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Reclaiming Our Voice: Strengths First-Generation African American Males Use to Succeed in College

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By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to add to the small body of literature exploring the successes of African American males in college. In this particular study, I sought to explore the strengths that first-generation African American males perceived as important to their success at a primarily White institution in the Midwest. Personal interviews were utilized to learn which self-identified strengths were important to success in college for each participant. The result was a candid portrait of the difficulties African American males face and an in-depth understanding of the strengths they utilized to overcome difficulties and succeed.

This study explored how five self-identified first-generation African American males attending a predominantly White institution used their strengths to fulfill their personal definitions of success in college through the completion of five interviews. The following themes emerged from analysis of resultant data: "Receiving poor strength training," "Negotiating a primarily White institution with strengths," "Going to battle: Starving stereotypes," "Trailblazing versus trail avoidance," and "Utilizing communal and individualistic orientations." The results from this qualitative study indicate that first-generation African American males at this institution primarily used their strengths

to conquer difficulties that arose out of their home communities and the primarily White university environment. Implications for student affairs practitioners are provided and recommendations for future research are reviewed.

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to come back to school, but they have been unbelievably supportive throughout this entire process. They taught me to work hard and pursue my passions. I am so fortunate to have such excellent examples and teachers in my life!

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Preface

"Samir, I get to see you twice today? Did your schedule get switched?"

"No, Ms. Irby. I've gotta make up English from last year. Uhg!"

"Well I'll enjoy getting to see you twice a day all semester!"

"Aw, Irb, this is gonna be awful! Do I have to do all the work for both classes, or" Samir's voice trailed off. For him, reading and writing were pure torture, and now he had to take two English classes.

"Of course you have to do work for both classes! You'll be alright, and you know I'm here to help you. It's important that you have this stuff down when you get to college." Samir hung his head and drug himself into my classroom. If nothing else, he always let people know what he was feeling and thinking about life, and he had made it clear that this was going to be a long semester for him.

This is the first memory that pop's into my head when I think of Samir. He was one of my sophomore English students at a public charter school in Kansas City, MO my very first year of teaching. He hated English, but he got through those two English courses. In my next memory of Samir, I think back to his senior year in high school when I served as his college counselor. He was preparing to go to college at a little school in Iowa on a football scholarship, and came in blazing mad about a letter he had received from the football program.

"Irb! You gotta look at this!"

"What, Samir? Is everything ok?"

"They sent me this letter, and hardly any of the Black dudes who go here even graduate!"

"What? Let me see what it says." He shoved the letter into my hands, breathing hard from rushing into the room so upset. The letter was sent to inform incoming student athletes about basic retention and graduation data from the college. He was right. Only a handful of Black males actually graduated from this college within six years.

"Wow!" I let it out even though I was trying to stay calm and hold in my shock at these numbers. "Well, Samir, these statistics aren't good, but you are my student, and my students aren't statistics." He took a step back and looked at me like I had four heads.

"What are you sayin', Irb?" He was used to me saying crazy things that required a little explanation.

"Well think about everything you know that those other men probably don't. You've gotten to take a class everyday where you learn about going to college and what to do when you get there to succeed. You know about how important it is to get involved and how a college syllabus works and even about Millennial Student Theory and Chickering's Vectors. No other kid is gonna know about that stuff. You have grown up so much in high school, Samir! You are prepared! You are ready for college!" Samir's posture came back, and he held his head high.

"Ya know what? You're right. I'm not a statistic!" He flashed his infamous smile that always lit up the room.

"Heck no, you're not. And don't let anyone tell you that you are either, ok?"

"Alright, Irb. Thanks for looking at that for me."

"No problem! Let me know if they send you anything else weird."

"Ok! See ya!"

Samir disappeared back into the busy hallway that morning and seemed totally fine with our conversation. I was shocked that such a small chat seemed to empower him so much. If I had been in his shoes, I would have needed much more reassurance and may have rethought my decision to attend that college. This conversation about the odds of African American students finishing college was always a tough one for me. Most of my students were Black, and so many of my young men had truly battled to make it through not only academically, but alive and well to high school graduation. I knew they could succeed in college, and used the line "My students are not statistics!" many times after this conversation about Samir's letter.

My favorite memory of Samir happened a few weeks later, when he came to see me the week of his senior prom worried about how he would ever maintain his relationship with his girlfriend, who was attending a different college. He cared about her so much, but knew that he needed to pursue the college that fit him best, and so did she. This is a moment where I distinctly remember thinking, "Wow! You've grown from a boy to a young man right in front of my eyes!" He had grown exponentially in the three years since I first met him. I used the "If you're meant to be, you'll be." line that I threw out in so many conversations like this with seniors toward the end of their last year in high school. I told him that he should just keep being really honest and being the good man that he was to her. That weekend at prom, Samir and this girlfriend that he cared so much about were one of the classiest looking couples there. She wore a white dress with sparkly red stones on it and he had a black tuxedo with a red vest and bow tie. After they arrived, he brought her over to meet all the teachers who were chaperones and was a perfect gentleman all night. I remember thinking about what a great example he was to all the young men there. I remember being so happy that I had decided to chaperone prom, because this was one of my last events with the school. I was leaving to go to graduate school the next year.

My next memory of Samir happened on an August night in 2011, a little after 2:00 AM. I received a text from one of his classmates letting me know that he had been shot and killed. I could not go back to sleep for a long time that night, and laid there just weeping and thinking about my memories of him. When I woke back up that morning, I remember thinking, "Whew that was a horrible dream!" and being so relieved that it wasn't true. Then, I looked at my phone and had several more texts from students letting me know what had happened.

Over the next few days, I learned that Samir had been at his cousin's house just a few days before he was supposed to leave to go back to college, when a man came to the apartment next door with a gun. The neighbors flushed the children out of their apartment and over to Samir and his cousin's. Samir was taking the children to the bathtub to protect them from stray bullets when he was hit in the neck. He bled to death in front of these children, and his cousin found him after the gunfire had quieted down. I had served as his cousin's college counselor as well and the two young men graduated together. My heart was absolutely broken to lose Samir and to hear that his cousin, an equally wonderful young man and amazing example, had to find him dead in the midst of such violence was devastating.

My last memory of Samir had nothing to do with hating English or worrying about conquering college graduation as a Black man or moving away from his girlfriend.

My last memory of Samir is not filled with his contagious laugh or his great smile. He didn't shout "Irb" from across a room, crack a joke, or give me a bad time. My last memory of Samir is seeing him in a well tailored suit with a high-collared white shirt covering the hole a bullet ripped through his neck. My last memory of Samir is sitting in a packed church with his family, friends, and community members who had known him and the great man he was. I was with the family of students, alumni, parents and former colleagues we had built at school. Despite every effort his family, community members, and educators made, my last memory of Samir was of him as a statistic. He added to the percentage of young Black males who die because of gun violence. He added to the percentage of Black men who die at the hands of other Black men. He added to the statistic that Kansas City, Missouri is one of the most dangerous places to live in the United States. I had lied to him when I told him that he would not be one of those horrendous statistics about Black males.

My motivation for this thesis was fleshed out in the few weeks that followed my last memory of Samir. As I tried to start a new school year and people I hadn't seen in a few months returned to campus and asked how I was, I had to explain what had happened. I had to explain to my boss and professors that I had to miss a few days the first week of school to go to a funeral. When I told many people that one of my former students had been shot and killed, I got responses like, "Oh, was he in a gang?" or "Was he selling drugs or something?" I had to explain that these assumptions could not be further from the truth. I had to explain that the world lost a wonderful example of Black manhood; a man who overcame academic setbacks and who graduated from high school and went on to college despite the fact that so many African American males in his city could not. We lost a man who tutored elementary school students, became an Eagle Scout, and who treated his girlfriend with an incredible amount of respect.

I knew that the research for my thesis needed to hold up other incredible examples of African American males were working toward graduating from college like Samir would have, had he been given the chance. Based on responses I received when explaining his death, it was apparent that people did not understand that Black males could be wonderful people persisting in college. I knew the research for my thesis needed to address the college experience of men who were not academic geniuses or floundering to make it through their courses, but men who fell in between these two groups, who were faced with struggles but were steadily forging paths toward college success. This thesis is meant to paint a real picture of the African American male experience at a primarily White university and the personal strengths they use to succeed, not a hazy vision of this experience through rose colored glasses. Samir is no longer here to show the world that African American men can be positive examples. In telling his story he would have been candid and honest, but also filled with promise and possibility, so my hope is that this thesis carries on the story that he cannot

Chapter 1

Introduction

As a former college counselor in a charter public school that served mainly African American students, over 80% of whom received free or reduced lunch, I am continually frustrated by the negative forces that impact the success of my students, especially male students. The media paints a very negative picture of African American males. Statistics about the success of this demographic in college are abysmal, and these young men are quite aware of this fact. I have worked with many students whose own family members discourage them from even thinking about college as a possible future option. There is a great need for more research on successful students of color as campuses are getting increasingly diverse (Pascarella, 2006; Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). I know and have seen these young men enter and succeed in college, and I have a great desire to tell their stories of success and resilience. I believe that research focusing on the strengths of African American males - as opposed to more common, deficit focused research - can have a very different impact on both pre-college and college initiatives to ensure the success of first-generation African American males.

As a graduate student in educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, Don Clifton asked the question, "What would happen if we studied what was right with people versus what's wrong with people?" (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 20). This question launched "the most extensive research into positive behavior and success in history" (p. 20). Their research uncovered that, although "the popular notion is that if you fix a weakness in an individual, the individual will become stronger; if you correct a weakness in an organization, the organization will become better" (Clifton & Nelson,

1992, p. 10), this is not actually the case. In fact, they found "excellence can be achieved only by *focusing* on strengths and *managing* weaknesses, not through the elimination of weaknesses" (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 10).

I believe Clifton and Nelson's (1992) notion of focusing on and researching people's strengths can be applied to research about the college success of first-generation African American men and can produce very different results than the majority of research on this population that highlights their weaknesses or deficits. Rowley and Bowman (2009) found that "despite a popular tendency to focus on personal deficits of African American males themselves, research reveals a range of variables that are associated with their academic achievement" (p. 308).

This thesis focuses on the self-identified strengths of first-generation African American males who have succeeded in college. By learning about what they utilized to succeed, professionals in academic and student affairs can cater to and cultivate these strengths in programming aimed at ensuring this population is successful in college and prepared to enter the workforce after graduation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study is to add to the small body of literature looking at the successes of African American males in college. This study sought to explore the strengths first-generation African American males use to succeed at a large, primarily White institution (PWI) in the Midwest. Five personal interviews were conducted to investigate the personal strengths participants used to fulfill their own definitions of success in college. The results reflected a deep and personal understanding of the experiences participants had as they worked to attend and persist in college. Their voices

made clear the harsh realities they faced and their resilience in overcoming difficulty by utilizing their strengths.

Significance of Study

The results of this study are significant because they expand a very small body of literature about the success of African American males. Much of the research on this population focuses on their failures and deficits. The study is unique in that it combines first-generation and African American male identities; it is also distinct from others because it does not look at academically gifted students or participants who must meet stringent qualifications to be considered successful in order to participate in a research project. Results of this study increase the understanding of the difficulties first-generation African American males encounter on their paths to college and throughout their college experiences, and how they conquer these obstacles by employing their personal strengths.

Research Questions

To delve into this qualitative case study, I relied on the primary research question: "How do first-generation African American males describe the personal strengths that have contributed to their college success?" Sub-questions clarified how students realized, used, and cultivated their strengths and deciphered their feelings about the success of other first-generation African American males on campus. They included:

- How do first-generation African American males define success in college?
- What experiences in college do first-generation African American males identify as helping them realize and develop their strengths?

- What strengths are valued in other African American males who have been successful in college?
- What strengths would they tell a first-generation African American man he needed to be successful in college?
- What do first-generation African American males who are successful in college do?

The research questions were designed to dig deeply into each participant's understanding of what college success looked like and how they were working to achieve it by utilizing their own, self-identified strengths. Analysis of the resultant data, provided understanding of each student's unique story and connected similar experiences to create a larger understanding of the college experiences of first-generation African American males at this university.

Research Design

I utilized qualitative case study methodology for this research, as quantitative measure would not have adequately captured the lived experiences of first-generation African American males as they conquered difficulties on their road to success in college. Five self-identified first-generation African American males were purposefully recruited to participate in interviews. These interviews allowed me to fully understand their personal definitions of success in college and how they used personal strengths to succeed. I transcribed all the interviews and analyzed this data for emergent themes and sub-themes.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were utilized in this study:

First-generation: A student whose parent(s)/guardian(s) have not earned a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In order to be as inclusive as possible, this operational definition was used to include parent(s)/guardian(s) who attended some college or graduated from a community college as these experiences would differ from those of a student who successfully completed a bachelor's degree.

African American/Black: These terms were used interchangeably by participants in this study and represent any person of African heritage including Black-Latinos and multiracial students with Black as one of their identities.

Strengths: Participants self-identified the strengths the used to fulfill their personal definitions of success. To fully understand their ideas about succeeding in college, I wanted them to self-identify what their strengths were and how they used them.

Success: Participants created their own definitions of success in college. I wanted to explore strengths they used to succeed and therefore needed to fully understand their own definitions of success to fully understand their experiences.

Delimitations

Several delimitations were used in this study because a bounded case study methodology was used. All five participants self identified as first-generation African American males and were recruited from a single Midwestern PWI. Students were required to have at least sophomore status and a 2.5 GPA in order to participate in the research. No other restrictions were placed on participants.

Limitations

Findings of this study are not generalizable because of the qualitative research methodology that was utilized. Sampling was not random, but purposeful because participants had to identify as first-generation, African American/Black, and male. I have known some of my participants for quite some time and used their help to snowball sample other first-generation African American males. Therefore, the sample may not be representative of the first-generation African American male population at this institution. The thoughts and stories highlighted in this research represented my participants' ideas at the time of the study, and they may have self censored because of my identity as a White woman. However, I had established a very high level of trust with many of my participants prior to their interviews, and they were well aware of my advocacy efforts for students of color, so they may have opened up more with me than another White woman. Finally, I served as the primary research instrument in this qualitative study by collecting, transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting all the data.

Conclusion

African American males are not entering college and persisting to graduation at the same rates as their peers, and these numbers will continue to fall unless their experiences are better understood and they are better supported. Understanding what helps them succeed instead of what merely contributes to their failure is key in developing these support measures. I sought to address this gap in understanding by examining the experiences of five first-generation African American males at a PWI. In Chapter 2, I will review literature on the college experiences of first-generation students and African American students and delve into basic retention theories and the small body

of research on successful African American college students. In Chapter 3, I address the methodology used in this study that included personal interviews about students' views of success and the strengths they utilized to fulfill their definitions of success. In Chapter 4, I present the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. These themes address the various struggles participants endured in their home communities and at the PWI and details their use of strengths and strategies as they worked to overcome these difficulties. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings of this research, connect them to relevant literature, and offer implications for practice.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the strengths that first-generation African American[1] males perceived as important to their success at a primarily White institution (PWI). In this chapter, I review relevant literature on dominant retention theory, African American students and their paths to and experiences in college, first-generation college students, the concepts of cultural and social capital as they pertain to navigating higher education, the gender specific issues African American males encounter on their path toward higher education. African American males have the lowest college graduation rates at public and private colleges of any other population (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012), so understanding retention theories and the concepts of cultural and social capital as they relate to this population were important before beginning. This research challenged the overwhelmingly negative story presented in the research on this group by presenting a counternarrative (Harper, 2009a) of the strengths these young men brought to college and cultivated through their experiences on campus.

I searched books and and online databases of peer-reviewed journals including JSTOR, ERIC Education, Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), and NASPA Publications. Search terms such as "African American AND males," "first generation AND cultural capitol," and "Black males AND college" were particularly helpful in finding articles that related well to the topics explored in this research. I focused on

[1]African American and Black will be used interchangeably as they are in much of the literature and in the interviews of my research participants.

finding empirical data in peer-reviewed journal articles. I did not find much information that specifically addressed the college experience of African American males, so I expanded my search to all African American college students.

The following sections address previous research on first-generation African American males and relevant facets of their experiences. This work highlights the great difficulties these students face getting to college and succeeding in primarily White collegiate environments. My greatest criticism of this array of literature is that much of it focuses on the negative. Although simple numbers show low college attendance, retention data, and graduation rates highlight the fact that more needs to be done to ensure this population gets to and succeeds in college. Just knowing there is a problem does little to help those in the field solve it. By presenting the stories of successful students, practitioners can take cues to steer first-generation African American males toward a path of success and can begin to disseminate stories of strength and perseverance instead of carrying on low expectations for the success of this group.

With few exceptions (Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2005, 2006, 2007; Warde, 2008), there has been little discussion on successful Black males in college, and there is very little literature on the specific college experience of first-generation African American males (Cuyjet, 1997; Owens., Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince, 2010), however, quite a bit of literature focuses on various facets of these students' experiences. Since a major goal of many colleges is to retain this population, literature on retention theory was analyzed. Information on the experiences of first-generation students and African American males was analyzed separately as well.

Student Retention

"Dominant retention theories in higher education tend to adopt a social integration position, arguing that the key to retention and academic success is the development of a sense of connection with the institution" (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005, p. 607). Vincent Tinto's (1975) Theory of Student Departure is was the origin of integrating with an institution began. Two of Tinto's major premises – (a) ideas about students leaving college and (b) the transition from high school and home to college life – are based on theories outside the realm of higher education. He likened student drop-out to committing suicide (1975) and compared the process of entering and adjusting to college to the rituals of tribal cultures as they become members of different groups within their societies (Tinto, 1988).

The first leg of Tinto's theory (1975) stems from the work of Durkheim (1961), exploring why people commit suicide. He found that some people lacking the values of the society in which they live have difficulty integrating and affiliating with their society and decide to take their own lives. Because these individuals cannot socially integrate, they have little interaction with other members of their group and may commit suicide (Tinto, 1975). Tinto viewed dropout from higher education as way of committing suicide by choosing leaving the academic and social systems of a college. His theory placed the onus on students to take on the values of the college, even if they are not their own, and actively work to affiliate with other students at that institution, even if these students are very different from them as well. Critics of Tinto argue that one must be careful when putting all the work of transitioning into college on the shoulders of entering students (Rendon, 1993, Tierney, 1992, 1993 as cited in Maldonado et al., 2005). Institutional

culture and values already exist, and the range of students entering a college is very diverse. At a PWI, students of color would have to make potentially huge adjustments to the White culture of the college, yet White students may not even think about the change in culture. If students choosing to leave institutions of higher education can be likened to suicide, might negative institutional culture or damaging actions of those within an institution be likened to murder?

The second leg of Tinto's (1975) theory looks at Van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage in tribal societies. Specifically, those joining a new group within their society must separate from their former group by limiting interactions and discarding the views and norms of that group, transition into their new group by learning their views and norms, and incorporate fully into the new group by adopting these norms and values with which comes the rewards of their full membership (Tinto, 1988). Although the connections Tinto (1988) makes to tribal rites of passage involved in gaining new group membership are interesting, comparing them to a very diverse range of students entering a wide range of institutions of higher education is troubling (Tierney, 1999). Tribal societies are much more heterogeneous than typical colleges. Therefore, students who are outside of the majority culture – particularly first-generation students and students of color at primarily white institutions (PWIs) – have an additional burden of adjustment that would not compare to the traditional college student.

