on his academic success. This added push from his parents contributed to his ability to persist and move forward. He said when relating his parents to his academic career, "They're constantly pushing me – constantly. Honestly, if they weren't around, just to kind of remind me...I probably would not have made it through the semester" (Transcript E, Page 7, Lines 285-287).

Haitian parents can be kind of strict. My parents are the most strictest of people but they're really on top of me, especially my mom. My mom's constantly watching over me, making sure that I do things right. She wants--like they both want to make sure that I'm going what they consider to be what's best for me. My dad, he's also watching over me

but my mom, I feel like, is a lot more strict about a lot of things (Transcript E, Page 3, Lines 89-93).

Lemuel, as well as his brother Josiah, discussed the role their parents played in their becoming academically successful. Lemuel suggested, “My parents paid a toll because though they didn’t go to college, both did go to a form of technical education” (Transcript C, Page 6, Lines 193-194). His brother, Josiah, expressed the same gratitude regarding parental support.

My parents have always, you know, said to me that, you know, they think I'm special and they think that I'm going to do really, really good and you're so smart.” That one of the reasons I honestly am always trying to do good is because I--in the back of my head, I do kind of want to live up to that expectation that they'd kind of beseeched on me for so long that, you know, “You're got to be this. You're going to be that. (Transcript F, Page 14, Lines 457-462)

## Theme 2: An Early Start

### Textural Description

One common theme that was popular among the participants was their having developed an excitement for academics at an early age. This theme resonated throughout the interviews on several occasions within each interview. Once I recognized this pattern, it became clear to me that these participants did not view learning as a chore, but a part of life--a part of life that was encouraged long before adolescence.

Learning, for these participants, was never a challenge or difficult. It seemed the more the students were exposed to learning, the more natural it became--learning was enjoyable. Darren expressed, “When I was younger, I used to read the encyclopedia. I was actually that kid; I’d read four pages of the encyclopedia daily” (Transcript D, Page 5, Lines 136-137). According to Lemuel, “I went to a charter school, not too far from my house. The reason why I went there is because I was home schooled my whole life before then. During this early age, my mom educated us on history stories” (Transcript C, Page 2, Lines 40-42).

It continued with Gabriel as well who talked about his experience growing up in New York. Gabriel stated, “So I read a lot on my own, you know. And then I’ve been the type of person that’ll pick up a book on anything that interests me. It’s usually non-fiction, but a lot of education earlier on” (Transcript G, Page 3, Lines 79-80). Ethan too discussed his early start in learning, and how it contributed to his grit. This is what he had to say:

If anything, it might be kind of, I guess, in a way, books. I don't necessarily how I used to kind of got into reading. When I was younger, I used to read a lot. I just kind of, I guess, you're just constantly reading, reading and reading. Eventually, finding words along reading books and I'm like, “I don't understand what this word is. Let me go look it up.” And I'd look up that word and I find out. “Oh, this is--okay, that's what that word means.” As well as I'll sometimes use those words whenever I'm talking to people and then people won't understand what I'm saying but reading a lot. (Transcript E, Page 4, Lines 167-173)

### Theme 3: Guilt

#### Textural Description

The feeling of guilt stood out among many participants relating to their ability to learn quickly and produce excellence in academics. Guilt was unplanned and earned as a result of being taught to learn at an early age. Many of them were made to feel guilty by other students, teachers, and family members.

Ironically, for most of the participants, their guilt was associated with being ashamed. Ethan explained this guilt, “At the end of my senior year in high school, I was made top 50 in the county for academic achievement. My picture was in the local newspaper as well as announced all over campus. I never felt more ashamed and guilty at the same time. I felt totally not cool” (Transcript E, Page 4, Lines 138-140).

Antwone discussed his first memory of guilt, experienced while in a gifted program in middle school. He explained his experience of academic success was something he

inherited/learned at home but could not understand the feeling of guilt and shame connected with it. Antwone explained,

Yes. I would say both because when you look at it, the guilty and ashamed would be that growing up. The fact that it's not my fault that you put books in front of me and I can read them like that and you have these other kids who clearly aren't getting it. That's, you know--it's tough because at home it's celebrated but at school it's not. And your teacher is literally the one saying, "Why are you like this?" (Transcript A, Page 10, Lines 298-302)

Also speaking on his feeling of guilt for pursuing academic success, Darren's guilt was related to the time it took to complete assignments, compared to his peers. Also, he stressed that if he committed just a little bit more time, his GPA would exceed his B average. Darren elaborated further by saying,

I have felt extremely ashamed and guilty (uh) mainly because there's people with less gifts that put in a lot more work and either they achieve the same level or they go further. And it's not that I feel wasted, I just feel I could apply more, you know? Like, I apply a lot but I--I could be able to apply more. And when I see someone do with less and make it like really well, it's just like "Wow, they didn't have whatever burdens on them or whatever struggles. They could do that. And then for me it's just like, "I could've done better than--so there is that. (Transcript D, Page 4, Lines 112-117)

Josiah's response was most interesting. He presented guilt in a way that I never imagined. Josiah cleverly correlated guilt associated with his academic success to the concept of being privileged. As an example, he provided a detailed description of how guilt and privilege could be interrelated. He said,