Maldonado et al. (2005) cited Tinto's (1987, 1993) model that suggests "individual student 'departers' are still lacking in some fundamental way – they lack a sense of connection to the institution," which is a problem for both the individual student and institution to solve in order for students to be retained (p. 607). This can be a

problem for students of color, who are expected to fit into this "framework" and "conform to institutionalized norms often incompatible with their own" (pp. 607-608). Maintaining ties to home because of a need to stay connected to a home culture and set of norms, which are not represented on campus, is an important difference between students of color and White students at PWIs.

Sustaining ties to home. The assertion of Tinto's (1975) theory that seems to be the most contentious issue among researchers is that students must leave behind the values and connections to home in order to integrate fully into the environment of the college and succeed. Some researchers see keeping connections to come as an asset to underrepresented students (Rendon, 1993; Tierney, 1999) and especially African American students (Cabrera, Hagedorn, Nora, Pascarella, Terenzini, 1999; Guiffrida, 2004, 2005b; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2009). However, the research has been mixed regarding positive and negative implications of maintaining home connections.

In a qualitative study of 99 African American undergraduates at a mid-sized PWI, Guiffrida (2004, 2005b) looked at the impact of home connections on high-achieving and low-achieving students as well as students who left a midsized, private, PWI. He found that, while high-achieving students felt their families provided high levels of academic, emotional, and social support, low-achieving students as well as students who had left the institution perceived low levels of support in these areas (2005b). In fact, family issues and perceived obligations at home interfered with the achievements of low-achievers and leavers, many of whom felt guilty for using their families' already low financial resources (2005b).

When looking at impact of friends from home, Guiffrida (2004) also found mixed results regarding student perceptions of the impact of these connections. High-achievers found support and encouragement from friends who had also gone to college, but sometimes felt they needed to either sever connections or uplift with those who did not enroll in higher education. An interesting dimension of friendships between high-achievers and their friends from home was the perceived depth of these friendships. Many felt these were their only "true friends" (p. 701) because these peers truly understood their roots and struggle to make it to higher education. On the other side of the coin, low-achievers and leavers felt "caught between two worlds," (p. 699) because they did not quite fit into their college environment, but because they were in college, did not quite fit into their home environments completely. The need for social connections with other African American young peers caused these students to return home often to socialize with friends from home, which negatively impacted their academic achievement.

Winkle-Wagner's (2009) qualitative analysis of the experiences of 30 African American women at a large, Midwestern, research PWI also revealed this "caught between two" worlds phenomenon, which she labeled as a feeling of "homelessness" (p. 9). In order to fit in at home, participants felt they had to alter their behavior and speech patterns. These women were caught in between several dichotomous decisions: to bring their family and community along with them on their journey through higher education or to sever those relationships, to successfully represent family expectations of succeeding in higher education or realize that they did not understand what it took to succeed, wich sometimes derailed them from progress, and to fulfill their roles as caregivers to their

families or fully commit themselves to being a college students without those responsibilities (2009). In focus groups called "Sister Circles" (p. 6), several participants who were the first-generation in their families to attend college encouraged other women struggling with connections to home to sever relationships in order to decrease the stress associated with caring for family and better focus on school.

Research flowing from Tinto's (1975) original theory about student retention is mainly qualitative. It often looks students of color as a whole or at one racial or ethnic group. Within those groups, the experience of very high or very low achievers was analyzed, while the experiences with ties to home for students in the middle were left out. I did not find literature addressing differences in gender regarding race and ties to home. This area of literature addressing Black students' ties to home seems to show great differences depending on how a study was conducted and the participants that were chosen. This suggests a need to take another look at Tinto's (1975) theory to see if something might be missing.

Post-Tinto retention theory. Retention theories following Tinto's (Bensimon, 1995; Rendon, 1993, Tierney, 1992, 1993 as cited in Maldonado et al., 2005) look at students "not simply as individuals but as members of cultural groups characterized by sets of norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the world, including beliefs and assumptions about attending college" (p. 608). This research project will highlight the beliefs and assumptions first-generation African American males have about college and what it takes to, not only be retained, but actually be quite successful. Understanding their strengths – where they came from, how they utilized them, and how they were cultivated – will help in understanding why these students have not dropped out and how

they have successfully connected to campus culture. If they, as Tinto suggested, have disconnected from home and taken on the dominant white culture of campus, then maybe Tinto's theory should be utilized to help this group succeed. However, if maintaining home culture and connections have enabled these students to succeed, then more attention should be paid to the great resource of home connections for first-generation African American males. The next section will explore literature focusing in on the college going experiences of first-generation students.

First-Generation Students in Higher Education

For the purposes of this study, I used Engle and Tinto's (2008) definition for first-generation students that will refer to students whose parent(s) or guardian(s) have not earned a bachelor's degree in order to be as inclusive as possible. According to their work, approximately 4.5 million students, or 24% of all undergraduates were first-generation students. It is sometimes difficult to estimate these numbers, because several definitions are used when discussing and researching this population. Some look at college attendance, while others qualify only if parents graduated from college. Sometimes bachelor's degrees are the defining factor, while other definitions include associate's degrees. Also, some institutions keep track of first-generation students on their campuses while others do not. The campus where this research was conducted, for example, does not designate students as first-generation within university student information systems.

First-generation students are disproportionately students of color and low-income students (Jehangir, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Graduation rates for this population are markedly lower than their peers whose

parents have a college education. According to the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2011), 51% of first-generation students earned bachelor's degree within six years, and only 31.6% of low-income first-generation students completed degrees. This is shocking when compared to students who were neither low-income nor first generation, who had a 71.2% six year degree completion rate

The experience of accessing and transitioning to college is different for first-generation students than it is for students with a parent(s) who has college experience. First-generation students must pilot their way through the college application process without parental guidance and use high school to prepare more than their peers in order to understand what is expected in college level work. They sometimes struggle with academic unpreparedness because their parents did not understand the importance of enrolling in rigorous high school curriculum, and often think of college as simply a means to getting a job and do not look at finding a college that fits them, which can result in drop out (Reid & Moore III, 2008, p. 242). Finally, first-generation students live at home and work part-time more often than their peers (p. 242). Combined, these differences make the path to and success in higher education quite difficult for first-generation students, who need both academic and social support to conquer these additional hurdles (Reid & Moore III, 2008).

Jehangir's (2010) study of first-generation students involved in a multicultural learning community at a PWI highlighted several areas where first-generation students have difficulties adjusting to college life. These students struggled with "feelings of isolation and marginalization," trying to "make sense of the explicit and implicit expectations, rituals, and norms" of college, sometimes felt "invisible in both the

curriculum and in the eyes of their peers and teachers," and felt as if they did not "fit" on campus (p. 536). As mentioned earlier, these sentiments were echoed by participants in Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study of African American women who were first-generation students. Because their families could not understand their lives in college, these women cut ties to home as a solution to dealing with their unrealistic expectations.

Reid and Moore III (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 13 first-generation students from the same urban high school. They defined first-generation as students from families where neither parent had graduated from postsecondary education. All their participants were either African American or immigrant students. These students overwhelmingly felt that they were not as academically prepared for college as many of their peers because of the low quality of their high school education and few time management or study skills. Because their parents did not understand the importance of taking rigorous high school courses in order to prepare for college, students did not always take advantage of opportunities to take rigorous courses or even truly engage in courses in which they were enrolled. However, all participants were active in college preparation and access programs that helped tremendously in navigating the path to college and encouraging students.

One particularly interesting recommendation in Reid and Moore III's (2008) study was creating environments of high expectations in high school environments. Students in this study mentioned that, in their high school's peer culture, education was not the focus. Therefore, these authors suggested challenging students in the classroom so they learn study skills, encouraging involvement so they learn time management and leadership skills, and pushing students to take rigorous courses. These actions can

transform a high school's culture and the futures of not only the current students, but their communities.

Looking at the positive aspects first-generation students bring with them to college, Jehangir (2010) pointed out that first-generation students bring great "cultural wealth" to college campuses, which is "generated from the lived experience that marginalized students draw on" (p. 542). This strength and experience is not acknowledged very often in mainstream campus culture, but could be acknowledged, utilized, and developed to help first-generation students succeed. First-generation students must battle to get information that other students can seek out in their own homes. They must forge and manage their own paths to higher education with little guidance or support from understanding parents or guardians. Professionals in higher education can build off of Jehangir's (2010) notion of first-generation students' "cultural wealth" by acknowledging the persistence and resilience it takes to pursue higher education. These strengths can utilized in pursuing numerous academic and extra-curricular opportunities on campus. Highlighting and helping to cultivate these amazing strengths could change educational outcomes for so many first-generation students.

Studies addressing the experiences of first-generation students is largely qualitative to ensure the lived experience of participants is fully understood. More quantitative data addressing the number of students who live at home or work is also helpful in understand how this population differs from students who are not first-generation college students. Experiences as first-generation students and students of color seem to overlap in this research, as many of the research participants were students of color. This research project specifically addressed both life as a first-generation

student and as an African American male to more clearly understand how these two facets of identity worked separately in student's lives and intersected. While Jehangir (2010) acknowledged first-generation student strengths, her research does not dissect where students derive them from and how or if they use them to succeed in college. My research project will do just that in an attempt to understand how the unique strengths gained from forging the path to college are utilized by successful first-generation students. My participants' experiences as first-generation college students will, most likely, overlap with their identities as African American males. This racialized facet of their identities will be explored in the next section.

African American Students

This section is intended to provide an overview of relevant research on African American students at PWIs. I will address issues with African American student achievement, information specifically addressing African American males in higher education, and a few studies that explored the experiences of high-achieving African American students. While there was a gap in the literature when looking specifically at first-generation African American males who were performing fairly well at PWIs, combining these topics highlighted the most relevant facets of their experiences that have been addressed by previous research.

Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009) used Critical Race Theory to analyze policy efforts designed to extend educational access to African Americans along with reasons for great regression in creating equitable access to this population. The creation and support of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), desegregation of White schools, and implementation of affirmative action policies have helped to open the

door of education, however these authors point to the following as causing the regression of much of that progress:

> steady underrepresentation of African American students at PWIs; continued over-reliance on racially-based college entrance exams; consistent attempts to dismantle affirmative action; increased statewide admissions standards for public postsecondary education, without corresponding advances in public K-12 schools; reports of racism and negative African American student experiences at PWIs; low African American male student persistence and degree attainment rates; forced desegregation of HBCUs; inequitable funding for HBCUs; and the decline of need-based financial aid (p. 398).

Black students at PWIs have difficulty forming relationships with White faculty because they do not view them as practical role models because of racial differences (Guiffrida, 2005a) and observe them as being "culturally insensitive" (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010, p. 312). Particularly problematic behavior would include "stereotypical comments, insensitivity to African American culture, generalizations of students' opinions as representing all African Americans" (Guiffrida, 2005a, p. 702).

In order to understand what helps African American students to connect with faculty, Guiffrida (2005a) conducted a qualitative study of 19 Black students at a PWI using focus groups and individual interviews to see what faculty did to create significant relationships with students. "Student centered" (p. 707) faculty exhibited "othermothering" (p. 708) behaviors, which can be traced back to enslaved African Americans in the United States. Othermothering involved other women assisting Black mothers in raising children. Teachers in segregated schools took on this role to educate students, and many African American faculty in Guiffrida's study went above and beyond their official roles on campus to ensure that Black students were successful in college. These behaviors included mentoring students, connecting them to professionals in their desired fields, giving advice, being a positive example, tutoring students, pushing

them to be their best selves, advocating for and defending students – both on campus and with their families – and acting as counselors when students were struggling with both academic and personal issues.

Based on Guiffrida's (2005a) study, the concept of faculty going above and beyond for African American students at PWIs is different from that of White students. Supporting students both academically and personally, setting very high expectations, and even involving students' families contributes to building very positive and meaningful relationships with students that can impact the retention and overall experiences of Black students at PWIs. While most of the students in this study mentioned African American professors in describing student centered faculty, Guiffrida suggested that White faculty and staff can also incorporate these behaviors into their work in order to make deeper connections with Black students.

Rendon's (1993) qualitative study of first-year community college students also produced evidence that othermothering behaviors were effective for both Hispanic and African American community college students in the classroom. Students in this study felt as if they were validated when faculty were willing to spend time helping students in and out of class, served as mentors, and provided support and encouragement. Could this "student centered" behavior of faculty or staff also help to cultivate confidence and strength in first-generation African American men? Both Guiffrida (2005a) and Rendon's (1993) studies show that students feel cared for and validated by this type of behavior, but my research focused on whether or not significant adults on campus helped to build strength in my participants and dove into how their behaviors contributed to this strength building.

In Harper's (2009b) analysis of the involvement of African American students in what Kuh (2008) deemed as "'high impact educational practices" (p. 40) such as conducting research with a faculty member, studying abroad, engaging in service learning, interning in their field, or completing a senior experience, he noted that African American students had some of the lowest involvement percentages in every one of these categories except for service learning. Black students were missing out on experiences in which their White and Asian/Pacific Islander peers are actively involved. Since these experiences enhance both student learning and development as well as expose faculty and staff to the unique life experiences and viewpoints of a diverse range of students, Harper (2009b) emphasized the importance of ensuring race-conscious student engagement practices that decipher between equal and equitable participation of students. He also encouraged educators to reflect on their responsibility to actively work to involve diverse students and educate themselves to ensure they were prepared to engage these student populations.

African American males in higher education. While a few studies have been conducted focusing on the strengths (Maldonado et al., 2005; Warde, 2008) or successes (Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2005, 2006) of African American males, many research projects and articles have focused on the deficits of this population and reasons they struggle to get to and succeed in higher education. This crisis of African American males college attendance, achievement, and completion is discussed along with information regarding their specific struggles and some intervention strategies. Finally, a few positive studies about successful African American men in college are explained.

There has been a decline in enrollment of African American males in both predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) since the 1990s (Warde, 2008, p. 59). Warde (2008) cited seven reasons for the enrollment decline:

1. Disproportionately high incarceration rates,
2. Anti-intellectual sentiments in Black male street culture,
3. Poverty
4. Lack of academic rigor in very segregated, underperforming high schools,
5. High costs of tuition,
6. Decreased amount of financial support from federal, state, and local levels,
7. Institutional racism (pp. 59-60).

Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince (2010) added to this story, noting that "African American men are a unique group in that they are disadvantaged by inadequate educational preparation, low high school graduation and college attendance rates, as well as high unemployment and incarceration rates" (p. 293). Cuyjet (1997) pointed to several factors that contribute to this "underpreparedness" of African American men entering college:

> attending poorer elementary and secondary schools, lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement, peer pressure to disdain educational accomplishments and education as an outcome, financial hardships limiting educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers owing to racism (p. 7).

all aid in setting up barriers to college for Black males.

Differences in socioeconomic status and "urbanicity" (Strayhorn, 2009, p. 715) of Black males also has been found to be significant to educational aspirations. In a study of African American males in high school, Strayhorn (2009) found that young men living in suburbs from the highest socioeconomic levels had the highest educational aspirations, while rural males from the lowest socioeconomic levels had the lowest aspirations. In

this study, socioeconomic class, previous academic achievement, and then urbanicity affected educational aspirations.

The deep concern that African American men are not attending college – predominantly white, historically black, or community college - at the same rates as African American women (Hall & Rowan, 2001, p. 4; Cuyjet, 1997; Roach, 2001, p. 19; Rowley & Bowman, 2009) is discussed extensively in the literature. The discrepancy can be seen in both graduation rates and degrees awarded to Black males versus females. Of the cohort entering four year institutions in 2002, only 34% of African American males had completed their bachelor's degrees, while 44.2% of their female counterparts had completed college in six years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). This is especially concerning when looking at White male six-year graduation rates in this cohort, 57.3% of whom completed their degrees during the same time (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

In 1997, of all African Americans attending college, 62.6 percent were female, while only 37.4 percent were male (Roach, 2001, p. 10). During the 2008-2009 school year, 9.8% of bachelor's degrees were awarded to African American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Only 34.1% of those degrees were awarded to African American males, which was exactly the same percentage awarded to this group during the 1998-1999 academic year. This is obviously a long standing imbalance pointing to many larger issues, and the statistics only get worse when looking at higher level degrees. Of the doctoral degrees awarded to African Americans in 2008-2009, only 32.5% went to males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Cuyjet (1997) brought the worlds of first-generation and African American males together, finding "parental college role models are less prevalent for Black men than for their white counterparts; and if role modeling is important to academic success, it is possible that this discrepancy has a considerable effect on African American men" (p. 14). Putting excellent role models in place long before students get to college could greatly impact acquisition of both cultural and social capital for this demographic, and contribute positively to their success.

Owens et al. (2010) produced some very useful information to put into practice, and suggested that there are several things career counselors working with African American men can do when working with these students, including

> listening to the perspectives of these students, being willing to discuss racism and discrimination, explaining the importance of networking with faculty and alumni, encouraging students to join professional and student organization, and assisting students to manage and negotiate relationships with other individuals through the institution and society (p. 295).

Other effective interventions should "focus on mobilizing support resources and cultural strengths to encourage productive student outcomes by reducing distress, promoting resiliency, and fostering personal empowerment" (Rowley & Bowman, 2009, p. 308). African American men have been shown to be more satisfied with college when engaged with research-focused mentoring (Strayhorn & Saddler, 2009), which could incorporate many of the above mentioned suggestions. These suggestions all work toward listening to the issues these young men are facing and then either helping them to use and cultivate strengths that will help them succeed in college. This research project highlighted the stories of students who have done all or most of the above mentioned things on campus in order to be successful.

Studies of successful African American college students. Stories of successful African American males are rarely told in literature and seldom seen in the media. Cuyjet (1997) points to a major problem of low or negative expectations for Black males in dominant culture, pointing to the need to "recognize the broad acceptance and institutionalization of these negative perceptions of black men as threatening, unfriendly, and less intelligent than any other distinguishable segment of the American population" (p. 8). Harper (2005, 2006, 2007) and Fries-Britt (1997, 1998) also point to the overrepresentation of deficit focused research on Black males. The main purpose in my research is to highlight the fact that there are successful African American men on college campuses that fulfill no part of this stereotype.

Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) high-ability students had to constantly justify their intelligence and place on campus, because both peers and faculty assumed they were less intelligent (AA students overall), but engaged in a "process of resistance" (p. 512) by deliberately choosing not to fulfill stereotypes, making sure the perspective of African Americans was understood when it was left out of academic discourse, and working to educate White students about the experience of Black students. Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) noted the "tenuous balance" of active resistance which motivated students and resistance which detracted from their overall experience and psychological health.

Warde's (2008) qualitative study of 11 African American male graduate students at a primarily minority institution cites four major contributing factors to academic success for African American males: strong family support, rigorous high school courses, supportive peer relationships with same-race peers, and mentoring programs (pp. 60-61). In his section about factors that contribute to the success of African American

men in college, Warde (2008) found four major themes in a focus group of his participants:

1. Having an epiphany about the importance of higher education;
2. Having the resources needed to attend and persist in an institution of higher education;
3. Having a mentor;
4. Resilience when faced with obstacles (p. 64).