Being honest, guilty might be a proper word to describe it. It's not--because it's not something like I feel guilty because I know I didn't do anything wrong. But something--it's--there's a term that a lot of millennials talk about. They talk about things like different privileges that people have. So, you know, you might--you know, you have--two parents is a form of privilege. Being White could be a form of privilege. Being a male or a female, depending on where you are, could be a privilege. I feel, sometimes, like my brain is a privilege that a lot of people just don't get. And so, it sometimes just makes me--if anything--all it would do, it makes me think about is, "What is it that I can do with whatever that I was given?" Whether it's gifted or however it is, I just sometimes feel like the fact that I have this gift, if you want to call it--I've always felt like I want to do

something to help other people because I'm fortunate enough to have this gift so I want to do everything with that gift to better other people's lives. (Transcript F, Page 6, Line 187-194)

#### Theme 4: Campus Involvement

##### Textural Description

One of the things that stood out in the themes was that each participant valued the importance of involvement and/or relationships. I witnessed this firsthand during our meet and greet, and it seemed to galvanize the like minds of academicians achieving excellence in the classroom. What I learned from the descriptions was that these students unanimously contributed their progression in college to their ability to connect with others.

Furthermore, these students expressed this involvement as a primary reason for their student success. In addition, this involvement improved their communication skills and provided opportunities for networking. More importantly, it provided the opportunity for them to develop a feeling of community or family away from home.

For Ethan, involvement played a key role in his progression. He provided details as to how this involvement allowed for camaraderie in understanding the challenges of class assignments. Ethan explained,

Being able to find students who are either taking the same class as you or have already taken that class and kind of understand that feeling of that struggle when you're in that class. And a lot of times you're in the classroom and it's just like, "Oh my gosh, how in the world am I going to be able to go through this?" But then some people--well, they're like, "Well, I've already been through this" so they understand that feeling or they going through it with you just like, "Come on, we've got this. We can power through together." So as long as you have that person there, you can kind of communicate with--or you kind of share--have that shared relationship with and develop this kind of - it works out, somehow, in the end. Some classes are a lot harder than others so. And that connection really does help. (Transcript E, Page 5, Lines 183-191)

For Darren, it was the friends he met outside of the classroom who assisted him through some of the most challenging moments while pursuing his education. Similar to Ethan, Darren thought this was an added value as a student. Darren explained:

For me, I would say it was really important. So, when I started, I guess the drive, right? Because then you--you get to school and you're just doing your own thing and you're not really talking to anybody. I guess, some people just click in the beginning. You're just kind of getting stuck in that monotonous routine. And then you make friends. And then you talk about the work. And then there's that--that friendly competition and you're helping each other - the sense of camaraderie that helps you go. I don't think it is necessarily integral to being successful. But it definitely helps to have like that--that support of everyone wanting you to succeed because everyone's doing the same thing. Everyone's coming to college and they're trying to graduate. And it's like a group effort, at times. Like, no one--no one really wants to let you fall behind. (Transcript E, Page 6, Lines 178-188)

Antwone added his thoughts on connecting with others, focusing on his student organization involvement as a contributing factor to his ability to achieve academically.

So, when I started college, I wanted to perform like I wanted to come in, get good grades, get out. And coming to--I had--I went to different campuses, by doing that, I ended up joining Honors, joining Phi Beta Kappa. But I also ended up going to a leadership retreat. (Transcript A, Page 11, Lines 333-335)

Like Ethan, Darren and Antwone, Josiah provided a more descriptive narrative of the benefits of connecting with others while on campus. For me, Josiah's comments on campus involvement, went beyond his current point of student life. He explained how campus involvement has helped him develop purpose and a career direction. Here is Josiah in his own words:

Networking is amazing. Getting to know people now, that way five years later you have a job application and you know someone's in a certain field, I know that it's been official so I would definitely argue that one of the things that I know is helping me is my ability to connect with people because I already like have a--a volunteer program lined up for next semester because my prior program I was just in and talking to people and seeing them, how I am. She was like, "Oh, you should totally know. You should be a volunteer for my program." So, I would argue that even though some of my deepest desires, I'm not the

most extroverted person, I have learned to utilize that people are a resource and utilize those resources when you can. (Transcript F, Page 9, Lines 283-290)

## Theme 5: Failure is not an Option

### Textural Description

The next emerging theme from the data was the consensus that failure is not an option. These participants were determined to not let their challenges take them from their goals of completing college. How these high achieving Black males triumph over failure, despite every reason not to, and continue forward is a testament to the theoretical framework of Grit.

Many of the participants witnessed the failures of family members which resulted in motivation for them to be successful and complete college. Also, when the participants experienced failures, they were motivated to succeed against all challenges and odds.

Lemuel had this say about failure: “And, you know, it therefore logically follows that, you know, the opposite of failure is success. And if I feel I fear failure that, I guess, that definitely motivates me in a successful direction by default” (Transcript C, Page12, Lines 407-409). Gabriel reflected on a time when he quit the football team and how that made him feel. He said, “I told you I quit, you know, football in high school and that was my first time ever just giving up on something, so I always have that in the back of my mind” (Transcript G, Page 26, Lines 880 -882).