Sharon Fries-Britt has extensively researched participants in the University of Maryland's (a PWI) Meyerhoff Scholars Program, which began as sort of honors program in science and engineering for academically gifted African American males, but has since opened to a broader student audience including Black women and other underrepresented populations (1997). High-ability for the purposes of admittance into the Meyerhoff program was defined by SAT scores and grade point averages. In her (1998) article about these students, their average high school GPA was a 3.5 on a 4.0 scale, and an average SAT score of 1198 (p. 1). Fries-Britt studied both the male and female participants of this program, but their experiences were similar across genders, so they were significant in discussing the experiences of Black males.

In addition to battling low expectations, which will be discussed more later, these students also struggled with responding to stereotypes, which many actively resisted by behaving in ways that ran counter to Black stereotypes, attempting to represent themselves as positive examples of African Americans, and engaging in extra efforts to prove they were intelligent in the classroom (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 514). These students also spent a considerable amount of time educating their white peers about the Black experiences. Fries-Britt noted that these experiences "diverted from academics" (p. 517), which may, in part, explain why Black students entering college with similar

academic ability and preparation as their White peers still achieve at lower levels, take longer to matriculate, and drop out more often (Fries-Britt, 2002, p. 4).

Shaun Harper (2005) has researched high-achieving African American males extensively, because he has found their stories "are rarely highlighted in the literature; thus their stories regarding the keys to college success typically remain untold" (p. 9). He asked, "What about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college, and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside of the classroom?" (p. 8). Through his qualitative study of 219 Black males at 42 institutions in 20 states, called the National Black Male College Achievement Study, Harper (2005, 2006, & 2007) brought to light these untold stories of college success. An "antideficit achievement framework" (2005, p. 61) was utilized to move the research focus toward "understanding why black men excel instead of adding to the already well-understood reasons that they fail" (p. 61). His participants had at least 3.0 GPAs and demonstrated "lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences, and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors" (p. 59).

Students in Harper's (2006) study attributed their success to:

1. God,
2. Themselves,
3. Their parents,
4. And their peers – almost always in that order (p. 347).

The men in his study felt supported by other African American men, even men who were not as involved or engaged on campus. Older Black males often connected them to involvement or leadership opportunities through Black student organization and through

historically Black fraternities. Strengths such as being personable, being a role model, leading by example, being trustworthy, and effective communication were brought up students discussing why they thought Black peers on campus supported them (2006, p. 351).

The vast majority of literature addressing the experiences of African American students, and especially African American males focuses on their deficits. Because of this research, we are well aware of low college attendance, retention and graduation rates, of academic underpreparedness, and lack of involvement in meaningful campus activities. While awareness of serious issues such as this is important, simply being aware does not lend itself to understanding how to fix these problems. My research looked at first-generation African American males who have struggled at times in their paths to and through college, but also addressed how they overcame struggles by utilizing personal strengths.

Research focused on successful African American males is qualitative and tends to focus on the experiences of high-achieving students. My research is unique in that I am not focused on the problem student or the high-achieving student. By simply ensuring my participants had sophomore status and at least a 2.5 GPA, I opened the door to looking at the student who falls in between these two, more researched, groups. Therefore, I hope to fill in the gap in understanding the paths to success for students who are neither high nor low achievers, but more average first-generation African American males on campus. I use the term "average" not to imply these young men do not have incredible potential, but to highlight an important and overlooked population that has not been studied. Their experience is, most likely, different from that of males at the high

and low ends of the spectrum. Analysis of this different experience is important if the literature about African American men is going to create a clear picture of their lives as college students. Another facet of the Black male experience that needs significant attention is their culture. As students of color, they bring a different cultural experience to a PWI than is traditionally recognized or valued on campus. This concept of cultural capital is explored in the next segment.

Cultural Capital

Developing an understanding how college works sits at the center of succeeding at primarily White colleges for many first-generation students of color. Students who come from homes where parents and guardians cannot offer advice or guidance on succeeding in a realm they have not experienced set up with the norms and values of a culture that is not their own face a double burden compared to White students with college educated parents or guardians. In her article looking at the origins of the concept of cultural capital in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Winkle-Wagner (2010) uses Bourdieu's definition – "class-based socialization of culturally relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, or norms that act as a form of currency in the social realm" (Bourdieu 1979a/1984 as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5) to analyze how this concept can be used in higher education research. Students acquire various forms of cultural capital through home environments and can also attain it through their education. In higher education, students can then use this capitol to navigate both the academic and social spheres of college.

Maldonado et al. (2005) looked at the concept of cultural and social capital acquisition in relation to college student retention. In their work, cultural capital was

made up of the "linguistic and cultural understandings and skills that individuals bring to schools on the basis of their social class location," (p. 609) and social capital involved "skills and capabilities enabling individuals to act in different ways" which connected them to different people and networks on campuses (p. 610). Basically, students need the knowledge of how college works and the ability to connect to people who can aid in their success. First-generation students and students from non-dominant cultures often struggle to acquire both cultural and social capital in college because campus culture is different from their own and they may have few ties to knowledgeable others who can help them adjust.

Viewing Tinto's (1975) retention theory through the lenses of cultural and social capital can highlight where first-generation students of color may not quite fit. While it may seem that completing coursework in order to earn a grade seems like a fair and straightforward process, there is much more at work when looking at what knowledge and behavior – learned through cultural and social capital acquisition – are rewarded, or penalized. In Tinto's (1975) discussion of academic integration in college, he noted that both grades and intellectual development were the rewards given for students who successfully integrated into their college's academic system, with grades as an extrinsic reward and intellectual development as more of an intrinsic reward. He explained that a student's grades represented "an evaluation of the student's attributes and achievements in relation to the system's values and objectives" (p. 104). If a student's values and objectives are different than that of the academic system where he finds himself, his learned behavior in the classroom may not be recognized as valuable, and go unrewarded.

Important in the analysis of students' cultural and social capitol is understanding what types of capitol are acknowledged, valued, and rewarded within higher education settings, especially at PWIs. If students can share "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, norms, preferences, or mannerisms" of the dominant group in exchange "for social rewards such as acceptance, recognition, inclusion, or even social mobility" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5), they will, presumably, have an easier time navigating higher education. However, if students do not come to an institution with cultural capital of the dominant class – college educated White culture – they will have a difficult time understanding what they need to do to succeed socially and academically. Cultural capital that was acquired at home will not be acknowledged, valued, or rewarded in their new environment. This is an important concept when looking at low-income, (Strayhorn, 2009) first-generation students, and students of color, and may account for the feeling of "homelessness" (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) students struggle with at PWIs. Rewarded and unrewarded cultural and social capital can be further analyzed by looking at cultural values of minority groups versus those of dominant White culture.

Again, a major issue with the second leg of Tinto's theory (1975) compared integration into college culture to initiation rituals within tribal groups. The main criticism of this is that moving to a new group within a tribe is social movement within one culture. When coming to college, students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures come together, representing many cultures coming to a place where academic and social culture already exists. At PWIs, this culture is framed with Eurocentric, White norms and values.

Guiffrida (2006) suggested ways in which Tinto's theory on retention could be more culturally sensitive by recognizing that students do not have to throw away their culture, and many students of color are successful at PWIs who can function in both home and university culture. With these adjustments, professionals in higher education can understand differences in motivation and culture, and better set up supportive environments for a diverse range of students. Guiffrida (2006) analyzed motivation – intrinsic and extrinsic – as well as differences between individualist and collectivist culture. He posited that students are intrinsically motivated because of a need for autonomy and their desires to be effective and establish relationships are engaged in the most meaningful type of learning (p. 453). On the other hand, extrinsically motivated students focused on gaining rewards or avoiding punishments or internalizing pressures to learn because of rewards or punishments might negatively affect their learning, while internalizing external pressures to learn can positively impact learning (p. 454).

Guiffrida (2006) then looked at differences between individualist orientation and more collectively oriented cultural groups. While he warns this is not universal, Western cultures tend to be more individually oriented, meaning they focus more on personal goals over those of the group. Collectivist cultures, such as those in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Native American groups tend to focus more on the good of the group and group goals while suppressing individual goals (p. 455). Collectivist values are still a part of these cultures in America, but this orientation is very different than what environments at PWIs expect or reward. If, as Tinto suggested (1975) students from more collectively oriented cultures leave behind the norms, values, and people in their

home environments, this huge break from cultural norms would be a huge adjustment for students transitioning into college.

Research on high-achieving African American students highlights excellent examples of the differences between the intrinsic rewards of the collectivist orientation of Black culture while living in an environment where more individually oriented behaviors are recognized and rewarded by the White culture of PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Harper, 2005; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). High ability African American students in a merit-based program in math, science, and engineering at a PWI expressed frustration in what they reported was a "proving process" (Fries-Britt, 2002, p. 7). White students and professors expected them to prove their intelligence by sharing their grades and test scores and proving they new course content (Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002). They had to prove their merit, the reason they belonged in the group, with personal information valued by more individually oriented cultures. While constantly feeling the need to prove oneself would understandably be frustrating, perhaps it was additionally frustrating because of the collectivist value of group belonging, for which these students were constantly struggling to achieve. However, among Black peers, these students made an effort not to disclose their involvement in the program because of problems with their peers thinking they were "acting White" (p. 5) or acting as if they were better than peers (Fries-Britt, 1998). These gifted African American students were sanctioned for standing out from the group or supposedly thinking they were above it as individuals.

In Guiffrida's (2005) study of African American students' ties to home, he discussed family relationships with high-achieves, low-achievers, and leavers. High-

achieving students reported parents who emphasized the importance of their individual academic achievement, even bragging about their students' accomplishments to others. On the other hand, low-achievers and leavers felt pressure from their families to come home often, lend support financially and fulfill head of household duties with siblings. Students' achievement and persistence in college was affected because of the differences in familial values – individualistic or communal - and the support or pressure that came along with them.

In their study of Black high-achievers, low-achievers, and leavers at a PWI, Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) found that low-achievers valued giving back to the Black community over academic achievements, involving themselves in Black student organizations to the detriment of their grades, while high-achievers valued academic achievement over involvement and saw the benefits of involvement as those that helped them to achieve academically and persist in college (p. 315). These are glaring examples of individualist versus collectivist values, and perhaps point to a larger issue. Must African American students take on more individualist values to succeed in college, or must they at least learn to balance their collectivist orientation with their own individual needs to persist?

Professionals in student and academic affairs often struggle with the tension "between the need to value students' personal and cultural knowledge and the need to meet institutional pressures for students to become more like the people who already 'belong' in the academy" (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006, p. 10). In order to truly cater to first-generation students of color, professionals must be willing "to help students construct bridges between their personal and cultural knowledge and that of the academic

world" (p. 10). Students may need spaces where their particular cultural and social capital is valued and rewarded as well as spaces where they can learn pieces of the cultural and social capital needed to navigate and succeed on campus. Understanding and acknowledging student strengths that may be different from traditionally rewarded strengths of dominant university culture is a great way to begin to build these bridges with students and one of the major purposes of my research. I analyzed first-generation African American males' ideas of success and strength to see if successful students in this group exhibit individualistic and/or communal values and whether or not they have found places were their orientation(s) are valued and rewarded.

Summary of Literature

Literature addressing the experiences of first-generation students, African American students, and specifically, African American males helps to build a base from which to work from and question in further research. The overwhelmingly negative focus on the deficits of African American males and first-generation students is not fully representative of these unique student experiences. Thus, my research project on successful first-generation African American males seeks to fill the gap in the literature on students who are succeeding on campus, but may not qualify as academically gifted or be the most highly visible students involved on campus. Through the study of student strengths, I hope to understand what strengths are vital to the success of first-generation African American males and how they realize and build on these strengths in college.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter three, I describe the methods used to develop and carry out this study. Chapter four will describe findings from participants regarding their strengths – how they

were realized, cultivated, and used to succeed on campus. Finally, implications of my finding and recommendations for future practice and antideficit research on first-generation African American males will be outlined in chapter five.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The study of successful first-generation African American males has mainly utilized a deficit approach. I choose a different angle for this research project - highlighting their successes. I aimed to learn from successful first-generation African American male undergraduates how to help others like them succeed at a large, public, Midwestern research institution made up of primarily White students. Being aware of problems helps student affairs professionals start to build solutions, but understanding how people succeed can help build another important piece of the puzzle. The results of this research may lead to understanding the strengths students use to persist in college as well as how these strengths are cultivated in college.

Study Rationale

The rationale for this study arose from the gap in information about strengths of first-generation African American males who are succeeding on college campuses. Information exists about pieces of this puzzle, but not its entirety. Harper (2005, 2006, 2007) and Fries-Britt (1997, 1998) explored the realities of highly successful African American males. Many of these students were not first-generation and they were academically far superior to their peers. The majority of research on this population looks at the deficits of African American males. Research on first-generation students also looks primarily at their struggles (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2008, 2010; Reid & Moore, 2008). However, little was found regarding the strengths of successful first generation students (Jehangir, 2010). The need for research including all the pieces of

this unique student experience at a PWI is needed to be able to effectively focus efforts to retain this population.

Research Questions

This study's primary research question was: "How do first-generation African American males describe the personal strengths that have contributed to their college success?" Sub-questions were used to clarify how students realized, used, and cultivated their strengths as well as decipher their feelings about the success of other first-generation African American males on campus. They included:

- How do first-generation African American males define success in college?
- What experiences in college do first-generation African American males identify as helping them realize and develop their strengths?
- What strengths are valued in other African American males who have been successful in college?
- What strengths would they tell a first-generation African American man he needed to be successful in college?
- What do first-generation African American males who are successful in college do?

Methodology Rationale

This study used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of first-generation African American males. Merriam (2009) noted that "qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). Qualitative methods are a fit for this study; because I am attempting to understand the

meanings of personal strengths my participants associate with their college success as well as what experiences have cultivated their strengths. These experiences varied and would be difficult to quantify because of their complexity; therefore qualitative methodology suited my purposes very well. In addition to a focus on meaning, Merriam (2009) noted three other important characteristics of qualitative research: using the researcher as the primary instrument, an inductive process, and rich descriptions to convey findings. I was the "primary instrument" (p. 15) for data collection and analysis, allowing adaptations as needed. This study was inductive, because there was a "lack of theory" (p. 15) regarding strengths of this population, so this research will focus on building concepts that do not already exist because of a gap in the literature instead of testing existing theories. Finally, the results of this research are conveyed using the rich descriptions of my participants. Participant's words and ideas are conveyed instead of using numerical descriptions of their experiences.

The research method used to conduct this study followed a case study model (Stake, 1995) in order to investigate a very specific phenomenon in a very specific group (p. 445). I used this method as a "means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding" (Merriam, 2009, p. 50) - the strengths of first-generation African American males at a primarily white institution (PWI). The bounded system (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) that was studied was the experience of academically successful first-generation African American males at a large public research university that is a PWI during their fall semester in 2011. This study fits the case study method well, because the research participants demonstrate a unique level

of success (Merriam, 2009) at this particular institution and in overall trends of college success for first-generation African American males.

Merriam (2009) identified three special features of case study research. It is particularistic, focusing "on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon," descriptive, producing "a rich, 'thick' description of the phenomenon under study," and heuristic illuminating the phenomenon being studied (p. 43). Case studies "can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (p. 44). Merriam's (2009) features of case study research fit this project quite well. This project focused on a very particular facet of the student population on one campus experiencing success, making it particularistic. Descriptive information from participant interviews was used to develop themes and relevant quotes from interviews were included to ensure "rich, 'thick' description" (p. 43) was used in discussing findings of this case study research. This study is unique because it focuses on the strengths of first-generation African American males instead of deficits or weaknesses. Therefore, it is heuristic, because it will "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study" in a distinctive manner (p. 44).

Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

Philosophically, I would say that I identify with postpositivist thinking, viewing "inquiry as a series of logically related steps" and believing "in multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). However, especially in this area of research, I must realize that the reality of my research participants is inherently different from my own, and their experiences are very different from one another. This belief would also make me a constructivist (Merriam, 2009),

because I believe my reality as a non first-generation White female to be very different than that of my research participants. My previous work with first-generation African American males has taught me to take a step back from my own reality to really learn and understand their reality as much as possible as I explored both commonalities and unique areas of their experiences. This was a very valuable skill to utilize as I interviewed participants.

Critical theory is an interpretive framework with which I deeply identify, especially with this research project. Critical theorists are "concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987 as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 27). Areas of study for those doing research through this lens would include "social institutions and their transformations through interpreting the meanings of social life; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and a critique of society and the envisioning of new possibilities" (p. 27). This particular research project focused on all three of these areas. These students are transforming their own lives, and their institution through their social interactions despite the overwhelmingly negative history of other first-generation African American males who have come before them. By studying their strengths and how they acquired and honed these strengths, I present new possibilities for ensuring the college success of this group in the future. Instead of working to just prevent the expected negative outcomes, these research results can assist in cultivating strengths that have been particularly useful to the men in this study.

Participants

I used a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2007, p. 76) of five participants to ensure that I collected enough data to explain the case thoroughly but avoided diluting the specific stories of my participants (p. 76). These students identified primarily as African American or Black males, and had a self reported cumulative GPA of a 2.5 or above. Neither of their parents or guardians attended or graduated from a four year post-secondary institution. Four out of five of my participants were the only or oldest children, so they had no older siblings to follow into higher education. One participant had an older sister who initially went to college, but has since left higher education. They all came from urban areas and primarily African American communities within their cities. Through my work on this campus, I already knew many potential interview candidates, but I used snowball sampling to find participants as well. Snowball sampling "involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria…established for participation in the study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). As interviews occurred with "early key participants" each one was asked to refer other potential participants (p. 79). Some of my participants were involved in the same student organizations and were friends with one another; therefore I knew that snowball sampling would be an effective method to find other students who might participate in this research project.

Research Site

This research was conducted at a large, Midwestern, predominantly White research institution which, for the purposes of this study, will be called Middle America University. In the fall of 2011, 24,593 students were enrolled in classes, including 19,345 undergraduates. Of this group of undergraduates, 464 students identified as

African American. The average ACT score for entering freshmen was a 25.3, which has been a fairly consistent average score for the past five years. Data from 2008 looking at first time, full time students showed the retention rate from year one to two to be 83.9%, from year two to three was 76.7%, and from year three to four 73.3% of students were retained. In 2010, this university had a six year graduation rate of 60.9% for its entire student body and 34% for African American males.

Data Collection – Interviews

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol based on Merriam's (2009) example and can be found in *Appendix A.* Questions focused on the self-identified strengths they used to succeed in college – such as perseverance and a positive attitude - and experiences that contributed to the growth of these strengths. Participants reflected on personal strengths that led them to college success as well as strengths they thought were needed in other first-generation African American males in order to succeed in college. Interviews were conducted in quiet places on campus where the participants felt comfortable. They lasted between 30 and 50 minutes each. I did not take notes during interviews in order to ensure participants felt more at ease and to make sure I was directing my full attention on what participants said in order to ask good follow-up questions when needed. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

In this research project, I used "categorical aggregation" of data (Creswell, 2007, p. 163) to look at multiple interviews and searched for specific issues that came up multiple times in the data. Because each student's reality is different, and some strengths or issues may be unique to individuals, I used "direct interpretation" (p. 163) to look at

items that come up only once, but were quite relevant to the study. In vivo coding was utilized first by pulling participants' words from the transcripts and assigning codes of single words or short phrases. I then assigned axial codes to both individual transcripts and the entirety of my data by connecting individual codes to create categories of data and ultimately to come up with themes. I took the different categories of data – whether from multiple instances in one case, multiple instances in multiple cases, or single instances from one case – and collapsed them into major themes to present in the write up of this case study. Within each category of data, I looked at what strengths or experiences each participant had in common and what was possibly unique. Discussion of strengths tended to center on similar difficulties students experienced within their families, communities, and on campus and themes started to emerge from analyzing what barriers they had in common and how they were conquered. In looking at each obstacle, sub-themes started to emerge based on how my participants utilized their strengths to overcome. Using these methods, I produced an in-depth portrait of my participants' shared and individual experiences.

Validation Techniques

A pilot study of this project was completed for a qualitative research course. The basic design of this research project and many of the research questions were completed as a part of this project. A pilot interview was conducted and feedback from this was used to revise and refine my research questions to ensure they were getting to the heart of this particular case.

Triangulation, checking the accuracy of the data by utilizing several methods (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009), of the data was also used to ensure data accuracy.

Member checks and a peer reviewer were the main methods of triangulation. Member checking involved sending interview transcripts back to my participants and asking them to see if everything in their interview was accurate. I asked them to let me know if they wanted to revise anything they said or explain anything further through another interview or through written communication. All of my participants were satisfied with their interviews and how they had explained their strengths. My peer reviewer was an African American male. He reviewed my codes, themes, and sub-themes to ensure that I was accurately interpreting the data. We came to complete agreement about each piece of data analysis before I wrote about my findings.

Role of Researcher

The success of first-generation African American men is very near to my heart. I worked at a public charter school for three years as a high school English teacher and college counselor in inner city Kansas City, Missouri. The vast majority of my students were low-income African American, and over half of our students were first-generation college students. The particular struggles of the young men I worked with were astounding to me. If they put all their efforts into their education, they were ridiculed. On the other hand, some students who were shot while involved with gang activity could put up pictures on Facebook throwing gang signs in their hospital beds and be heroes. I spent most of the first semester with my seniors working on making them believe they really could go to college and succeed, despite unbelievable discouragement from society and many of their own family members. In spite of all of this, we sent all but a few of our young men off to college, and most of them are still working on their degrees today.

I *know* first-generation African American men can and should succeed in college. I *know* many success stories of persistence and resilience. Other young African American men and people in higher education need to know these stories as well. Instead of functioning as people who work to keep these men afloat in college, we should be highlighting and helping them grow in their strengths. I hope this study disseminates these powerful and positive stories of incredible strength and triumphant success and influence methods used to cultivate the strengths of these students to increase retention and graduation rates.

One important facet of this project to discuss is that it was cross-racial and cross-gender research. I identify as a White woman and my participants identify as primarily African American or Black men. I have known two of the students I interviewed for this project for several years, and because of our interactions they knew that, even though I am a White woman, I am aware of many of the difficulties they deal with at a PWI and very supportive of diverse students. This likely helped me to build trust with them. However, three of my participants were not initially aware of this, and may have felt uncomfortable discussing personal issues regarding race with me. In order to alleviate this issue as much as possible, I explained my background and my personal reasoning behind conducting this study in hopes of gaining participant trust.

I asked my participants questions that deeply related to their experiences as African American men. Although I felt that my participants, for the most part, shared their experiences and feelings very openly, I know that they may have censored themselves. There is no way I can put myself in their shoes, so I am aware that what they may have shared with an African American woman or man may have been less censored

or more honest than what they chose to share with me. However, because of my identity as a White woman, my participants may have provided more explanation because they may have assumed that I did not understand their experience.

Limitations

The issue of generalizability (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) is brought up as a limitation of case study research. Although the results of this study may not be easily translated to first-generation African American males on another campus, I thought analyzing their experience on at Middle American University was still important to explore. I did not want a generalized view of the strengths of first-generation African American males at a PWI; I wanted to know specifically what strengths helped my research participants succeed on their particular campus and how these strengths were realized and cultivated on their particular campus. Through this small research project, I learned that these specific stories are very powerful and each student's insight can be applied in numerous situations. If nothing else, readers will walk away with an understanding of the experiences of these students on their campus, which reflects the experiences of many students on other campuses that I have worked with in the past. Therefore, my findings may be theoretically or conceptually generalizable to other institutions.

Merriam (2009) also pointed to the limitation of sensitivity and integrity of the investigator in case study research, noting the lack of training for researchers and guidelines for writing reports of case study research (p. 52). I combated this issue by first being aware of my personal feelings and biases about first-generation African American males and the tendency to research their deficits rather than their strengths. I also

included rich descriptions of my participants and their stories using quotes from them whenever possible to ensure accuracy of my depictions.

Strengths

My past experiences working with first generation college students and African American students as in both the high school and college realms served as a great strength in this project. This was especially useful because this research was done across gender and racial lines. Before beginning the interviews, if students were not previously aware of my past experiences working with students, I discussed my past career and my passion for making sure underrepresented students get to and succeed in college. I could oftentimes visibly see a sense of relief when students understood why a person who looked like me would be conducting this research.

Another strength of this project is its focus on the positive. My participants were well aware of the negative stereotypes and expectations placed on them by society and many discussed wanting to show they could be successful college students to disprove these negative expectations. I believe this made them even more motivated to dive into their successes and explain their strengths.

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the rational and methods used in this case study, explained the research participants and site, and explained how data was collected, analyzed, and validated. As student retention continues to be a major focus on higher education, new methods of understanding and supporting students will need exploration and implementation. In Chapter 4, I will report the findings of this research and explore

important themes that were evident in discussions of first-generation African American male's strengths and their contributions to persistence at a predominantly white college.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the way that first-generation African American males describe the strengths they used to succeed at a large, Midwestern, public, research institution that is primarily White. Through 30-60 minute interviews, participants described the personal strengths they used to succeed in college. This study aimed to add to the small body of research using an anti-deficit approach to understand the college experience of African American males. In this chapter, I present the major themes and sub-themes of my research which emerged in conversations with my research participants.

Introduction to Participants

Each student interviewed for this study grew up in an urban area and in African American communities within their cities. Also, each of the men is either an only child in their household or the oldest child. In addition to basic demographic information about these students, understanding their ideas of what success in college really looks like as well as their personal motivations for succeeding are important pieces of each student to understand. They used their strengths to accomplish their versions of success because of their personal motivations. I explain each participant's ideas about success in college and share what has motivated each to succeed. Table 4.1 displays a summary of each participant's basic information.

Table 4.1: Basic Participant Data

Name	Hometown	Year	Major	ACT Score	College GPA
Joe	Kansas City, MO	Junior	Communication Studies Minor: Ethnic Studies	18	3.0
Henry	Kansas City, MO	Junior	English	19	3.37
Duane	Omaha, NE	Sophomore	Communication Studies & Political Science (Pre-Law)	24	3.5
Nathan	Omaha, NE	Senior	Fashion Design & Art-Graphic Design	17	2.5
Patrick	St. Louis, MO	Senior	Sociology	22	2.5

Joe. Joe is a junior from Kansas City, Missouri majoring in communications studies and minoring in ethnic studies. I was Joe's college counselor in high school and have known him for almost five years. After he completes his undergraduate degree, he wants to pursue a master's degree in higher education administration and work in student affairs. I made sure to include him in this research because of his interest in a master's program that would include a research component. Success for Joe involves avoiding the paths of some of his family and community members. His father's early path in was not positive and avoiding it has been both a version of success and motivating factor in Joe's life. Discussing his father, he noted:

> He got into trouble really early, so I know I'm really making him proud knowing that I'm not doing the things that he do, and like he's a positive influence on me. People would say that he's not a positive role …model for me, but he's the perfect role model because he showed me, everything that I didn't wanna do, so that was perfect for me cause I saw the things. He's a really good person character wise. He's a really excellent person, but he just made some bad decisions and it showed me that I didn't want to make those decisions, so them telling me that it's good that I'm makin' my own path and not following the path of my family members and people in my community, then that's just the encouragement that I need knowing that I'm doing the right thing and they're really proud to see that I *am* doing the right thing.

Growing up in an urban environment riddled with violence and crime and seeing some negative aspects of his community play out in his own family motivated Joe to pursue higher education and work hard to succeed.

A huge piece of motivation that helped him get to and pay for college is a college access program Joe participated in since he was in sixth grade. This program involved students in study skills workshops, tutoring, pre-college programming, and they set each student up with a mentor. If students participated regularly and maintained a 2.5 GPA, they received a full scholarship to the college of their choice. Because he stayed with the program through high school graduation, Joe now has a full scholarship for his bachelor's degree. This program was so vital for his path to college because, before he got involved, he "didn't even think about college," but shared that it "put it in my ear early on" and the program had the "resources to get me to college." Knowing he had the support and resources from this program motivated him to pursue higher education.

Joe is also motivated by the fact that he has become a role model for his little brothers and sisters. His nine-year-old brother even wants to attend the same institution as him. Other family members tell him they are "proud" of his pursuit of a college degree and emphasize the importance of his responsibility as a role model to his younger siblings. In their family and community, these siblings do not have examples of people going to college, so Joe is the trailblazer on this new path.

Henry. Henry, a junior from Kansas City, Missouri, wanted to complete his English undergraduate degree, and continue on to become an English professor. I was also Henry's college counselor and have known him for almost five years. He defined success in college as not only getting good grades and learning to utilize resources, but

also by working in the community and networking on campus. Through networking, he has attempted to build a "positive reputation." He sees someone with a positive reputation as a student who knows themselves and has found direction, and demonstrates dedication. Networking and building this idea of a positive reputation were vital to his success, because when he arrived on campus, he shared:

> I know when I came to college my freshman year I actually didn't know why I was here, and I kinda had to struggle with that. For starters, it was cause I didn't have a major. I didn't know where my life was headed. It was kinda a big step in life and I was kinda just like thrown here, and I had to find my way. But then as I started building relationships with other people, getting to know students, teachers, and staff. I kinda found the direction that I was meant to go through.

Arriving on campus so unsure of his direction in life was a challenge for Henry, but because he chose to reach out to others and build a positive reputation, he started to feel successful on campus. The idea of feeling lost and finding direction seems to echo throughout his story on campus, and he has worked hard to help others find their way through chaos during his time on campus.

Henry's main motivations for succeeding in college centered on realizing the opportunity he had been given and taking full advantage of it. Henry came to Middle America University with a full scholarship because of his participation in the same college access program as Joe. He is on a full scholarship as well. Also, attending college was an opportunity his parents never had. He has three younger siblings, and wants to show them, "We can make it, and we can be successful." When asked what advice he gives them about college, he replied:

> There's a lot of distractions and you kinda gotta know the reason why you're there. You constantly gotta be reminded the reason why you're here. You're not only here to get an education, but to make something of yourself, and not saying that college is for everyone, but I just wanna tell 'em, like education is really important. You should take it seriously.

He wants to take advantage of the opportunity he has been given to go to college, and pass on knowledge about how to avoid distractions and succeed so that his siblings can take advantage of the opportunity as well.

Duane. Personal success in college for Duane, a sophomore from Omaha, Nebraska, means succeeding academically and "leaving (his) stamp" on campus, which for him involves changing the "social structure" of campus. He shared, "To me I feel like groups and minorities are in their own sections, and I want to bring it all together, cause we're all going to school here." This idea of college success is unique to a predominantly white institution (PWI), where there are few students of color and dominant campus culture is dominated by White culture.

Duane's personal motivations for succeeding in college include his family's desires for his education and realizing the connection between getting a college education and having access to the type of jobs that will enable him to "live the life I wanna live." Duane's mother instilled the importance of going to college in him from the time he was young. He told the following story about her desires for him:

> In elementary school, I remember one time sayin' that "After high school I'm done with college." You know kids, "I hate school." and such. And my mom looked at me and said, "What? No. You're goin' to college!" And I never really thought about it then, but it's always been implemented by my parents because they did not go to school, and they knew that goin' to college would be the best option for me.

Even though Duane's mother did not attend college, she pushed for him to go because she knew the importance of getting a college degree. Growing up with this type of high expectation motivated him to succeed in college and even prepare for law school.

Duane has also noticed that more and more jobs are requiring a college degree, noting that "a college degree is equivalent to a high school degree, so I feel that like…I have to have the backing to get the job that I want to." For him, receiving a college degree and a law degree are imperative in order to have the quality of life he would like to in the future.

Nathan. A senior from Omaha, NE, Nathan defines college success as "saying on top of your academics," networking, and pursuing the career he is interested in - designing well tailored men's apparel. Networking to find useful resources on campus, meet a variety of people, as well as pursue internships in his career field, has been vital to his success in college. He emphasized the importance of taking advantage of his time in a college environment: "You can learn anywhere, but one thing you wanna take from college is networking because you will never find a doctor and a lawyer in the same place as you would anywhere else in college."

He responded very candidly when asked what motivated him to succeed in college, sharing "I just don't wanna be known as a failure." His mother has been a huge influence on his decision to go to and keep working hard in college. She received an associate's degree in art, but wanted him to pursue a bachelor's degree. She encouraged Nathan to study and even pushed him to try harder if he got a B in a class. She introduced him to the idea of networking to create connections with college educated people. Nathan described her strategy: "She always put people in my life who went to a four-year college and who are in the same footsteps as I am. So, she always connected me with people to help me out." Nathan's mother did not earn her bachelor's degree, but because she wanted him to, she placed role models in his life who had earned this degree.

Patrick. Patrick, a senior Sociology major from St. Louis, Missouri is getting ready to pursue a master's degree in higher education administration with an emphasis in student affairs. He defines college success as having a "well-rounded" college experience, where he balances academic work and extracurricular activities about which he is "excited" and "passionate."

Proving that good can come from St. Louis is a major piece of Patrick's motivation to succeed in college. He asserted: "I carry my city on my back." He explained:

> Coming from a city that's very racially divided where, seeing African American males like myself that kind of just mired in the system and kind of just stuck in that cycle, I wanted to show my younger family members and just prove to myself that I could do something…of this magnitude.

While his deep connection to St. Louis motivates him to succeed, "getting out of the city" is also a huge accomplishment for him. As the first male in his family to "go, stay, and graduate from a four-year school," Patrick sees himself as creating a new path for those in his family and many in his city.

Strengths discussed in this research were identified by each participant. I did create any strengths for them based on our conversations, but strictly relied on strengths they mentioned and explained to create themes and sub-themes from their interviews. The self-identified strengths each participant mentioned during their interview are presented in the table below.

Table 4.2: Strengths Used to Succeed in College for Each Participant

Joe	
• good organizer • leadership • on time • make my commitments • responsible • trustworthy • having integrity • interpersonal skills • comforting	• caring • understanding • positive attitude • able to bounce back from the negative • not feeding into stereotypes • standing out • resourceful • knowing the value of higher education
Henry	
• understanding • introversion • ability to adapt	• seeing connection with different others • voicing his opinion • courageousness
Duane	
• patient • determined • speaking and communicating with others • positive attitude • "mannerable"/customer service	• humble • embracing other African American males • networking • focused • tunnel vision
Nathan	
• I hate being like everyone else. • disciplined • time management	• knowing what I wanna do, basically in life • staying consistent • persistent
Patrick	
• internal strength • persistence • outgoingness • ability to just know people • outgoing nature • effective follower • perseverance • us versus them mentality • stepping outside that comfort zone	• doing the things that people tell you you can't • open mind • seeing other people's perspectives instead of your own • experiencing other people's experiences • building relationships • refocusing/recentering • introversion

A powerful motivational factor for the men in this study seemed to be avoiding failure. Nathan put this bluntly, saying "I just don't wanna be known as a failure." This idea came through more subtly for Joe, who wants to avoid the pitfalls his family

members and many in his community fall into. Henry emphasized his desire to show his siblings that they *can* be successful, but they need to strategically avoid distractions in college. Patrick's deep connection to St. Louis is important to him, but he has worked to avoid getting "mired in the system" that so many African American males encounter there. He wants to show his family members and prove to himself that he can graduate from college.

Four out of five men in this study are planning on pursuing degrees beyond their bachelor's. Both Patrick and Joe plan to pursue a master's degree in higher education administration in order to work in student affairs. Duane wants to go to law school, and Henry wants to get his doctorate in English and become a professor. Despite the struggles involved in coming to college as first-generation students and African American males, these men have a desire to continue on in their education. This desire would, undoubtedly affect their views on finishing their bachelor's degrees, as it serve as a stepping stone in their ultimate goals instead of the end goal.

Some common areas of strength for my participants were their abilities to connect and relate to others coupled with their steadfast desire to succeed despite and difficulty. Relational strengths included interpersonal skills and being caring for Joe, Henry's strengths of being understanding and seeing connections with different others, and Patrick's outgoing nature and ability to build relationships. Strengths used to succeed in the face of obstacles included Nathan and Patrick's persistence, Duane's focus, Joe's strengths of not feeding into stereotypes and bouncing back from the negative, and Henry's courageousness. Coupled together, these strengths allowed my participants to

seek out supportive others, lend support to other men like them, and persevere in getting to college and fulfilling their versions of college success at Middle America University.

Research Themes and Sub-Themes

From the interviews of these five research participants, five themes and six sub-themes emerged. They are summarized and visually depicted in Table 4.3 below. Both the themes and sub-themes centered on my participants' experiences at home, in their communities, and at Middle America University and their reactions to them, using strengths to combat difficulties. As previously mentioned, all my participants came from African American communities within urban environments to the predominantly White environment of Middle America University. This transition in addition to negotiating their lives as first-generation students and African American males was at the center of our conversations.

Table 4.3: Research Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme 1: Receiving Poor Strength Training Advice students received prior to coming to college and in their early days as college students did not address the actual difficulties they encountered.
Theme 2: Negotiating a PWI with Strengths Participants used their strengths to transition from living in primarily African American communities to a PWI.
Sub-Theme: Refocusing the Struggle & Maintaining Tunnel Vision Difficulties experienced at Middle America University were many, so participants refocused on what was important to them and had to push aside distractions.
Sub-Theme: Creating Comfort Zones Participants created their own culturally comfortable zones to combat the difficulties of attending a PWI.
Sub-Theme: Redefining Diversity Because of their desire to re-work what it meant to be an African American male on campus and engage White students in diverse experiences, participants worked to redefine diversity.
Theme 3: Going to Battle: Starving Stereotypes In order to prove that they were not the negative stereotype of African American males that many assumed them to be, participants actively worked to exhibit behavior opposite of these stereotypes.