Gabriel elaborated:

So never wanting to feel that feeling again. Never wanting to feel the feeling that I gave up. You know. And that's something that I just like keep until, you know, like not visually look at but, you know, personifying that, just like that. Failure felt like a, you know, just – it was just horrible. So that (uhm)--that has contributed to it. (Transcript G, Page 26, Lines 883-887)

For Antwone, his willingness to succeed was motivated by his desire to become fiscally responsible. Antwone mentioned, “So for the fear of failure, its’s plain and simple. I don’t – if I’ve already invested \$300 into a class, I want to make certain I get \$3000-worth of value out of it” (Transcript A, Page 16, Lines 501-502).

Lemuel spoke about his fear of failure. He was used to receiving As in all of his coursework. Anything short of that, was a failure (to him). Lemuel elaborated further by suggesting his desire to not fail has everything to do with pleasing his biggest support group, his family. Here is the story Lemuel shared:

Other things, I would say, is (uhm)--to be honest, a fear of failure. To be honest, I definitely think that's a fear that I do have. I do have the fear of failure. (uhm) Whether it's getting a B which I had recently been on, that I had to make up for, you know, you know, just get more A's so you can, you know, back it up. But I— I definitely have a huge fear of failure and letting myself down, my reputation down, my family down, that that fear, I think, motivates me to avoid that outcome as much as possible. (Transcript C, Page12, Lines 403-407)

## Theme 6: Academic Success

### Textural Description

The last emergent theme for each participant focused on academic success and how students had attained their academic success. All the participants viewed themselves as academically successful, based on their GPAs. In addition, they each offered their guidance on how this culture of academic success was achieved. Gabriel confirmed his academic success by saying, when asked about the topic, “So I would say, “Yeah, I think I'm – I'm not where I want to be, you know, but I definitely think I am academically successful” (Transcript G, Page 2, Lines 56-57).



Gabriel conveyed more information when asked if he viewed himself as academically successful:

(uhm) So I would say, “Yeah,” I would say I definitely am. I mean, I achieved some of my short-term goals. I got my Associates in a year (uhm) you know, and I'm still working here as a student but, you know, I've run into very road bumps and I've been able to get over those, you know, with not much problem at all. (Transcript G, Page 2, Lines 53-56)

Darren connected his success with performing well in higher level courses. He said:

Yeah, I would say so. Like, it's rough going through higher level math and being able to work at the same time and still--still like succeeding. So, I would say that, on top of having--like, maintaining a social life and all those other things. I would say I am. (Transcript D, Page 3, Lines 97-100)

Lemuel's overall GPA confirmed him to be an academically successful student. He said:

(uhm) I would define myself as academically (uhm) successful, I've maintained almost 4.0, I believe it's a 3.8 – 3.9 now. (uhm) I--you know, I consistently, you know, do my homework when I have my free time. I--I mean, I just have a love for learning and I tend to produce good results, I've been hearing, so I would assume that I'm academically successful. (Transcript C, Page 1, Lines 17-20)

Not only did these participants believe they were academically successful; they also offered insight on how this achievement was developed. In addition, they were able to speak about the motivation and their desire to press forward, regardless of the challenges faced.

Following are a few statements from the interviews. Barry discussed the importance of having a college degree:

(Uhm) It is to see people struggling getting a job. Like, you can get a job without a degree but (uhm) it's more difficult. And your boss can really abuse you if you don't have a degree because he know that, without a degree, it would be more difficult to find another job. And I see people, in general, have more respect for people with a degree than without a degree. So that's what motivate me to get a degree. (Transcript B, Page 5, Lines 143-147)

Josiah was home schooled at an early age. As a result, he was required to study on his own. He elaborated on the development of academic success as follows:

Hmm, how did I develop this? Because I mean--I think it goes back to my home schooling. I think having to learn on my own made me appreciate what knowledge is because, I guess, it's kind of like there's so much information out there. There's all the books in the library, all the books on Google but a lot of people just don't utilize those things like they should. And so, a lot of my drive to learn to be successful just comes from the fact that I know I have the mental ability to do it. There are so many resources out there, why not better myself or the lives of people around me through learning? (Transcript F, Page 7, Lines 229-236)

Antwone, was motivated by his desire to becoming a first-generation college graduate in his family. While many others perform for their family by being the best at sports, Antwone perfected himself in books. Here is what he said, as it relates to the motivation that is responsible for his drive to pursue academics:

But at the same time, it's---you always have that home backbone--where it's like your grandma, "When are you going to be done yet? When are you going to do this? When are you going to do that?" So I think it's just--I finally ended up getting an internal sense of, you know, when I love learning, I want a Doctorate's degree. That's the direction I want to go. So, I don't know what the end goal looks like in terms of like clarity but it just--somewhere along the line, I gain conviction about the fact that I want to do something that nobody else in my family has done before. I want to be different. I want to be successful. And I want to end up having enough financial stability to be able to give back to them for all that they've done. (Transcript A, Page, 11, Lines 338-346)

### The Essence of the Phenomenon

My goal as a researcher was to go beyond the spoken words of the participants to capture the essence of who they were as individuals seeking academic success. What I discovered was that these high achieving Black male students possessed an indefatigable spirit which contributes greatly to who they are and their having the ability to achieve academic success as students at the community college. This understanding of who they are could be seen in their excitement for studying, meeting new people, walking across campus to class, connecting with faculty, as well as campus involvement. These students embody a great sense of hope and appreciation for the

academy and their end goal of graduation. They know how and have the stamina to deal with obstacles and are aware of how to approach hurdles in the quest for academic success. Suffice it to say, the grit I observed in each of the participants, was indeed the driving force behind their will to pursue their passion for learning with persistence and perseverance. Furthermore, the grit they possess stems from this indefatigable spirit they have within. The two are inter connected.

The students who were participants in this study acknowledged challenges they encountered. Most of these challenges evolved around family dynamics such as being the only person in the home who understood the culture of academia or parents encouraging in-state over out-of-state schooling. There was also the challenge of one of the participants whose father lived in Europe far away from his family. Additionally, another participant experienced grand theft by another family member. Nevertheless, the participants did not allow these challenges to become barriers in their pursuit of graduation.

During the interviews, I asked a question related to challenges while pursuing their education. Ironically, I noticed how difficult it was for most of the students to identify an experience that jeopardized their high drive for academic success. Embedded in Figure 8 is a snapshot of the many setbacks these high achieving Black males have been successfully able to step over as they journey towards academic success. They were formulated from the interviews. Based on my experience with them, the challenges in the lives of these high achieving Black males had zero power over their grit. In other words, problems or hurdles did not affect their stamina to pursue their goals of obtaining their associates degrees. For me, the indefatigable spirit they displayed was deeply connected to their passion for learning and supports them as they strive to meet their academic goals.



*Figure 8.* The Indefatigable Spirit: A depiction of a high achiever

*Note.* Artwork Copyright 2018 by Gerald Jones

### Summary

This chapter was intended to capture the voices of the participants during the interview process. In addition, this chapter contains a report of the step by step process used to analyze the data obtained from the seven participants, leading to six emergent themes. Each of the themes was discussed in detail and supported by quotes from the participants' interviews.

## CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

Historically, the literature has fallen short in reporting the academic success of Black males studying at community colleges. As a result, our knowledge about high achieving Black males at these institutions has been limited (Harper, 2008). It was the purpose of this study to expand the research on Black male success at the community college by revealing the participants' emerging themes and lived experiences.

In Chapter 1, I presented an introduction to the study. In Chapter 2, I examined the literature connected to community college retention and high achieving Black males enrolled in higher education, particularly, community colleges, and introduced the theoretical framework. In Chapter 3, I introduced and discussed the study's methodology and data collection process. This was followed by an introduction of the interview participants in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I presented emerging themes from the data, along with answers to the research questions.

In this final chapter, I have discussed and presented implications and recommendations for practice and research along with a final summary. Lastly, I have shared my reflections on the process for this study, as well as on the selected topic.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences and challenges of high achieving Black males in programs targeting their academic success at the community colleges. Previously, the literature on the Black male experience in community colleges has focused on

retention failures (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002). Consequently, these studies have paralleled their findings with other racial group's academic performance.

However, through understanding the lack of literature for Black males in the community college, I aimed at understanding the phenomenon through the lens of Duckworth's (2007) Grit Theory, the force that has propelled high achieving Black males to persist regardless of the challenges and obstacles. Moreover, this study focused on the experiences that played significant roles in the lives of high achieving Black males at a community college. Black male students still fall behind their White peers when considering academic achievement in higher education (Banks, 2009). However, the challenges that Black males face are very uncommon to any other student racial demographic group (Banks, 2009). Despite these challenges, high achieving Black males have found a way to persist.

### Limitations

There were a few limitations to this study. First, the study was limited by participation of only seven students who shared their lived experiences. Although the interviews were thorough, the researcher only captured the voices of these seven individuals. As a result, the emerging themes and the explanations to the research questions were limited to the stories of these participants.

Another limitation of the study was cultural. More than half of the participants were of Caribbean descent. As a result, the academic experiences of Black males whose families were brought to the United States involuntarily may not have been reflected in the results extracted from the data. Thus, the lived experiences, challenges and opportunities may have been reflected differently in the data. These differences are addressed in Ogbu's (1993) Oppositional Cultural

Frame, a framework discussing the mainstream culture and the varying experiences of blacks who arrived to this country voluntarily or involuntarily.

This dissertation focused only on students who were part of an honors program. This was an additional limitation. Although, I wanted to explore the experiences of high achieving Black males in programs targeting academic success at the community college, in doing so, I may have excluded other high achieving Black males who for various reasons may not be connected to the honors program or STEM. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the findings from within the study are still relevant and could be beneficial to other students from various backgrounds.