Sub-theme: Understanding the Battle In order to fight strong stereotypes, low expectations, and negativity one must understand how these aspects of first-generation African American identity present themselves.
Sub-theme: Developing Battle Strategies Participants developed several proactive methods for fighting against stereotypes, low expectations, and negativity in their communities and on campus.
Theme 4: Trailblazing versus Trail Avoidance As first-generation students and African American males, these men were blazing new trails instead of following others' footsteps. In order to stay on positive paths, they had to actively work to avoid trails some in their families, communities, and even peers on campus were choosing.
Sub-Theme: Negotiating First-Generation Identities As the first in their families to aim for a bachelor's degree, participants had to carefully manage the first-generation piece of their identities.
Sub-Theme: Forging the Path Participants described creating their own paths to and through higher education.
Sub-Theme: Avoiding Paths Participants described the negative paths they intentionally avoided in order to stay on their paths to college success.
Theme 5: Utilizing Communal and Individualistic Orientations While they acknowledged leaning toward a communal orientation, participants emphasized the need to utilize both a communal and individualistic orientation in order to succeed in college.

Theme 1: Poor strength training. When asked what they had been told regarding what strengths or skills students needed to succeed in college by others before and during college, much of the advice given to my participants centered on basic academic skills. While basic academic and organizational skills are important to have in college, they major strengths mentioned in this study had little do with academic life. I would compare the advice given to students about succeeding in college to putting soccer players through strength training workouts that only addressed the muscles in their arms. Soccer players need strength and agility in their legs to truly prepare for their sport just as first-generation African American males need to be prepared to handle the often difficult realities of leaving their primarily African American urban communities and coming to a PWI.

Duane was told he needed to be "smart" to succeed, and one of Nathan's teachers told him that the work load was going to increase, so he needed to develop "endurance in studying." Nathan also had a professor pull him aside his freshman year to work harder in class. People in Joe's life told him:

> You're gonna have to get your studies together. You're gonna have to learn your time management" and different things like that, so like I didn't necessarily hear the, "Make sure you be a leader in college" or anything like that…but it was just more so the tools that I needed to be successful like academic wise.

One of the main strengths Joe has used to succeed in college has been leadership, but this was not an immediate focus of his when he came to college, because he was focused on the nuts and bolts of managing his time and achieving academically. He expressed frustration with only being given this type of practical advice as opposed to developing strengths on personal growth level:

> I never hear, "Make sure you're a leader." It wasn't anything personally or inside of you, ya know? How you get that leadership. You get those values inside. It was more so, like what you needed to be successful, like academically.

For Joe, these more personal strengths have been more helpful than practical advice about using a planner or developing good study habits, and he wished that people would have included this type of advice when they were telling him how to succeed in college. While giving all students advice to organize themselves, study hard, and manage their time well is important, these pieces of advice do not address the difficult realities the men in my study were faced with after coming to Middle America University.

Not all advice given to participants was aimed at the wrong set of muscles; however it did tend to focus on possible student problems and deficits instead of utilizing personal strengths. Advice given to prevent failure before and during college also impacted students' efforts to succeed in college. Once he got to campus, Duane was told

"you just can't forget the reason why you came here" and encouraged to avoid things that might steer him away from his path. Difficulties of attending a PWI will be discussed in depth later, but this advice seemed to be almost a warning about potential frustrations and distractions. Unsure of exactly how to handle potential obstacles in his path, this prompted him to develop what he called "tunnel vision" to focus on his academics and avoid negativity.

Before coming to college, Patrick's mother engrained the strength and value of perseverance in her son. He described their conversations before and during college:

> 'You don't ever give up. Don't ever let anyone tell you you can't do anything.' Um, and I've always kind of internalized that and like anytime I'm ever like… 'I can't do this!' or 'I'm at my wit's end!' I usually call my mom. My mom's like, "Well, look at how far you've come, and look at what you've done so far."

By encouraging him and preparing him for potentially difficult situations in his future, Patrick learned and began to internalize the strength of perseverance. He also learned that his mother was going to encourage him through difficult situations. She had high expectations for him and believed in his ability to succeed in college.

The first-generation African American males in this study were also encouraged to connect with other African Americans on campus. As mentioned earlier, relational strengths were definitely utilized by the men interviewed for this project. Duane has found building supportive relationships through networking vital to finding other African Americans to talk to on campus. He shared:

> A lot of African American males feel like there is nobody on this campus who they can go to, but there actually are. There's a large number of people, well not a large number, but it's a quality number … who, if you need help with somethin' or you need, you just need anything, it's always somebody you could go to.

At a PWI with a small African American student, faculty, and staff population, he had to intentionally seek out other African Americans, but doing so helped him to feel more culturally comfortable on campus.

Much of the advice participants received was directed only at their academic lives or rather ominous about potential difficulties. Academic strengths like endurance in studying and time management are great to have when entering college. However, focusing on never giving up, blocking out the negative, and building positive relationships was more helpful for the first-generation African American males in this study as they entered a PWI.

Theme 2: Negotiating a PWI with strengths. All students interviewed for this study grew up in urban areas and lived in primarily Black neighborhoods. With the exception of Duane, who attended a private all male high school, each participant also attended a high school where either the majority of students were African American or there were a large percentage of African American students. Although coming to a PWI is a challenge for many students of color, making the transition from school and community environments that are primarily African American to a new school and community that is primarily White poses significant challenges. Many of the strengths students discussed centered on dealing with the difficulties of this transition. Sub-themes that emerged in this theme were re-focusing the struggle and maintaining tunnel vision, creating comfort zones, and redefining diversity. These sub-themes touched on ways in which students: handled the shock and struggles involved in attending a PWI by managing the lenses they used to see issues, created their own spaces to feel as if they could freely exhibit their own culture, and worked toward redefining what being an

African American male on campus meant as well as opening up the definition of diversity.

Discussing the transition of coming into a primarily White environment from a primarily African American community, Henry emphasized that coming to campus from Kansas City, Missouri was a huge change: "I came here, and it seemed like the world was different!" Differences in racial make-up in his new college environment posed a challenge. Patrick, a senior from St. Louis, Missouri also described the challenge of moving from a majority to minority community and how his peers handled it:

> They're from the predominantly minority sections of the city. When they come here, it's like you're not in the majority anymore and they get frustrated with that, …and I don't think they're really ready or prepared to handle that.

He went on to explain that transitioning from primarily African American school systems contribute to what he called "culture shock":

> If you go to a predominantly African American high school, you're in the majority group, so don't know what it's like to be stared at when you walk into a classroom and you don't know what it's like to have a professor ask you "What do you think?" and your answer to be representative of your entire race. So…people get frustrated with that.

The new pressures of feeling as if they are on constant display and expectation that their opinions and actions represent their entire race were very frustrating for the men in this study.

One assumption the African American men in this study had to contend with was that they only reason they, as Black men, would be attending this particular PWI would be to play a sport. These men did not express any discontent toward men who were involved in athletics, but the assumption that this was the only way they could get to college was offensive. When wearing sweatpants or a sweatshirt, Henry said many

people ask him if he plays football or if he came to college on a football scholarship. When he shares that he actually came to college on the academic scholarship from the college access program he was a part of in Kansas City, they are often "shocked." When I asked him how seeing this shock felt, he explained:

> Angry, cause they don't see that I'm fit to be, that I'm fit to be smart. Like the only reason for a Black male to be here in campus is for sports and that's not necessarily true.

The assumption that Henry would not be "fit" is particularly disturbing here. These students assume that Henry, as an African American male, is not "fit" to attend college based on his own intellectual merit and presume that only his physical abilities as an athlete could get him through the doors of this institution.

Patrick also dealt with this athlete assumption and explained, "You're already at a disadvantage 'cause people always wanna automatically assume that since you're in college, you're a male, you have an athletic build, you probably play a sport." Like Henry, Patrick also dealt with surprise when he told them that he was not an athlete. He explained reactions of White students: "They're surprised at the fact that you actually wanted to come to school here, and you actually like the school, and you're not resentful of the fact that you're here surprises them." White students assuming Henry was an athlete were surprised at his ability to have an academic scholarship. White students that Patrick has encountered assume that the last place he, as a Black male, would want to be is this primarily White university.

Duane , Henry, and Patrick all mentioned that they felt the root of many difficulties in dealings with White students was that they had never really interacted with African Americans before coming to college. Patrick discussed the strength of having an

"open mind" to "deal with being at a PWI." Discussing particular difficulties with students from rural areas, he said "You're like the first Black person they have ever seen!" In order to understand these White students from rural areas, he used what he called "one of my biggest strengths" – "experiencing people's experiences." This strength was used in several ways, but he used it during interactions with White students to understand their backgrounds and understand the origins of their negative stereotypes. After learning about why White students held various stereotypes, Patrick even took the time to teach them about his culture: "Educating people on perceptions that they have, and perceptions that they have of African American men in college…has been something that has just kind of motivated me." The cycle of learning about the backgrounds of White students, learning why they may assume things about him, and then educating them on the African American experience and culture has worked in Patrick's favor to help him deal with potentially negative interactions.

Duane discussed the strength of patience when dealing with White students, saying:

> They may say some things or act a certain way, and you kinda have to take a step back and not get angry or mad because they don't know. They haven't experienced that, so it's not really their fault.

The ignorance of White students who have had few, if any interactions with African Americans seems to be an excuse for ignorance for Duane, and he is very patient when they say inappropriate or offensive things. He explained what he felt were the origins of their negative assumptions:

> If you're coming from a small town where you've never interacted with someone – a minority – before, all you have to go off of is what you see on TV and in movies and just what people have told you and sometimes those perceptions are completely false.

Duane is incredibly understanding of true ignorance on the part of White students new to interactions with students of color, however these types of interactions can be incredibly offensive and draining on students over time.

Henry described the feeling of constantly explaining his community as "burdensome," but added, "You get used to it." One particular interaction with a girl on his residence hall floor was particularly hurtful. After an entire school year living on the same floor, she told him:

> [Henry], if I hadn't known you the way I did, I would have been completely scared of you because you're just like this big…I don't wanna say Black, but you're just like this big man who looks intimidating, but deep down, I know that you're…a cute, cuddly teddy bear.

He said of her statement, "She tried to cover it up, tried to sugar coat it." Adding that he was a "cuddly teddy bear" in reality as opposed to the "intimidating" person she had originally assumed him to be was very hurtful to him. In the midst of all the stereotypes these men were assumed to fill and the White ignorance they encountered, they worked to develop coping strategies using their personal strengths.

Refocusing the struggle & maintaining tunnel vision. Attending a PWI meant dealing with many distractions for the first-generation African American males interviewed in this project. In order to cope, men in this study were very conscious about using their strengths to choose what they wanted to focus on – hardships and ignorance or their own paths to success – and developed strategies to manage this task. Two of the strengths Duane has used to succeed in college are staying determined and focused in the face of difficulties and distractions. Coming into college, Duane had an ACT score above the national average. He went to an all male private school. He has maintained a high grade point average during his time at Middle America University, but the

distractions involved with attending a PWI caused him to use determination and focus to rise above the difficulty and continue to succeed. He said he knew there were "ups and downs" in college, but he tells other African American males, "remember your goals…remember why you came to school" and "not to let things steer them away from the reason they came to [Middle America University]."

In dealing with the negative news reports about North Omaha, Duane uses his strength of "tunnel vision" to focus on his goals in college and block out pessimism about his community or his abilities as a Black male to succeed. He shared, "Not everybody is gonna be happy that you're succeeding." and "Those (negative news reports) are kinda things that you have to just put to the side and not focus on too much." Again, the idea of creating personal truth comes into play. Duane blocks out everything but that which will help him accomplish his version of college success.

Joe chose to participate in the college access program in Kansas City to help him create another option besides going to jail or being killed. Like Duane's use of tunnel vision, he chose to focus on his goal of going to college and ignore others telling him that his only options were to end up in jail or an early grave. Joe says of realizing that college was an option and the other students in the program:

> Being able to have that option – absolutely loved it. It really goes back to, I think we realized the importance of education and the importance of fulfilling our own personal goals, and making sure we lived out our own expectations and exceeded the expectations of the people in our community.

Although the path to higher education was new, Joe found guidance and support and blocked out

others' negativity in order to create and meet his personal expectations for the future.

In order to deal with the stresses and pressures of attending a PWI, Patrick used his strengths of refocusing and re-centering himself. In addition to the difficult interactions previously mentioned, Patrick also feels pressure as an African American male who is seen as a leader. Because there is a very low population of African American males at Middle America University, he is often put in leadership positions, even though he is already very busy. Although he has grown and learned much from his leadership experiences, he also said "Leadership can be a burden." He described when he feels the need to refocus and how he goes about it:

> I'm just tired of school. I'm just tired of doing it. I'm tired of being a leader. I'm tired of always having to be the one doing this…I refocus myself and I find my center…I always call it finding my center cause those points in the semester when I get burnt out.

Recovering from this burnout, be it with academic work or carrying the burdens of leadership, has helped Patrick to persist in college. He has even noticed that "People who can't refocus struggle." This idea of refocusing the struggle is key in understanding how African American males handle the burdens of a PWI. Whether their stress comes from working to avoid negative perceptions from home and on campus, explaining and educating White people on campus about their experiences, or extra burdens of leadership, learning to handle this level of stress and distraction is imperative.

As a role model to his three younger siblings in Kansas City, Henry tells them:

> There's a lot of distractions and you kinda gotta know the reason why you're there, like you constantly gotta be reminded the reason why you're here, like you're not only here to get an education, but to make something of yourself, and not saying that college is for everyone, but I just wanna tell 'em, education is really important. You should take it seriously.

As mentioned in his introduction, Henry grappled with his own feelings of not understanding why he was in college and feeling as if he was "thrown" at Middle

America University. His confusion in understanding his purpose for higher education and finding a career path are very normal for college students, but these issues coupled with the difficulties African American males experience at this PWI caused great distraction. Perhaps like Patrick's idea of "finding my center," Henry constantly reminded himself that he came to college to "get and education" and "make something" of himself to remain focused on his goals instead of getting derailed by this PWI's distractions.

The question students were asked about their strengths was "What personal strengths have helped you succeed in college?" I did not ask what strengths helped them deal with difficulties at a PWI or in their social or academic lives, but very broadly inquired about strengths used to achieve their version of college success. The fact that these men had to consciously choose to focus in on their path to success and block out the distractions of this PWI through utilizing strengths like courageousness, patience, determination, open mindedness, and refocusing truly shows the level of stress and difficulty that environment can have on the success of African American males. While they were expending the energy to utilize and cultivate these strengths, their peers who were not African American males were busy focusing on opportunities these men may have been missing.

Because of the negative interactions described above, it is not surprising that some African American students decide to avoid interactions with White people completely in order to solely focus on personal success and avoid every possible negative distraction that might come with attending a PWI. Henry was, understandably, angered by some comments from a peer, but none of the men in this study expressed great hatred

for White students, faculty, or staff. However, they shared that this disposition did exist on campus. Patrick was very frustrated by the "I hate White people attitude" he sees some of his African American peers exhibit. He described interactions with Black peers who were frustrated by the actions of White students, staff, and faculty on campus, He told his peers, "You don't get that you're the first literal, physical person that they have ever seen of color before?" He reported that these negative interactions with White people are "why they had that culture shock and when you're in culture shock, you kind of cling onto your culture more." Instead of choosing to dislike or avoid White people, he shared: "I use my time here at a predominantly White institution to educate people who might have negative perceptions." Patrick has the strength and desire to "experience people's experiences," so he educates instead of getting frustrated to the point where he avoids interactions with White people on campus. He seemed to be motivated to understand White students and educate them in order for them to understand his experience. While Patrick viewed this in a positive light, it is important to point out that not all students at Middle America University see it this way. Even though a student may see these educational experiences as positive, energy expended consistently educating others could lead to burnout. Time spent educating could be spent on other educational pursuits.

Creating comfort zones. While attempting to expand their own cultural competence and blending African American cultures with what Patrick called "predominantly White campus culture" was important to the men in this study, finding spaces where either African American culture was prevalent or where diversity was respected was also important. Patrick used his strengths of building relationships and his

"ability to know people" and found his "safe space" by joining a traditionally African American fraternity. He explained the importance of getting to "hang out with a group of guys who get you culturally completely. They get you." He explained that many African American men

> might not of ever had another male say, "Hey man. I see your struggling. Do you like, wanna talk? It's okay and we can just go play video games or go play basketball just to get your mind off of it." Just having that…comfortable zone for them.

The importance of the support Patrick received from his fraternity brothers came up in several answers to questions in his interview, but this idea of African American male peer support seems to be at the root of why these relationships were so valuable for him. Patrick was raised by his mother and grandmother, and having the support and example of other Black males was new to him and incredibly important to his success in college.

Henry found his culturally comfortable zone in his ethnic studies courses. He realized that he had the strength of seeing connections with others in these classes. Henry used this strength to see that students who were not African American "share the same things that I shared from a different race." Other students struggled with being placed in a box by stereotypes others held of them. He shared this example from a student who came to the university from a small town who was assumed to be a "hick":

> People view me as just a farm boy. That would be the only thing I can be. And that's not necessarily true, and I, I think that my ethnic studies class made me realize that, I don't know, that no matter what race you are, anybody can experience those things.

This realization that other students were grappling with others assessing their value and potential based on stereotypes had a huge impact on Henry. He said this realization "kinda kept me here" and "made me open my eyes." He said these classes "made me feel

like I had a home, because it made me realize that you don't necessarily have to be like a minority to feel the same that I feel." He was also relieved to see conversations in these classes "made other students open up their eyes to show like the realities of a college campus and even the everyday stereotypes that we hold that we may not recognize, that we may…show indirectly." Feeling a sense of solidarity with students from completely different environments and seeing other students realize the stereotypes they held, kept Henry at Middle America University. His ability to connect to and identify with the struggles of others kept him in college, and his desire for other students to engage in these meaningful discussions of diversity is evident in Henry's motivation to change the definition of diversity on campus.

Redefining Diversity. Although some African American students insulate themselves to avoid negative interactions at Middle America University, others decided to work toward building a campus culture that was more inclusive of diversity. Men in this study did not seem to want the cultures and experiences of students of color to be so separate from the White culture and students of Middle America University. While interacting with White people on campus was often a challenge for them, engaging in diverse experiences also helped them grow. A desire for greater campus understanding across cultures and motivation for all students to have the opportunity to grow from experiences with diverse others prompted the men in this study to redefine diversity on campus.

As mentioned earlier, Duane pursued various involvement opportunities in hopes of having a direct impact on campus culture. This was part of his personal version of college success. Patrick described his belief that students should work to "blend

cultures" as "acculturated," and has actively worked to blend "African American culture with traditional predominantly White campus culture." Duane, Henry, and Patrick found it important to work toward this blending of culture at this PWI instead of keeping cultures separated.

Part of the reason Henry decided to come to this institution was because it was a PWI: "Part of the reason why I came here was so that I could…extend my racial horizons, and when I actually got here, it was kind of a challenge." Coming from a primarily African American community and school, Henry wanted to push himself to learn about and understand the experiences of diverse others. He purposefully put himself in situations where he was completely surrounded by White students. Here is an example of one of those intentional experiences:

> I can say that…goin' to some of the traditional sorority or fraternity events, sometimes I felt out of place, but I still try to learn from it, try to take something away from it. And I feel like if I can do it, then so can other students too, and you can learn a lot from it.