### Implications and Recommendations

#### Recommendations for Black Male Students

This study provided an aberrant form of knowledge regarding the lived experiences and challenges of high achieving Black males at the community college. More importantly, this study may offer guidance to all students in what will assist Black male students, high achieving or otherwise, to achieve academic success. In addition, it calls attention to six themes experienced by Black male students in higher education which could be helpful to other Black males. As discussed in this study, parental support played a tremendous role in the academic success of these students. The support these participants experienced from their parents, grandparents, and church at an early age laid the foundation for their indefatigable spirits.

Also, it is important for Black male students to connect with other students who share similar educational goals. When the students attended the meet and greet prior to the start of the interviews, I observed how excited they were to be in the room with other scholars who possessed the same fervor towards academics as they did. Coupled with the challenges of being

Black males due to the negative experiences of isolation and racial discrimination, it is important for Black males to develop communities within their institutions that aid in addressing these concerns while promoting degree completion (Harper, 2005; Strayhorn, 2009).

Lastly, I believe it is important for Black male students to adopt an attitude that resists failure as an option. As I reflect on the experiences of the participants of this study, they proceeded beyond their opportunities to fail. Doing so allowed them to become stronger at developing the grit Duckworth (2007) described. Therefore, it is crucial for Black male students to learn how to juggle the challenges of guilt, shame, relationships, external activities, work, family, isolation, and finances in staying committed to their mission of academic success.

#### Recommendations for Higher Education Practitioners

Practitioners who work with Black male students in higher education could utilize this study to gain insight on strategies supporting the academic success of these students. This information could assist not only Student Affairs practitioners, but those in Academic Affairs as well. The participants in the study appreciated being involved on campus and connecting with those who reflect their grit culturally. As I observed from the meet and greet, the campus community allowed them to speak freely of the strategies they utilized to triumph over adversity, as well as to serve as resources for each other during their lived experiences on the grounds of the college campus. As a result, higher education practitioners should work to assist high achieving Black males in developing a critical mass or support group to help foster their academic progression.



### Recommendations for Institutions

Given the importance graduation rates have on funding, this study should be beneficial to community college administrators in promoting recruitment and retention, as well as fostering student success for Black male students. As noted earlier regarding the meet and greet held prior to the interviews, I could not help but observe the excitement that filled the room once like-minded, scholarly Black males were gathered in one place. It was almost as if the feeling of isolation had dissipated. The perception of this experience was that it had never occurred before. I understand the literature about Black males and isolation as they relate to the acting White concept. Despite this, institutions should do a much better job of highlighting the academic success of Black males, even if it means utilizing high achieving Black males as examples of success to increase retention of this population of students.

It is also recommended that institutions do a better job in promoting their honors programs to Black males. While recruiting participants for this study, it was a struggle to find the population of Black males who were in an honors program. There are many opportunities to promote these opportunities. Additional recruitment efforts can lead to more high achieving Black males being supported in historical programs such as Honors and STEM that foster their academic growth and career development.

Unfortunately, according to Bivens & Woods (2016), the community college system is failing one of its key constituents by neglecting to provide sufficient services towards ensuring their success as students. Studies show that when administrators provide adequate student support services to meet the needs of African American students, other demographic groups benefit as well (Lewis & Middleton as cited in Bivens & Woods, 2016).

### Recommendations for Future Research

My study consisted mainly of a small population of seven participants. Increasing the sample size would ensure a deeper insight on the lived experiences of Black male students. However, I would not suggest changing the characteristics of the students.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a study on the academic success of Black males whose families were brought to the United State involuntarily to see data differences in the areas of racial discrimination, profiling, family support, and negative institutional experiences. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare the data between the two groups (involuntary and voluntary) for differences between the two groups and how their academic success might have been affected by those differences.

A third recommendation is to expand this study by focusing on other geographical locations within the United States. Although this study focused on a community college in the southeastern region of the U.S., it would be of importance to learn the lived experiences of other Black males in other regions of the country. Furthermore, this additional recommendation could help expand our understanding of high achieving Black males studying at the community college level.

A fourth recommendation for this study is to conduct a focus group instead of the interview format. This method would allow students to interact with each other's responses, thus stimulating additional insights into the problem. In addition, this format may result in gaining a more in-depth illustration of the issues of academic success.

The final recommendation for this study is to focus more on the role families play in the academic success and persistence of community college Black male students. This could be an

opportunity for community college administrators and families to learn how they could work together in providing the early framework that produces academic success among Black males.

### Concluding Summary: Was it Grit?

Grit is having the self-control to pursue one's long-term goals regardless of the challenges one may face. The goal for these students was that obtaining a college degree is possible if a student perseveres with passion and persistence while learning. Since I started this study, however, the criticism of the conceptual framework, grit, has recently grown. Critics have begun to argue that grit alone, as defined by Duckworth et al. (2007) is not the only determining factor that is needed to pursue long term goals. When one critic, Kundu (2017) conducted a study on economically disadvantaged students succeeding beyond their challenges of poverty, he concluded it was the students' ability to understand the school's social structure that helped them gain onward mobility. This structure is identified as a form of agency, the other determining factor contributing to academic success. For Black males, researchers have suggested that when there is a strong support system, agency, these students survive (Harper, 2012). According to Kundu (2017) when students possess agency, they are engaging in systems of support that help foster their success. In other words, these critics have concluded that successful students need more than stamina and motivation to succeed.