Henry learned and grew so much from these experiences and has a desire for other students to take advantage of this type of learning. However, this has been a frustrating endeavor. As a student worker at the multicultural center on campus, he often encounters White students who do not feel comfortable spending time there or attending various programming events. He believes that this hesitation comes from "White students feeling like they lack culture." He expanded on this phenomenon and how it made him feel:

> A lot of the White students feel that they aren't cultured. I don't know. It kinda made me feel angered in a way, because everyone is cultured and it's kinda I don't know I guess to me, if you don't know your background, how do you know yourself? A lot of [White] students will get in there [the multicultural center] and say, "Oh I don't know. I just feel so uncomfortable." And …one student told me that she would never be in there without her friend [who was a student of color].

During this discussion, I wondered if White students did not realize their culture because they were like fish in the ocean who do not realize they are surrounded by water. When one's culture is the norm, one may not realize it is unique. For Henry, his culture was not reflected in mainstream campus life, and he was made very aware of differences that existed between him and White students on campus. Henry's desire for White students to engage in this meaningful development of cultural competence and frustration when they refused to even acknowledge their own culture was palpable during his interview.

Out if this frustration, he decided to work with a staff member at the multicultural center to "redefine diversity" on campus and have this change reflected on the center's website. While the final definition was not yet completed, he told me that the major point of changing it was to "invite every student to come here (the multicultural center) and utilize the resources." Although the experience of campus is very different for Henry as an African American male compared to his White peers, he used his strength of seeing connections with others to try to understand their point of view. Even though he was frustrated by White students lack of connection with the center, he related his original feeling of disconnect with Middle America University to White students' lack of connection to the multicultural center saying, "I kinda understand where…the students are coming from. Like, to feel lost or to feel like you don't have that connection with something." He understood that the diverse student population in the multicultural center and cultural programming that happened in the building might be new to White students, but he wants them to reach out and learn about various cultures like he reached out by attending the philanthropic events of primarily White Greek organizations.

Patrick explained the importance of finding culturally comfortable zones, by sharing his opinion that African American students need to feel "culturally comfortable" before they can include White students in their social lives and get involved in student organizations that are not specifically for African American students. Once students have found these spaces on campus, he suggests that African American students become involved in student organizations not based on race or culture. He received this advice from one of his fraternity brothers who simply told him, "Don't let (the African American student organization) be the only thing you've ever done in college." After broadening his own involvement and truly enjoying it, he told his peers:

> Join the African American Student Association, but alongside of joining the African American Student Association…this is something that's in your major…this is just a group that would help you with your strengths, so kind of pointing them in the direction of here's the cultural side of you but don't let that, don't let your culture put you in a box and let that be the only thing that you've done all four years.

Avoiding boxes seems to be a prevailing theme throughout this research. Several examples are given above of Black students being put in stereotypical boxes by White people on campus. These incidents were hurtful and offensive to my participants. In Patrick's piece of advice to others about involvement outside of cultural organizations lies a method to staying out of a box. Patrick and his fraternity brothers think there is value in involvement outside of cultural organizations and therefore avoiding the stereotype that African American students are only involved in African American student organizations is important. The men in this study carried this idea of active resistance to stereotypes much further, which will be explored in the next theme.

Theme 3: Going to battle - starving stereotypes. Instead of feeding into negativity or low-expectations, Joe suggests the following to other first-generation

African American males: "Don't feed into the stereotype about African American men and how we can't succeed…Use all the negative energy that you're getting from other people and just use it as positive to just keep you keep moving." Negative expectations were frustrating to deal with, and so was seeing their Black male peers fulfilling stereotypes. Patrick shared his feelings about this and further explained the need to avoid embodying these stereotypes:

> So it's, it's been frustrating just to be an African American male and see other African American males doing those stereotypical things, and I'm like, "Why are you playing into the stereotype? We already live in a glass house, so why would you kind of just perpetuate that?"

This theme of doing everything in one's power to deliberately defy negative stereotypes of African American men was pervasive throughout this research. Because these men wanted to completely avoid "feeding" into stereotypes, this theme is labeled starving stereotypes. They starved stereotypes by changing their behavior, exceeding low or negative expectations, becoming leaders on campus, and serving as positive examples for others.

Stereotypes about first-generation African American males imply they will not succeed, therefore expectations for their success are quite low. If, as Joe suggested, "it's a battle" to find arenas at home and on campus where there are high expectations and positivity, then African American males must have a combat strategy. He has his own strategy for dealing with low expectations and negativity from home and on campus:

> Don't let what people tell you bring you down, cause they're going to present the negative more than the positive, but don't let that deter you. Don't let things like that get to you. Just turn that all into fuel.

Joe advises other first-generation African American males to take "all the negative influences that may be in your life, even maybe some family or friends or people you

think were friends. Turn their negative attitudes and use it as fuel to make you keep going." He could have let these negative influences dim his own fire, but Joe chose instead to use difficult experiences with negativity and low-expectations to fuel his desire to succeed. He has used this ability to turn negative into positive throughout his time in college. Men in this study used their strengths to combat low-expectations in their home communities and at Middle American University.

Understanding the battle. In order to understand the true strength of the first-generation African American males in this study one must first understand the enemy these men are fighting. Strong stereotypes, negativity, and low expectations intertwine to create quite a formidable opponent, but once again, my participants used their strengths to fight the battle and achieve success. Henry gave a salient example of just how deeply imbedded stereotypes are into the culture of Middle American University and how difficult it can be for African American men to prove that they are not the stereotypes that many White students, faculty, and staff place on them. He was assigned a large creative non-fiction paper for an English class for which he decided to write about how his father's life in the military effective his family when he was growing up. This story was significant to his personal life, but he wanted it to be about more than him and his family. Henry utilized the "counternarative" (Harper, 2009a) technique to share a story about a Black father who was married to the mother of his children and deeply involved in their lives. This image of Black fatherhood runs counter to the stereotype he feared that many in his class held. Here is Henry's description of his paper and his motivation behind writing it:

> I kinda wanted to portray, well not necessarily portray, but to show that not all Black fathers are necessarily absent in the Black community, and I wanted to

> show that my dad actually played a vital role in my life, which is one of the main reasons I'm here too, is that he kinda instilled in me that knowledge…is very important, and that's kinda one of the stepping stones or the reasons why I strive or work so hard in college is because of my dad, and I kinda wanted that to be…[the] topic of my paper. And I think that was kinda like a strength for me…to get that paper done.

When asked more about what type of strength he used to write and share this paper, he shared that he used the strength of being "courageous" writing and sharing his family's story, because he feared other students would "say I exaggerated something or that I could be lying or…playing the race card." He was afraid that other students' negative stereotypes of Black fathers would be so ingrained that they would not be able to believe that his father was present and active in his life. Fortunately, Henry's classmates enjoyed the non-fiction piece he wrote, and he felt like he had "accomplished something" by writing and sharing his counternarrative in a predominantly White educational setting.

Henry's story illustrates the difficulties African American students face at PWIs. He was afraid to share his truth because the stereotypical truth in the minds of White students, faculty, and staff was so strong. Because the stereotypes were so strong, he did not feel as if he was allowed to have an involved and encouraging father. The assumptions of White people seem to take precedence over the realities of Black students on campus to the point where one needs to be "courageous" to share real life experiences.

This notion of negativity directed at first-generation African American males was very prevalent in Joe's discussion of his college experience. Dealing with each facet of this identity on its own can be challenging, so his experience under all of these umbrellas was quite complex. When discussing the difficulties of managing these identities, Joe brought up worries about professors having low expectations, noting that sometimes, classes are "really a battle 'cause they don't have high expectations for us" and

> They don't really expect much, so they grade you on a high school level. You're only given that much so you're not pushed to the limit like you should be to really be competitive in the job market or like anything like that so they're not really helping you and you really wouldn't even know 'cause they're not saying 'Oh I'm grading you on a high school level.' But they're not elevating their expectations of you, because sometimes they have low expectations of us being first-generation African American students.

While some professors may think they are helping or being kind to first-generation African American students by being easier on them in their coursework, Joe drove the point home that lowering expectations does not help these students compete in the real world. Fortunately, he could employ several strengths when faced with low-expectations. Joe discussed his ability to bounce back from the negative as well has knowing the value of higher education as strengths that allowed him to create high standards for himself and overcome others' low-expectations.

Because Joe understands the value of higher education, he wants to pursue a graduate degree in Higher Education Administration and become a student affairs professional. He was very upset when discussing the lowered expectations the college access program in Kansas City that helped him get to college had just instituted. Previously, college students enrolled in this program had to maintain a 2.5 college grade point average (GPA) to continue to receive their full scholarship. Recently, they moved the requirement down to a 2.0. Joe was very frustrated by this change: "That's dumb because once you get to grad. school, like having a 2.0, you're not gonna get into grad. school. Ya know? So having low expectations does not help at all." Again the notion of fighting for high expectations in order to succeed in the next stage of life comes into play. Joe wants to pursue a graduate degree and has actively pursued relationships with student affairs professionals and attended conferences to learn about the field. Having to keep at

least a 2.5 GPA ensured he was more prepared to pursue graduate education. It set him up to succeed, and he was discouraged to hear that his program would not be doing that for students in the future.

Duane also felt the sting of low expectations at Middle America University. He thinks, "Being a successful African American male on this campus, sometimes it's not expected of you." In fact quite the opposite seems to be expected: "People think that, if you're an African American male on this campus, you go to class, sometimes, and then you go straight home. Like, you don't participate in other activities. You don't do anything, and… that's kinda depressing." Duane feels as though expectations are quite low for Black men on this campus. Luckily, Duane has an incredibly positive attitude. His friends pointed out this strength, and he used it to overcome the negative stereotype above by becoming involved on campus to help change perceptions of African American males.

In my own experience working with students, I have learned that however high or low expectations are for students, regardless of whether or not they have academic or behavioral issues, they tend to meet them. If the expectations of professors, staff, and students at Middle America University are that Black males are incapable of completing college level work and that they do little on campus but occasionally show up for class, then something is wrong with campus culture, not Black males on campus. The men in this study chose to set high expectations for themselves, and when expectations are raised, other African American men will, most likely, start meeting them too.

Developing battle strategies. One major way men in this study starved stereotypes was by intentionally changing their behavior to avoid being labeled as a

stereotypical Black male or athlete. One of the strengths that Henry used to succeed in college was his "ability to adapt" in order to avoid these negative interactions. He shared: "I'm very careful with my appearance now, cause I don't want people to perceive me different than what I am." He avoids wearing sweatshirts and sweatpants so people do not assume that he is only in college because he is an athlete.

Patrick changes his behavior to avoid the stereotype that African American males are scary or threatening. After witnessing and hearing about several negative interactions his Black male peers had with White students holding this stereotype, he changed his demeanor to appear "non-threatening" saying this change "takes the fear out" of interactions with White students, staff, and faculty on campus. He wants people to know "I'm not scary." He intentionally changes his approach to meeting new people if those new people happen to be White by appearing as friendly and harmless as possible.

Men in this study were confronted with negative stereotypes and low-expectations in their home communities and on campus Middle America University. Joe shared, "I didn't fall between the cracks like they would just expect us to. I exceeded people's expectations." He was very conscious of low expectations for Black males:

> African American men *really* aren't as successful in college, so not being a statistic, and like turning that negative into a positive and being able to say, like "Well you say that about me, but I, I can succeed and I can bounce back and not fall into that stereotype."

Acutely aware of what was expected of them, many of the men in this study choose to avoid falling "between the cracks," and exceeded expectations. In fact, Patrick shared that one of the strengths he used to succeed in college was "doing the things that people tell you you can't do." Faced with negative expectations of Black men in St. Louis and at Middle America University, he used this strength to persevere. Patrick was about a week

away from graduation at the time of his interview, and he said that when he did walk across the stage too get his diploma he would think,

> I just broke the stereotype. I just broke the mold…And to realize that I'm defying a stereotype by having a piece of paper on my wall that says I have a Bachelor's of Arts in Sociology and I have successfully completed all components

His voice then trailed off as he imagined this powerful moment. His imagining that walk across the stage and realizing the power of it, not only for himself and his family, but for African American males everywhere as we spoke was an incredible moment to share with Patrick. That piece of paper would mean that he did something that generations of his family did not have the opportunity to do. He shared that he was not just getting this degree for himself, bur for his family, city, African American peers, and African American males in particular. He shared his reasoning of why his graduation was so important for Black males: "Not that many African American males statistically go to college. Uh and then there's an increasing statistic that we're going to jail instead of to school, and it's just, by being one to walk across that stage and get a degree." He knew that he could be a positive example for other African American males by showing them that they could go to and graduate from college instead of getting incarcerated.

Patrick will be starting his master's program in Higher Education Administration in the Fall of 2012, and he wants to become a student affairs professional. In the future, his dream is to continue to be an example for African American males:

> I have an office and I have my degrees on my wall and that African American male who …he's on academic probation and he's struggling. To have him come into my office as an academic advisor and say "Hey, I know I'm way older than you… but to have him look at my degrees and be like "Dude, I did it, and I was the first one in my family to do it. So I see you in me."

Again, Patrick has a powerful vision of a meaningful future as a great example to other African American males. He values his ability to be an example so much that he wants to pursue a career where he gets to serve as that positive example of Black manhood every day.

Joe also valued serving as a positive example to other African American males as a mentor in a learning community in which he participated. He used the strengths of being comforting, caring, and understanding to really listen to and help these students when they faced difficult times at Middle America University. Like Patrick, this experience was so meaningful to him that he is also pursuing a career in student affairs. He explained: "That's part of the reason I want to do student affairs too, because I, I helped to shape their foundation." These men exceeded society's expectations of them by succeeding themselves, but took this one step further by intentionally choosing careers where they would be reaching out to and serving as an example for other African American males.

Another area where African American males in this study exceeded expectation and "stayed out of cracks" was in their roles as leaders on campus. Duane explained the low expectations for African American males on campus: "People think that, if you're an African American male on this campus, you go to class, sometimes, and then you go straight home. You don't participate in other activities. You don't do anything, and… that's kinda depressing." Not only did many of these men participate in activities, they were also leaders in them.

The major strength Joe talked about was leadership. Through experiences using and cultivating this strength, he said: "I found what I like to do…helping people."

Becoming a leader was Joe's way to "stand out" from negative stereotypes. He pointed to leadership experiences as a major strength that helped in directing his career path for the future. As a mentor for a learning community focused on diversity, he found:

> I had the title, and then like they'd come to me for advice so I could just sit down and talk to them for hours…and give them some of the reassurance they needed like for some of the out-of-state students… They looked up to me…they respect me and everything like that too.

In addition to his mentoring role, getting involved in residence hall activities, and participating in programs at the multicultural center on campus were also activities that helped Joe realize he could be and was a leader: "getting my feet wet in what I wanted to do, that really helped to bring out my leadership potential." Because he sees himself as a leader, he also feels it is important to exhibit important values: "If I feel like I am a leader that falls into many other areas…of being responsible, trustworthy, having integrity."

Patrick originally became a leader in his fraternity because there were only seven members on campus. Because they were such a small group, they all had to be active and involved. He said it was a group where one "can't be just a member" and he did not "have a chance to just sit back and twiddle my thumbs." Out of necessity for the organization, Patrick become a leader, and because his brothers saw him as "the social guy on campus," they sent him out to talk to others to plan events. Through these experiences, he realized one of his areas of strength was in his "natural leadership abilities" and these abilities "just kind of blossomed" as he continued to be a leader in the fraternity.

Patrick used a strength along with his fraternity brothers he called and "us versus them mentality," which sums up the overall theme of starving stereotypes quite well. He

shared, "that's what's got us through a lot of the hard times as like a brotherhood and a bond is…when everyone else is stacked against us, we just, it's just us, and we are our own biggest voice." Choosing to create their own voice instead of being defined by the negative voices in the media, in their communities, and on campus was an extremely important skill for Patrick and his fraternity brothers. He explained his frustration with "them":

> I think a lot of times, just in general, the media gives us our voice, and we don't really have a chance to reclaim our voice…so really for me, I think it was just really putting myself around people who were successful and doing the anti of what everyone else expected you to do.

Reclaiming control of their lives and exceeding low or negative expectations was a powerful idea that arose from Patrick's discussion of the benefits of joining a traditionally African American fraternity. He reported feeling as if his voice was not in his control, but in the control of media producing negative images of Black men. This act of resistance, of reclaiming his right to his own voice is so important to acknowledge. Instead of just accepting others' voices, Patrick and his fraternity brothers actively and intentionally took back their voices as African American men and very intentionally chose who they would become. This idea of choosing one's own path and intentionally avoiding negative paths first-generation African American males might be expected to venture down will be explored in the next section.

Theme 4: Trailblazing versus trail avoidance. Forging a personal path to and through higher education was intertwined with actively working to avoid negative paths common for African American males in my participants' home communities and at Middle American University. Much of the focus in conversations with my participants about this idea of creating new trails arose from their identities as first-generation

students in their families and communities. In order to understand the strengths used in trailblazing, I will explore three sub-themes: negotiating first-generation identities, forging paths, and avoiding paths. My participants' identities as first-generation students, positive trails they forged, and trails they intentionally avoided will be explored to portray the entire picture they painted in explaining paths they took to succeed in college.

Negotiating first-generation identities. As previously mentioned, students in this study are all first in their families to pursue a bachelor's degree. These men also happen to come from urban areas where it is rare for African American men to go to college. Much of my discussion with students in this study centered on their identities as African American males, however the fact that they were all first-generation students was also an important facet of their identities. Although many of their families and community members set the stage for them to attend college and encouraged it throughout their lives, they did not always have advice to give regarding what strengths or skills their students needed to succeed. While Joe's family encouraged and supported his desire to go to college, he emphasized, "they couldn't tell me what I needed cause they haven't been there." Along similar lines, Nathan's family and community members thought he should attend college, but could not tell him how to navigate his path in higher education. He felt as if, "everyone else was just telling me, 'You need to go to college.' but never told me what I needed to do when I got to college." As a first-generation student, he did not necessarily know how to navigate the path to college. Encouraging him to enter higher education was a definite positive, but it did little to plot this course.

These men are the first in their families to come to a four-year college, but they are also some of the first-generation to go to college in many of their communities.

Difficulties with families and community members understanding the lives of students going to college was very relevant in their discussions of this piece of their identities. Duane's strengths of "tunnel vision" and focus came into play when discussing relationships with friends and family members back in Omaha. Discussing his community, Duane said:

> You have to have a tunnel vision, kinda like you just see only your goal because, growing up in North Omaha, it's a lot of people I know that did not go to college. So, they kinda don't understand my…they don't understand that I have to do homework every night. I have to study every night. So, when they call me or they wanna I.M. me on Facebook, it's kinda like "Ok. It was cool talkin' to you, but I gotta get back to my school work."

The lives of people at home may not have changed much, but Duane's life changed considerably when he came to college. He no longer had the time to communicate in the same ways he used to. His phone and online communication methods with friends from home had to change. Duane's family's expectation that he would come back to Omaha from Middle America University was also difficult to deal with at times:

> Some people may, your family may want you to come home every weekend or they may wanna see you a lot, but they just have to understand that you're going. College is something that they may not have went through, so they don't understand the burden and exactly what you have to do.

Because Duane was the first in his family to attend college, his family did not understand academic course work and involvement in student organizations would keep him on campus and away from home. They could not understand what he called his "burden," and he could not meet their expectation to come home often.