The grit concept stems from the family of motivation. The voices of the students in this study seem to have reflected these critics' concerns. As supported earlier through the emerging themes from the interviews, the participants are cognizant of the important role agency has played in their ability to be successful. As a matter of fact, they understand how to utilize the agencies of family, faculty and peer support as mechanisms to keep marching forward.

Motivation of high achieving gifted students could be observed from behaviors such as preparing for an examination (Reraki, Celik, & Sacriam, 2015). Studies from psychologists on motivation have discovered matters in humans as factors which inspire them to act in ways in which the matters will aid in providing an explanation to the behaviors involving the motivation (Ames & Stipek, as cited in Reraki et al., 2015). For example, what a student does, the sequence of activities prior to the activity, how much time a student prepares for the activity, as well as the intensity of the preparation or behaviors are elements of the matters (Reraki et al., 2015). All these behaviors are factors contributing to the motivation leading to achievement of an activity.

Although the concept of motivation was not a unifying emerging theme, the participants did explain their understanding of the term. Ethan's response reflected the sentiments of all of the participants relating to motivation and the behaviors associated with it. He shared:

Motivation, I would say, is being able to continue doing something despite not necessarily at one time--not necessarily having the desire to go and do it at that time. So, example of homework, you might want to--you know that doing homework is good for you and it might help your grade but there are times when you're really--you just like not want to do your homework. It's just like, "It's been a long day. I'd rather just go to sleep right now." I just kind of push this off aside but you know you really should do it so. (Transcript E, Page 5, Lines 198-203)

In conclusion, the students in this study, were very much different from the conclusion in Padilla et al. study on successful minority students identified earlier in this study. Those students struggled with the transition from high school to college, limited family support, cultural isolation, as well as a lack of financial resources. The seven participants in this study were not affected by barriers. Instead, they were successful in connecting with faculty, adapting to

campus life, maintaining family support, as well as utilizing financial resources to assist in advancing their educational progress.

So, was it grit? Or, was it something else that defined their ability to be academically successful and engage in behaviors which motivated them to succeed? As mentioned throughout this study, grit is defined as having a trait-level of perseverance and passion as one pursues long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al. suggested that when passion and perseverance are combined to pursue long-term goals, the concept of grit is produced.

The seven high achieving students who participated in this study possessed a passion for learning and the will to persevere. These two tenets are embedded within Duckworth's definition of this study's conceptual framework. I understand the critics in placing a large focus on agency or support groups in determining graduate rates for minority students. However these seven students exhibited a passion for learning that explained their perseverance and persistence amid every excuse not to keep moving forward. These students exemplified grit.

### Reflections of the Researcher

As I reach the conclusion of this study, I am so excited to have reported the lived experiences of high achieving Black males in this dissertation. In addition, I am even more appreciative of the implications these stories have on improving the overall experience for Black males studying at the community college. Moreover, the insights revealed could be beneficial to educational institutions in assisting students better at maneuvering through the hurdles while pursuing their college education. I believe students are committed to this topic because of its connection to the success of Black males versus failures. Also, I have noticed the positive energy from colleagues in the field who are anticipating this study's results. All these points increased

my energy and desire to add to the literature in sharing the stories of those whose voices were missing.

There are two aspects of the study which were particularly interesting to me as I worked on this study. First, the meet and greet. I never formally introduced this component of my study, since it was an unofficial add-on. However, seeing all these Black high achieving students in one room energized me to complete this study with excellence. One could feel the excitement from the depth of their spirits as they introduced themselves and spoke briefly of their experiences as a community college student.

The second interesting thing I learned from this study was how proud each participant was to attend the community college. Why these high achieving, smart, talented, and gifted students elected to study first at the community college did not rise as an emergent theme was no surprise. Like many community college students, these high achievers wanted to take advantage of smaller classrooms, have a more strategic relationship with faculty, and save money.

As I reach the end of this journey, I cannot cease to reflect on the process and the sacrifices made to get to this point. While working full-time, married, and having a daughter in the middle of coursework, I can happily acknowledge, I, too, possess the same grit that I observed in each of the participants. To every Black male community college student, this study is for you. However, the tenants of persistence, perseverance, and passion go beyond my studied population. As communicated by each of the participants during their interviews, Grit is available to all. The journey was no easy one, but with my strong desire and stamina, along with my agency of support, this work is finished.

### Closing Vignette

High school had come and gone for Thomas Williams. Raised by a single parent, whose income standards met the qualifications for him to receive federal aid, he was determined to triumph no matter what the disadvantage. With the additional support of his family, faith, campus involvement, and interaction with his faculty, Thomas was well on his way toward academic success.

Thomas stayed home to save money, and attended the local community college, where his first semester of hard work contributed to his being recognized on the Dean's List. In addition, he met the qualifications to be inducted into the college's honors program where he engaged with other scholarly peers. Thomas was the epitome of what it meant to be a successful, high achieving, African American male student. Yet, amidst all the excitement and honors, Thomas remained unfulfilled.