Also from Omaha, Nathan felt as if family and friends from home were "neutral" about the idea of him going to college. He shared their lack of reaction:

> People really don't think "Oh if you're going to college, you're doin' you" but if you don't, you're still the same person. Nobody really gives you grief or nobody

> says like, "Oh congrats!" or anything like that, um so I would just say it's neutral. Cause I've never had a friend say, "Oh I'm proud of you for goin' to college." or anything like that.

Growing up, Nathan's mother emphasized the importance of higher education and made sure he was connected to people in Omaha who could support him on the path to higher education. However, Nathan's friends from home seemed to be "neutral" about the idea of him going. Unlike Duane, he did not express frustration with people from Omaha who did not understand that he could not communicate like he used to or come home often.

Patrick highlighted what he believes was a major difference in the paths to and through college for African American males and females. He explained:

> A lot of my African American female peers, their mom or their grandma went to college, so they're kinda following in her footsteps, but for a lot of African American males, they're following in no one's footsteps. They're the footsteps that are gonna be followed.

Disparities in the number of African American males and females who attend and graduate from college are well documented in the literature, and Patrick's point adds another layer to the stories of first-generation African American men as they blaze trails to college success.

Forging the path. As first-generation students from communities where they knew that many African American men did not attend college, forging path to college involved a lot of hard work and even some roadblocks. In his discussion of the first-generation piece of his identity as a college student, Patrick discussed the unfamiliar path to higher education and lack of examples in his community. He had to use his strength of "internal drive" to make it to Middle America University: "Since you're the first, you don't know how to do it, so no one's ever shown you how to do this before, so um it's

gonna be hard." He had no trail left by a family or community member to follow out of St. Louis. This lack of college educated examples caused a "road block":

> To have someone that you physically see doing it, you don't have that, so for a lot of us that's the hard part, and you get to that first road block, and you're like "I quit. I can't do this anymore." Then you go home or decide you can't do it. I think that, that roadblock of being one of the few people…that has actually done something…keeps me going.

The road to higher education was a difficult one for Patrick because he had few examples as the only child, and he used the strengths of internal drive to push forward. Also driving him is the knowledge that he is one of the "few people" who are heading down that path of higher education in his family and in his community. Serving as one of the few in his family and community to make it to higher education is very important to Patrick. In discussing his internal drive, he shared the power of being the example in his family:

> That's unique about first-generation African American males is like, for a lot of us, we are more successful than our parents, and for us, we're our parent's role models in that aspect too. Cause it's been times like my mom has been like, cause my mom is starting her own catering business and she's always been like, "You have motivated me more than you know it." and just to see her do her own thing, just based off of my drive and my hunger to be successful.

Patrick fully understood the importance of his success. He is a role model for people in his family and community, and even for his own mother who pushed him to be successful and never give up.

Joe discussed the role his involvement in a college access program played in forging his path to college and attributed his strength of understanding the value of education to his participation in the program since sixth grade. When asked what was unique about successful first-generation African American males, Joe stated, "We figure out the value of education earlier than some students…we figure it out and then really

understand education is what we need." Knowing early on that he would be following the path to higher education instead of the paths to jail or the grave as many African American men in Kansas City did, was powerful for Joe. In order to stay on this path, he asserted:

> You have to really go above and beyond. Like just looking at you, they really won't know that you're first-generation, but being an African American male period, like you really have to stand out. And people don't really expect much from you sometimes, so you like don't really get much.

This strength of "standing out" and forging a personal path has also involved avoiding the pitfalls that unsuccessful first-generation African American males have struggled with in his community and on campus. In relation to Black males in Kansas City, he asserted:

> I'm like makin' my own path and not following the path of my family members and people in my community, then that's just the encouragement that I need knowing that I'm doing the right thing and they're really proud to see that I *am* doing the right thing.

His family is proud of him for avoiding their paths and the paths of many males in his community.

Nathan's chosen path had more to do with his career choice. He said one of the strengths he used to succeed in college was "knowing what I wanna do, basically in life." Understanding the career he wanted to pursue – designing men's fashion – helped to create his path to higher education. He found this passion in a fashion design class he took in high school because he had grown bored with an engineering course. Nathan explained:

> When you know what you wanna do in your career and with the rest of your life, you're very…you know what you wanna do throughout to get to that goal, so I knew what I had to do to get class done and all the homework assignments, so I just did it.

If Nathan wanted to have a career in fashion, he had to get a degree, so he had to follow the path to and through higher education. He was lucky when coming into college, because he had found a career path he was passionate about. When I asked him what students who have not decided on a major or a career path should do to find it, he suggested that they "be open minded" and "experiment" with different options. He has even given this advice to another African American male before:

> That's what I told one of my friends and he just wasn't open to it, and then he ended up dropping out, which is sad, but if you're open to anything, then you learn what you truly like. I woulda never known that I like to sew if I wouldn't of took the class.

While Nathan did not have to worry about the path of career and major confusion, his advice to avoid waiting in limbo to figure out a path is important. Refusing to experiment with options meant dropout for one of his friends.

Avoiding Paths. All participants in this study came from urban communities and lived in primarily African American communities. Unfortunately, negative pieces of their communities weighed on these young men as they grew up and continued to affect them in college. This sub-theme explores the ways my participants carried their communities with them, and sometimes even mentioned being proud of where they came from, but simultaneously work to not become another negative example from their communities. They were of their communities, but consciously chose not to become more negative examples of African American males from those communities. This sub-theme also looks at African American culture at Middle America University and how my research participants avoided some negative paths their peers were choosing to travel.

Duane discussed the "negative news reports about North Omaha" about "deaths, killings, and recently, the AIDS rate." He feels "It's kinda really depressing." Although

he is away from his community and succeeding in college, Duane still struggles with feeling depressed about the negative things taking place at home. Joe also discussed negative aspects of his community in Kansas City, Missouri and what he was told by significant adults growing up:.

> They really put that sense in our head, like 'Look around in your neighborhood and the community that you're in. People aren't being successful. People are either going to jail or they're going to die.' Ya know, I heard that growing up so much, like you're either going to end up in jail or going to the grave. And you hear that being told to like cousins and things like that too, but you never even had the option of saying alright you can go to college too.

Because Joe was of this community in Kansas City, his destiny of going to jail or being killed seemed inevitable. The significance of the college access program in his life becomes glaringly clear when it is apparent that without it, Joe might have traveled down one of these two very negative paths. This is a striking example of low-expectations for African American males in his community.

Although Patrick shared that he loves his hometown of St. Louis. The idea of leaving the city is new to his family. From the time he was young, Patrick's mother was very supportive of his education. He attended a college preparatory magnet school. However, his mother made it very clear that, as a Black male, he would have to work harder than his White friends to succeed. She told him,

> You do, you realize you have to work twice as [hard as] he does…because of the fact that you're an African American male that you're already at a disadvantage, cause statistically society says that you're set up to fail.

Aware that he was not "set up" by society to be successful made Patrick even more driven to succeed. Leaving for college, getting his degree, and doing "things that don't involve having a kid before the age of 25" have been some of his main missions in college. As mentioned in his introduction, he carries St. Louis on his back and wants to

show that successful people can come from his city. He also mentioned that, like North Omaha for Duane, there is a considerable amount of negative press about his city. He has used his strength of perseverance to overcome negative expectations of African American men from his city:

> The perception in the media is "You can't do this." and "You're not cut out for this." Then for me, I value people doing what people say that they can't do just to show them, "Hey I did it. And I did it way better than you ever expected I would do it."

Instead of accepting the truth about African American men as portrayed by media about St. Louis, Patrick decided to create his own truth and show that he could exceed the low expectations set for him in his community.

Patrick also experienced difficulties with friends from St. Louis who decided not to attend college and stay in the city. They asked him questions like "Why would you go there? What is there?" These questions were personally so difficult to field that he wanted to ensure other men knew how to handle themselves if their friends from home started questioning their choice to attend college - especially a PWI. He prepared first-generation African American men from large metropolitan areas for these tough conversations when giving tours of campus by telling them:

> Your homeboys back at school are gonna be like, 'Man, like why are you doing that? Like that's not cool!' Those are gonna be the some guys that, at your ten year high school reunion, that are doin' the same things that they were doin' when you were in high school.

Although it would be difficult to explain the choice to go to college to classmates who chose not to attend, Patrick found solace in knowing that he was going to advance his life while some of his friends would continue to do the "same things" back in St. Louis. Coming to college in general was difficult enough to explain, and Patrick was also

questioned about choosing to attend a PWI. His friends who chose not to attend college also said, "I don't know why you went there anyway, cause you know they don't really like us. They don't really care for us anyway." Even though his friends did not decide to attend college, they emphasized the assumed distaste that the White people at a PWI would have for "us" – meaning African Americans. In light of many of the stories told in the process of this research project, their opinion seems quite valid. However, Patrick wanted to pass on this method of coping with the questioning to students like him who, he felt, would endure it too.

On campus at Middle American University, Joe thought that having the "resources and prior knowledge about college" helped him to stay away from the negative paths of unsuccessful peers, noting

> A lot of them were in programs similar to [his college access program], but I don't think a lot of them took it as seriously as I did. The African American men that I came in with freshman year are not here, so don't be influenced by your peers.

Despite getting harassed by some of these men who ended up dropping out of the university about his diligent study habits and involvement, Joe continued to make great efforts to ensure that he was successful. He would advise other students like himself to:

> Make your own path, like don't fall with the same crowd you were with in high school like especially if they're not doing anything good 'cause they all failed out together. None of them are here. They stayed together in high school. They stayed together here in college, and they failed out together in college, so make a path of your own.

Joe stayed strong in choosing to study and stay involved instead of getting wrapped up in some of the activities of his African American male peers. This kept him on the path to success in college.

Career choice was central to the trail Nathan wanted to travel, but one of his main motivations in college had more to do with avoiding the path to failure. He shared, "I just don't wanna be known as a failure." The desire to avoid the path to failure was one of his main motivations to succeed. He also explained one of the strengths that helped him avoid this path: "I hate being like everyone else, so when I saw my friends going out, kinda actin' wild. I always do the opposite of what everyone else does, so I did that." He saw "everyone else" journeying down a path that would not lead them to success in college, and therefore chose to avoid them when they were making poor choices. This was such a problem for him that he felt he needed to use his strength of discipline to avoid spending time with other African American students during his first year of college, saying

> I think the main reason I did it my freshman year because I didn't know how to communicate with them and still do my homework, because I knew how I could get caught up so easily, but now I increased my skill of discipline, so I can hang out with them and say, "Well I gotta go and do my homework."

Nathan struggled to build relationships with African American students and accomplish what he needed to in order to succeed academically. He shared, "I love my race, but every time I'm around them, we get no work done." He told himself he "really needed to be focused" and therefore avoided them until he knew how to handle his academic course load. Then, he started to build more relationships with Black peers. Within Nathan's African American peer group at Middle American University, he reported that it was tough to socialize and complete academic work. The overall peer culture is not one where school work gets done, and he had to distance himself to meet his academic goals and develop his strength of discipline in order to succeed academically and maintain these relationships. A need for African American peer support was definitely apparent in

discussing the experiences of Black males in this study, however Nathan and Joe both had to make very strategic decisions about spending time with their African American peers if they still wanted to succeed academically.

Patrick's journey to find a major and career path is a perfect example of taking the path Nathan suggested to his friend who dropped out of Middle America University. He started with architecture, changed to business, and then switched to sociology. After finding what he called his "academic focus and passion" he started to realize his strengths and that he could succeed in college. He shared, "Finding my major…helped me find those strengths." Succeeding academically in sociology courses as opposed to his architecture and business courses and realizing the role of sociology in his life on campus enabled him to realize and start developing his strengths.

Avoiding the path the media expects for African American males was central to Patrick's journey on the path to college graduation, and sums up the theme of intentionally choosing to forge new trails to college success instead of follow more familiar ones that lead to failure. He shared what he loves about being a first-generation African American male:

> I think that's one of the things that I love about being in this position is just like "Hey, I'm one of the first, so …of course I'm under a microscope cause I'm a first, but…to be one of the few, you get, you get to be one of the ones that challenges the mold and breaks the mold and says, "Hey. I know this is what the media wants to tell you about me, but that's not true. This is… how I actually am."

Although he was placed "under a microscope" as a first-generation African American male, the fact that Patrick could forge a positive path and "break the mold" was a triumph for him. As shared in his introduction, Patrick forged this new path to college for his city, family, and other African American males, but he also blazed this new trail for

himself. This notion of first-generation African American males succeeding in college for others as well as themselves will be explained in the next section.

Theme 5: Utilizing communal and individualistic orientations. Although researchers often like to place cultures in a box when looking at communal or individualistic orientation, students in this study made it quite clear that they may have come from more communal cultures, but paying attention to their individual needs was also vital to their college success. Joe clearly illustrated this combination of fulfilling communal and individualistic needs:

> You have to make it what you wanna make it and do it all for yourself. Like, I'm doing it for my family too, like I want to be successful for them, but make it a personal goal that you wanna be successful for yourself, cause you're living your life. You're not living your life for anyone else, so do what you love to do, and just fulfill it the best way that you possibly can.

He wants to succeed for his family, but he also needed to personally own his college experience as well in order to truly succeed. Duane also exhibited both communal and individualistic values. He has greatly benefitted from the "sense of community" he has found with African American teachers and staff and programs like TRiO's Student Support Services, but he asserted that Black males also need the strength of "focus" to succeed: "So focus is one of the main things…I'm sure even though you love the people, your friends and family but sometimes you just have to focus on you." Loving friends and family and wanting to serve as a support system for them and maintain ties with them is important to Duane, but he also had to focus on himself to succeed.

Patrick's connection to his community of St. Louis, as mentioned before, is extremely important to him. One of the major reasons he wanted to succeed in college was to show that Black males from St. Louis could earn a college degree. In difficult

moments when he loses focus, he tells himself, "You're doing this not only for yourself." The feeling that he is lifting up his family and city through his personal accomplishment points to a communal orientation. When asked about his biggest personal accomplishments in college, Patrick described his fraternity winning both regional and national chapter of the year which was a "personal, but also a group goal." This also points to a more communal orientation.

Curious about the possible pressure of going to and graduating from college for so many other people, I asked him how he saw other students handling the pressuring. Patrick shared how some students with many siblings or from single parent households find themselves in a "downward spiral":

> They don't get the freedoms to just be a student and do it for themselves, because they're havin' to do it for so many other people and they can't do it for themselves. They don't really get why they're doin' it…They're not really internally happy, and I've seen that with people, and then those are the ones that really, don't really finish.

This final example of needing to couple a communal orientation with and individual orientation is quite clear. In Patrick's eyes, students have to be able to personally own their college experience in addition to succeeding for or with others in college.

Conclusion

Five themes and eight sub-themes emerged from conversations with the first-generation African American male participants in this research project. These themes highlighted arenas where strengths are needed to persist in higher education and strategies used to persevere in the face of difficulty. The first-generation and African American male facets of these students' identities are interwoven and complex. Although negotiating these identities would be complicated enough at any college,

attending a PWI adds extra layers of difficulty to their experience. Techniques professionals can use to support first-generation African American men and cultivate their strengths as well as further directions for anti-deficit focused research are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

This last chapter focused on themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews of five first-generation African American men at a predominantly White institution in the Midwest. Rather than focusing on students with the highest (Fries-Britt,1997, 1998; Harper; 2005, 2006, 2007) or lowest GPAs and test scores or on students who drop out or never make it into higher education as much of the research does (Cuyjet, 1997; Hall & Rowan, 2001; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince, 2010; Roach, 2001; Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Warde, 2008) I studied African American men who are in the middle of this spectrum. By limiting participant participation only by ensuring men were first-generation, identified as African American, and had at least a 2.5 GPA, I opened the door to research the lives of first-generation African American males who fall in between these two extremes. Filling this gap in the literature allowed me to understand their unique experience at a large, Midwestern, research focused PWI. While individuals in this study did indeed struggle with many of the difficulties brought up in research on first-generation students and African American males, they used personal strengths to transcend these difficulties.

Summary of Findings

The main question I used to guide my research was: "How do first-generation African American males describe the personal strengths that have contributed to their college success?" I used the following sub-questions to delve further into this topic:

- How do first-generation African American males define success in college?
- What experiences in college do first-generation African American males identify as helping them realize and develop their strengths?
- What strengths are valued in other African American males who have been successful in college?
- What strengths would they tell a first-generation African American man he needed to be successful in college?
- What do first-generation African American males who are successful in college do?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted personal one-on-one interviews with five first-generation African American males at a primarily White institution in the Midwest. I had hoped these conversations would center more on personal accomplishments and exciting moments in their college careers, however students ended up describing their strengths according to barriers they had to overcome. They used their strengths to conquer these mountains. Participants discussed strengths and values that were instilled in them growing up, how they learned to overcome negativity and low expectations in their communities and on campus, and how they realized and cultivated their strengths to better themselves for the future. Major topics that will be addressed in this chapter include:

1. How this study's themes and sub-themes answer the research questions and connect to the literature.

2. Implications from the study for student affairs practitioners desiring to better the college experiences and increase the retention rates of first-generation African American males.

3. Recommendations for future research on the strategies utilized by first-generation African American males to succeed at primarily White institutions.

Summary of Themes & Links to Literature

From the data, five main themes and eight sub-themes emerged centering on difficulties these young men faced and the strengths and strategies used to overcome them. Topics covered by these themes include: advice participants were given about how to succeed, strengths needed to negotiate being a African American male at a primarily White institution, battling low-expectations, starving stereotypes, creating new trails versus avoiding negative ones, and utilizing both a communal and an individualistic orientation to succeed. Major findings in this study included:

1. In order to negotiate their primarily White institution, participants utilized their strengths to refocus their struggle, maintain tunnel vision, create culturally comfortable zones, and redefine diversity in their own lives and on campus.
2. First-generation African American males at Middle America University actively worked to starve the stereotypes into which others assumed they fell.
3. In order to succeed in college, research participants consciously chose to blaze new and unfamiliar paths and actively avoided paths followed by family members, African Americans in their home communities, and even some of their African American peers in college that did not lead to success.

4. Students in this study found it necessary to utilize both communal and individualistic orientations in order to succeed on campus.

Advice from others. Students received advice about how to succeed in college from a variety of sources before coming to college and in their early days as college students. Since they were first-generation students, many of their families could not give them detailed advice about college success, but advice to persevere and stay focused helped students once they got to campus. Most of the practical advice students received at school or as participants in college access programs focused on academic skills and time management.

Being smart, studying harder, and keeping a schedule are important pieces of managing the transition to college. However, conversations about other topics would have been helpful to the students in this study before entering college and during their transition into Middle America University. Joe mentioned that no one told him about the importance of leadership in college. As demonstrated by many of the difficulties students endured in college, very candid conversations about coming to a PWI as an African American male would have also been helpful. How would Black males experience a PWI differently if they would have had real conversations about how to find culturally comfortable spaces on campus or handle the ignorance of some White students, faculty, or staff?