Due to this inner void, Thomas decided to have a conversation with his academic advisor. During this conversation, the advisor recommended Thomas read a recent dissertation on the journey of successful Black males enrolled at the community college. The students in the study experienced similar feelings of isolation, guilt, and shame in pursuit of their academic success. Moreover, the advisor believed the findings in this reference would offer hope to Thomas as he seek to better understand his own journey towards academic success.

APPENDIX A  
PERMISSION TO USE AN ILLUSTRATION ON ACHIEVEMENT/EDUCATION



## Re: Academic Achievement/Education as Liberation Figure

**From:** Barbatis, Peter R <barbatip@palmbeachstate.edu>  
**Sent:** Saturday, November 4, 2017 1:50:36 PM  
**To:** Gerald Jones  
**Subject:** Re: Academic Achievement/Education as Liberation Figure

Hi. Soon-to-be Dr Jones. Of course you may use the figure. You have my permission. I wish you a success defense.

Sent from my iPhone

On Nov 4, 2017, at 1:45 PM, Gerald Jones <[geraldj@Knights.ucf.edu](mailto:geraldj@Knights.ucf.edu)> wrote:

Dr. Barbatis:

My name is Gerald Jones, Director of Student Life for Seminole State College. Currently, I am pursuing my Doctorate in the Higher Education and Policy Studies Program at the University of Central Florida. I have enjoyed studying your work on factors contributing to the persistence of ethnic community college students. I am writing for your permission to use your figure on Academic Achievement/Education at Liberation published in the Journal of Developmental Education. This visual supports several engagement theorist work on student persistence within higher education.

My dissertation topic is: African American males in programs for high achievers at a community college: Exploring the qualitative nature of academic success.

If permission is granted, the appropriate citations and credits based on the APA standards will be provided as displayed below.

Thanks in advance. I hope to hear from you soon.

Figure 4: Barbatis Academic Achievement/Education as Liberation

Adapted from Barbatis., P. (2010). Underprepared, ethnically diverse community college students: Factors contributing to persistence. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 33(3), 16-20.

Gerald Jones, MPA  
Doctoral Student-Educational Leadership  
Director of Student Life  
Seminole State College

APPENDIX B  
PERMISSION TO USE ILLUSTRATION  
ON LOCAL MODELS OF MINORITY STUDENT SUCCESS

Re: Permission to Publish

TG

Tricia Fechter Gates <pfechter@acpa.nche.edu>

Reply all

Mon 11/6, 9:21 AM

Gerald Jones

Inbox

Permission granted. Please cite appropriately.

Sincerely,  
Tricia

**Tricia Fechter Gates, Ph.D., CAE**

**she, her, hers**

Deputy Executive Director

ACPA—College Student Educators International  
One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC, 20036, USA  
tel 1-202-759-4825 | fax 1-202-827-0601

**From:** Gerald Jones <[geraldj@Knights.ucf.edu](mailto:geraldj@Knights.ucf.edu)>

**Date:** Saturday, November 4, 2017 at 1:22 PM

**To:** Debora Liddell <[debora-liddell@uiowa.edu](mailto:debora-liddell@uiowa.edu)>, "[jcsd@acpa.nche.edu](mailto:jcsd@acpa.nche.edu)" <[jcsd@acpa.nche.edu](mailto:jcsd@acpa.nche.edu)>

**Subject:** Permission to Publish

Greetings:

I am pursuing my Doctorate in the Higher Education and Policy Studies Program at the University of Central Florida. I have enjoyed studying the article produced in your journal on *developing local models of minority student success in college*. I am writing your permission to use the figure on Taxonomy of barriers that successful students must overcome from the perspective of ethnic minority students. This visual helps support my work on academic success.

I humbly request your permission to utilize this figure along with the appropriate citations and credits based on the APA standards below. Thanks in advance

Figure 3: Taxonomy of barriers from the perspective of ethnic minority students

Adapted from Padilla, R., Trevino, J., Gonzalez, K., & Trevino, J. (1997). Developing local models of minority student success in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(2), 125-135.

Gerald Jones, MPA

APPENDIX C  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Gerald Jones

Date: January 08, 2018

Dear Researcher:

On 01/08/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination – Category 2 – Adult Participants  
Project Title: African American Males In Programs For High Achievers At A Community College: Exploring The Qualitative Nature Of Academic Success  
Investigator: Gerald Jones  
IRB Number: SBE-17-13687  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Jennifer Neal-Jimenez on 01/08/2018 02:08:37 PM EST

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX D  
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

## **Participant Informed Consent Form**

**Title:** African American Males in Programs for High Achievers at a Community College: Exploring the Qualitative Nature of Academic Success

**Introduction:** You are cordially invited to participate in a study aimed at exploring the qualitative nature of academic success of African American males enrolled in programs targeting high achieving students. This study is being conducted under the guidance of my major professor, Dr. Rosa Cintrón. You have been selected to participate in this study as a result of your ethnic/racial background and have at least a 3.0 cumulative grade point average. Your participation and completion of this informed consent is greatly appreciated, as the results will positively impact the Community College system, and its programs targeting high achieving African American males.

### **Purpose of this study:**

The purpose of this qualitative research study will be to explore the qualitative nature of the academic success for African American males in programs for high achievers at a community college.