PWI negotiation. Because all participants came from primarily African American communities within their cities, they went through some major adjustments coming to a PWI. Because of the complexity of the transition into a PWI, several sub-themes emerged including: "Refocusing the Struggle and Maintaining Tunnel Vision,"

"Creating Comfort Zones," and "Redefining Diversity." Henry discussed his new awareness that "the world was different" in terms of race when he came to college. Both Henry and Patrick were made to feel as if they did not "fit" on campus unless they were athletes. Students and professors assumed they could not handle the work and could only get to Middle America University through athletic talents, not academic abilities. Having the athlete stereotype and dealing with White students who had few previous experiences with students of color was quite difficult for my participants, hence the sub-themes detailing methods they utilized to cope. Men in this study had to try to understand and "fit" into a culture they did not understand and deal with White students, faculty, and staff who, often, made little effort to understand them. This cultural adjustment was at the center of our conversations about negotiating life at Middle America University.

The sub-theme of "Refocusing the Struggle and Maintaining Tunnel Vision" detailed participants' efforts to choose to focus on working toward their own success instead of the many distractions that arose out of their home communities and on campus. Duane called this "tunnel vision." When the many distractions did start to affect Patrick, he chose to "refocus and recenter" himself in order to feel renewed and come back to coping with his burdens.

The "Creating Comfort Zones" sub-theme focused on the spaces were participants felt as if their culture was recognized and valued. The desire for spaces where the men in this study could be accepted by peers can be linked to the idea of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1997a/1984 as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2010) defined cultural capital as "culturally relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, or norms." Before they could begin to reach out and acquire the culture of campus based on White norms and values,

men in this study expressed a need for a safe space where their culture was acknowledged, valued, and rewarded. Once they had access to a place like this and began to feel comfortable on campus, they could branch out to feel more comfortable in the university as a whole. Patrick explained this as follows:

> You have a group of people who get you - that we like sports and we like these sports as opposed to these sports and we like these foods over these foods – and not having to feel like you're always on display.

Used as a stepping stone, these safe spaces can enable a level of comfort on campus that is all too often lost when African American men are confronted with negativity and low expectations.

The final sub-theme in this section, "Redefining Diversity" explained how my participants worked to change the notion of what it meant to be a Black male on campus and had a desire to change the overall definition of diversity to be more inclusive. Duane joined student organizations specifically for the purpose of showing others that African American males could be positive leaders on campus. At the time of his interview, Henry was working with a staff member at the multicultural student center to change Middle American University's definition of diversity in order to be more inclusive of White students. Although his experiences with White students, were sometimes difficult, he grew personally from intentionally spending time with them. He wanted White students to realize the value of spending time with diverse groups of people and wanted them to feel included at the multicultural center.

Starving stereotypes. "Lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement" contributes to the "underpreparedness" of African American males (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince, 2010). Joe shared that

dealing with these low expectations is "really a battle." To fight this battle, men in this study developed strategies to intentionally defy negative stereotypes about African American men including changing their behavior, working to exceed low or negative expectations, and serving as positive examples.

The "Understanding the Battle" sub-theme in this section included participant's salient examples of the difficulties they were up against as African American males. In dominant culture, Black males are perceived as "threatening, unfriendly, and less intelligent than any other distinguishable segment of the American population" (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 8). African American students must also contend with "stereotypical comments, insensitivity to African American culture, generalizations of students' opinions as representing all African Americans" (Guiffrida, 2005a, p. 702). These experiences were addressed by research participants in their interviews.

Henry, one of the most polite and kind men I have ever met, endured being told that despite a young woman on his floor thinking that he was "scary," he was actually a "big, cuddly teddy bear" – a thinly veiled assumption that he was originally threatening. As previously mentioned, students in this study were also perceived to be athletes, only on campus because of athletic abilities, not academic merit. Joe discussed his feelings that African American males were being graded on a high school level by college professors because they were thought to be incapable of college level work. Patrick shared other Black students' shock at professors asking them to express the opinion of the entire African American community and personal frustration when others assumed another Black male's opinion was also his. Despite these negative assumptions and low-

expectations, the men in this study found environments of high expectations and responded positively when they were pushed to excel.

In the face of difficulties stemming from attending a PWI and negative or low expectations, the first-generation African American men in this study used the strengths of to intentionally defy or starve stereotypes about African American males, which was explained in the sub-theme "Developing Battle Strategies." The idea of resisting stereotypes and learning how to adapt to PWI culture also came up in the literature.

In their study of high-achieving African American students at a PWI, Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) found that students reacted to stereotypes by actively resisting them and intentionally being positive examples of African Americans on campus. Students in my study engaged in a similar "process of resistance" (p. 512) by choosing not to fulfill stereotypes, choosing to become examples, and working to educate White students about African American culture and the African American experience at Middle America University. Patrick and Joe are working their way toward master's degrees in order to become student affairs professionals and serve as examples for other African American men. Henry and Duane are working toward changing the definition of diversity on campus and to influence campus culture to become more inclusive respectively. Henry and Patrick changed their behavior in order to avoid fulfilling stereotypes.

Two men in particular reported feeling as if they needed to change their behavior in order to avoid negative interactions with White people on campus. The notion of cultural capital acquisition comes into play here (Bourdieu 1997a/1984 as cited in Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Men in this study acquired particular cultural capital and displayed what they learned in hopes that they would be acknowledged, valued and

rewarded instead of punished for displaying their particular cultural capital on campus. Henry avoided wearing sweatpants and sweatshirts in order to avoid being seen as an athlete who could only attend college because of athletic skill in hopes of being perceived as an intelligent man in college because of his academic merit. Patrick approached interactions with new White people very carefully in order to be perceived as a nice person instead of a "scary" or "intimidating" Black man. By adjusting appearance and mannerisms, these men attempted to display acceptable behavior in the White culture of Middle American University. What is particularly disturbing about these changes is that White men would not be expected to behave this way in order to avoid negative perceptions. Henry and Patrick are not the issue here; the culture of this PWI is.

Trailblazing versus trail avoidance. The theme of "Trailblazing Versus Trail Avoidance" was particularly important in this research. College completion rates of African American men are the lowest of any racial or ethnic group. At Middle America University, only 34% of Black males graduate in six years, compared to 62.2% of their White male peers (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012). The major point of this project was to focus on what African American males who are persisting in college do to persevere through difficulties, graduate from college, and do well according to their own personal definitions of success. On their road to and through higher education, the men in this study had to carefully manage the trails they were creating and strategically avoid more negative paths that many African American men in their families, communities, and in college took. In order to stay on positive paths, they used the strengths of understanding the value of higher education, standing out from other African American men pursing paths that were not leading to success, and discipline. Sub-themes that

emerged from the data in this section included: "Negotiating First-Generation Identities," "Forging the Path," and "Avoiding Paths."

The "Negotiating First-Generation Identities" theme explored what it meant for my participants to be first-generations students in their families and communities. Duane struggled with friends and family members who did not understand the time commitment he had to make to course work in order to succeed. Nathan's friends were "neutral" about his choice to attend college, as they did not really understand how important it was for him.

In the "Forging Paths" sub-theme, students shared their desire to create new paths and methods they utilized to do so. Through involvement in college access programs before college and the encouragement of their families, these men came to college understanding the impact higher education could have on their futures and their status as role models. It was important to Patrick to serve as a role model for his family members and other Black men in St. Louis. Nathan knew that he needed a degree to pursue a career in fashion. Even though paths to college success were new and unfamiliar, my participants pushed on to create them.

In the "Avoiding Paths" sub-theme, participants were incredibly honest about the realities of growing up in their communities and their frustrations with African American peers who were not following paths to success in college. Growing up, Joe was told that he would probably end up in jail or the grave as a Black male in his community. College attendance was not even discussed as an option until he became involved with his college access program. He knew that he wanted to avoid both of these options. On campus, Joe continued to work hard in the classroom and pursue leadership and involvement activities

despite peer pressure from other African American males to leave his study room. Nathan had to limit his interactions with African American peers on campus until he honed his strength of discipline enough to balance social and study time. Men in this study set out to create their own positive paths and succeed at Middle America University.

Utilizing communal and individualistic orientations. In his discussion of maintaining relationships at home, but also taking the time he needed to succeed on campus, Duane mentioned his strength of focus. The other participants did not specifically mention strengths used to balance the need to balance their communal and individualistic orientations, however Duane summed up much of their discussion with his idea of being able to give time and attention to family and friends while also carving out time to further his own need to be a successful student.

An important aspect of Tinto's retention theory relevant to this cultural adjustment was brought up in Guiffrida's (2006) article about how to make this theory more culturally sensitive. He discussed the need to pay attention to individualist and collectivist orientations when working particularly with students of color, many of whom come from more collectivist cultures as opposed to the more individualist culture of White people. In chapter two, I asked the question, must African American students take on more individualist values to succeed in college, or must they at least learn to balance their collectivist orientation with their own individual needs to persist? Guiffrida and Douthit's (2010) study looked at African American high-achievers, low-achievers, and leavers at a PWI. High-achievers seemed to display an individualist orientation while low-achievers focused on giving back to the African American community on campus

(Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010) and to their families at home (Guiffrida, 2005) – a more collectivist orientation - to the detriment of their own success in college. The first-generation African American men in my study would not fit into any of these "achievement" categories, and they demonstrated both collective and individualistic orientations.

Participants in this research project seemed to acknowledge their natural collectivist cultures by discussing their motivations for going to and completing college as largely driven by a desire to succeed for their families, younger siblings, cities, African Americans in general and particularly other African American males. However, they also expressed the need to have individualist leanings as well in order to succeed. Duane had to balance time spent talking with friends and going back home with the need to stay on campus and study. Joe expressed that he was going to college for his family, but emphasized that he was also doing it for himself. Patrick discussed carrying St. Louis on his back, but shared that students who only go to college for their families and not for themselves end up dropping out entirely. The answer to the question I posed in Chapter 2 seems to be that students must learn to balance their natural collectivism with an individualist orientation as well. This is an important finding, as other research has only focused on opposite ends of the success spectrum and limited African American students to either collectivist or individualist cultural identities.

Supportive African American relationships: Extensions of othermothering. While this research project focused on students' personal strengths and did not particularly address support people in their lives, each student mentioned other African American students, faculty, or staff who guided them in college. Guiffrida's (2005a)

discussion of "othermothering" often came to mind during these portions of our conversations. While they did not exclusively discuss Black women who exhibited these behaviors, extensions of othermothering behavior were definitely evident as they discussed people who went beyond typical duties of friendship or professional obligations as faculty or staff. Guiffrida (2005a) discussed behaviors such as mentoring, connecting students to professionals in their fields, giving advice, being a positive example, tutoring students, pushing them to be their best selves, advocating for and defending students, and acting as counselors for academic and personal matters. Examples of these behaviors in the African American people who my participants mentioned as supportive people in their lives were abundant.

Nathan mentioned both a staff member in the TRIO Programs office and a peer who were both African American men. These men helped connect him to resources on campus, connected him to internship opportunities, and served as positive examples. As part of a retention program on campus aimed at students of color, Joe worked with an African American woman who set academic, involvement, and personal goals with him and held them to meeting these goals. He could talk to her about a range of topics both college related and personal topics. Patrick mentioned two men in upper administration positions at Middle America University. These men both identify as Hispanic, not African American, however as men of color, he felt that they served as excellent examples just buy holding administrative positions. Patrick has developed a particularly close relationship with one of these administrators who has guided him in his desire to enter the field of student affairs.

Implications of the Current Study for Student Affairs Practice

Implications of this study based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this research and their connections to literature about first-generations students and African American males lead me to several recommendations for student affairs practitioners. Below are my recommendations based on each theme that emerged from the research:

1. In order to help first-generation African American men from primarily Black communities handle the culture shock my participants described when coming to Middle America University, they should be connected to safe spaces where their cultural capital is acknowledged and valued. African American fraternities and Black student organizations served as culturally comfortable zones for my participants.
2. First-generation African American males are not the source of the difficulties discussed in this theses; the culture of Middle America University is. Faculty and staff should be educated on cultural sensitivity and closely analyze the stereotypes they may hold about African American males. Students can be educated through ethnic studies courses. Expanding the definition of diversity in order to include more White students in cultural programming as Henry suggested would also help in educating White students and changing campus culture.
3. Realistic conversations with first-generation African American males about negative perceptions and low expectations they may encounter would help them to be prepared to handle difficult situations instead of being blindsided. Teaching

these men skills that will help them deal with ignorance would arm them with skills to handle these, almost inevitable, negative encounters.

4. The men in this study responded to positive push from a professor to work harder, staff working in the multicultural center to work hard to meet personal goals, and African American peers to network and become leaders on campus. Student affairs professionals should not be afraid to challenge students to push themselves and have real conversations with first-generation African American males about their strengths and abilities in order to empower them to succeed in college.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this research, I recommend several areas where further research could be done to better understand the experience of first-generation African American males who are neither very high or low achievers at PWIs. This study included only five first-generation African American males. Studies should be conducted at other PWIs utilizing larger samples to see if these themes and subthemes are consistent with larger populations and at different PWIs. Also, all of the men in this study were from urban areas and lived in primarily African American communities. Broadening the range of "urbanicity" (Harper, 2009) in the sample studied would probably broaden the range of themes and subthemes that would emerge.

Some facets of this research were not the main focus, but were, nonetheless important in interviews with my participants. The idea that first-generation African American males seek out othermothering relationships through a variety of sources – African American faculty, staff, older student mentors, and Greek organizations. A study exploring what these relationships look like and how they are formed could shed light on

methods student affairs professionals could use to support first-generation African American males and retain them at higher levels. Guiffrida's (2006) study looked at students as either communally or individualistically oriented; the students in this study discussed utilizing both orientations. If these men come to campus with a communal orientation, but must hone an individualistic orientation to succeed on campus as my participants suggested, how do they realize and manage this? Are students who balance these two orientations really more successful? Studies focusing more on first-generation African American males balance between collectivist and individualistic orientations could help student affairs professionals to understand how to best support this population as well.

Conclusion

Existing literature disproportionally focuses on the deficits of African American males. Combining the identities of first-generation and African American males is also quite rare. Research that focuses on the successes of men in this population spotlights gifted or high achieving Black males. In this study, I explored strengths that first-generation African American males who were neither gifted nor low achievers used to succeed in college. The results of this study are applicable to faculty members and student affairs professionals as well as those who work in college access programs aimed at opening access to first-generation African American males. Implications of this study can be used to empower first-generation African American males to come to college and persist toward graduation by helping them to realize and cultivate their strengths. Additionally, areas suggested for future research can continue to fill the gaps in the literature regarding this population. Approaching first-generation African American

males at PWIs from a strengths perspective instead of a deficit perspective can help student affairs professionals to understand how these students succeed and increase graduation rates for students with the lowest completion rate of any population in college today.

Because of my previous work with African American males, I am aware of barriers and difficulties these men must overcome in order to get to and succeed in college. This research project sheds more light on the serious issues involved in college attendance and completion for first-generation African American men. The loss of my former student, Samir, is a huge tragedy. However, we can use his story and legacy as an example for other African American men. Stories of success are missing in the media and in the literature, but they are needed in order for these men to reclaim their powerful and positive voices and graduate from college.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

IRB# 20111112172 EX

Purpose of the Research:
This is a study to better understand the perceived strengths of African American men who are first-generation college students at a Midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI). You were invited to possibly participant because you are 19 years of age or older and a first-generation African American male with at GPA at or above 2.5 currently enrolled at [redacted]. The research will be conducted mid-September through January 2012. The research will lead to a thesis, which should be completed by April 2012.

Procedures:
A one-on-one interview will be conducted with you in order to describe the strengths you utilized to be successful at [redacted]. The interview will be audio taped, will take somewhere between 60-90 minutes, and will be conducted at an agreed upon location.

Risks and/or Discomforts:
The study has no direct risks to the researcher, participant, or institution. Your participation in this study will not affect your standing with the university and all information provided will be kept confidential.

Benefits:
The interview will allow you to talk about your experiences as a first-generation African American male at the [redacted]. This information will be used to adjust and create programming benefitting this group.

Confidentiality:
The information, you provide will be used by the primary investigator to write a master's thesis. The results may be published in professional publications or potentially presented at professional conferences. Your name and information will be kept confidential and an alias will be assigned in the thesis in order to maintain your confidentiality.

Also, the observations made by the primary investigator during the interviews may be used to describe findings in the research. The records which will include audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, master list of participants, and computer records will be stored on the primary investigator's personal computer will be access by the primary investigator and her adviser. The records will be deleted upon completion of the project in August 2012.

Compensation:
There will not be any compensation.

_____
Participant Initials

Opportunity to Ask Questions:
You may ask questions about the research at any time by contacting the investigators at the numbers listed below. Sometimes participants have questions or concerns about the research. In this case, you should contact the [redacted] Institutional Review Board at 402-472-6965

Freedom to Withdraw:
Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time throughout the interview. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the [redacted]

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____ Initial if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview.

Signature of Participant:

_____ _____
Signature of Research Participant *Date*

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Principal Investigator
Kelly Irby
kellyirby@yahoo.com
(913)952-5679

Secondary Investigator
Dr. Rachelle Winkle-Wagner
Rwinkle-wagner2@unl.edu
402-472-2380

Appendix B

Recruitment E-mail

Dear _____,

I am writing to tell you about a study on the strengths of first-generation African American males who have been successful in college. I am conducting this study at [redacted] and am currently looking for participants to be interviewed.

The purpose of this research study is to explore how first-generation, academically successful African American males navigate higher education. Research on first-generation African American males is often focused on the negative. This study aims to explore the positive traits of this population in order to learn how to help them succeed and graduate from college.

You may be eligible for this study if you are an African American male who is the first in your family to attend a four year college, and you are at least a sophomore with at least a 2.5 GPA.

It is important to know that this e-mail is not to tell you to join this study. Your participation is voluntary. If you are interested in learning more, please e-mail me at kellyirby@yahoo.com or call me at (913)952-5679.

You do not have to respond if you are not interested in this study. If you do not respond, you may receive another e-mail, which you can simply disregard.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kelly Irby
Graduate Student
Higher Education Administration – Student Affairs Program

Appendix C

Participant Demographic Sheet

Basic Participant Data

Name	Hometown	Year	Major	ACT Score	College GPA
Joe	Kansas City, MO	Junior	Communication Studies Minor: Ethnic Studies	18	3.0
Henry	Kansas City, MO	Junior	English	19	3.37
Duane	Omaha, NE	Sophomore	Communication Studies & Political Science (Pre-Law)	24	3.5
Nathan	Omaha, NE	Senior	Fashion Design & Art-Graphic Design	17	2.5
Patrick	St. Louis, MO	Senior	Sociology	22	2.5

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Name:

Race/Ethnicity:

ACT Score:

GPA:

Major:

Hometown:

Year in College:

1. How do you define success in college?
2. What/who has motivated you to be successful in college?
3. What personal strengths have helped you succeed in college?
4. What experiences in college have made you realize your strengths?
5. What experiences in college have helped you gain strengths?
6. Tell me about a time when you used one of your strengths to succeed at something in college?
7. What strengths do you value in other African American males who have been successful in college?
8. What strengths have you been told you needed in college to be successful?
9. What strengths would you tell a first-generation African American man he needed to be successful in college?

10. What do first-generation African American males who are successful in college do?
11. What don’t first-generation African American males in college do?
12. Do you feel like other African American males support you in your efforts to do well academically?
13. What is difficult about being a successful African American male?
14. What is easy being a successful African American male?
15. What is unique about first-generation African American males who are successful in college?