**Procedures:** In this study, you will be invited to participate in personal interviews facilitated by the researcher. These face to face interviews is estimated to last up to 30-45 minutes to complete. Each response will be audio recorded and transcribed. Your name and institution will not be disclosed. Pseudonyms will be used during the entire research study process.

**Location:** All interviews will occur at a campus location convenient to the participant.

**Duration of the Interviews:** The interviews are estimated to take no longer than 45 minutes. Each interview will be conducted based on the participant availability.

**Risks/Benefits:** There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with this study. We cannot promise any benefit to you or others from your participation. In addition, there will be no academic credit or incentives offered for participation this research.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. Data will be sorted in a password-protected laptop computer and secured in a private, locked office. Also, the researcher will be the only one who has access to audio recordings and transcribed interviews.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences or affecting those relationships.

**Contact Information:** Questions or concerns about this study can be addressed to the researcher: Gerald Jones, Doctoral Candidate, College of Education and Human Performance,

407-223-0770 or via email at [geraldj@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:geraldj@knights.ucf.edu), or Dr. Rosa Cintrón, Faculty Supervisor, The Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences at 407-404-1882, or via email at [Rosa.CintronDelgado@ucf.edu](mailto:Rosa.CintronDelgado@ucf.edu).

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida (UCF IRB). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

University of Central Florida  
Institutional Review Board, Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826  
E-mail: [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu)  
Telephone: 407-823-2901



APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Part 1:** Demographic Items related to the target population, as well as determine how they view and interact on campus.

Primary Research Questions Related to  
Interview Protocol/Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Research Question #1

Race & Ethnicity

Research Question #1

Age

Research Question #1

Where were you raised?

Research Question #2

Do you define yourself as academically  
successful?

Research Question #1

Are you currently employed? If yes, how  
many hours worked weekly?

Research Question #1

What is your current GPA?

Research Question #1

What year in college are you?

**Part 2:** Questions pertaining to elements within the literature review

Primary Research Questions Related to  
Interview Protocol/Interview Questions

Interview Protocol

Research Questions #1

Please share your educational experiences prior to  
enrolling in college?

Research Question #1

Please share with me your upbringing?

Research Question #1	How supportive is your family? Any challenges
Research Question #1	Do you define yourself as academically successful?
Research Question #1	Do you see yourself as gifted? What other words have you used to describe your academic success? Is this similar to the way others have defined you?
Research #1	Have you ever felt guilty/ashamed, excited/happy of your giftedness?
Research #1	How did you develop your desire to pursue academic success overtime?
Research #1	What external factors contributed to your ability achieve academic success? Please elaborate.
Research #1	What role if any does your ability to connect with other students, play in your progression in college?

**Part 3:** Questions relating to constructs of the theoretical framework.

Primary Research Questions Related to Interview Protocol/Interview Questions	Interview Protocol
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Research Question #2	What motivates you to succeed?
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- Research Question #2
- How do you define motivation?
- Research Question #2
- Explain a situation which threaten your ability to succeed academically. Why did you persist? How would you describe this force or strength? What strategies increased your ‘pushing forward’?
- Research Question #2
- What are some of the positive outcomes which motivates you towards academic success?
- Research Question #2
- What are some areas (i.e., family, friends, hobbies, etc.) you’ve neglected in pursuit of your passion towards academic success?
- Research Question #2
- How do you prepare for deadlines?
- Research Question #2
- What has contributed to your persistence towards academic achievement?
- Research Question #2
- Do you believe GRIT is available to all?

APPENDIX F  
HORIZONTALIZATION PROCESS

### **Gabriel**

Defines success as helping others

Work a lot while juggling school

Started reading a lot on his own very young

Recommended by his mom to attend the CC first

Valued the CC direct connect partnership with the University

**Community had played a role in his academic success**

Was raised by both parents

Was influenced by extended family (it takes a village)

Mother went above and beyond

**Feels guilty since he didn't study twice as hard, but achieve the same results**

Describes himself as intelligent and dedicated

**\_\_\_\_\_**

Influenced by both parents

Was a part of Honors Programs

Defines motivation as one's ability to keep pushing

Is motivating by his willingness to help others succeed.

Was challenged once by failing a class, and began to understand the importance of hard work from this failure.

Personal gratification encourages him to move forward.

Family, Friends, hobbies have suffered as a result of school

Accomplish deadlines by completing tasks early.

He learning the feeling of failure, which motivates him to move forward.

Grit is available to all

### **Josiah**

Success is internal

Received all As

Worked on campus

**Involvement on campus**

Started reading young

**\_\_\_\_\_**

Selected the community college due to cost and friendly atmosphere.

Grew up in a very religious background

Have two very supportive parents

Challenges of coming from a large family living in one house

**Learning comes natural for him**

Others validated his giftedness

**Feels his brain is a privilege and guilty because of it**

Learning is a lifestyle

Started reading books at an early age.

Parents played a key role in his academic success

Siblings Struggle motivate him to achieve academic success

Human Connection played a role in achieving academic success

Defines motivation as the will to do

Motivation is a lifestyle

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