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The Impact of Religious Commitment and Motivation on African American Male Academic Achievement

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THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND MOTIVATION ON AFRICAN
AMERICAN MALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

by

BEVERLY CABBLE LOGAN

(Under the Direction of Missy Bennett)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this mixed method, pragmatic, research study was to determine, from successful African American college age students, what influences have contributed to their academic success. Quantitative data were collected using two survey instruments, the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10) and a researcher created demographic instrument for data collection. Qualitative data were collected through five researcher-conducted focus group discussions with 10 African American students enrolled in a four year university located in the southeast region of the United States. The guiding questions were: How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among minority male college students? What relationship exists between religious commitment, motivation and academic achievement of minority male college students? What motivational factors have impacted the academic success? Results revealed that students felt that religious commitment was a factor in their academic success, while quantitative data showed a negative correlation between students' grade-point averages and their religious commitment score. Students identified family support, personal motivation, and determination not to be a statistic as factors impacting their academic success.

INDEX WORDS: Religion, Motivation, Academic Achievement, African Americans

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MALE AMERICAN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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DEDICATION

This page is dedicated to all of my family, living and deceased. I especially dedicate this work to my parents, Marion and Mildred Cabble, and my grandparents, Rev. James and Mrs. Mary Black Cabble. I further dedicate this document to my best friend/spouse, Von; our children Aaron and Kimberly; and my sisters, Carole, Gloria (Donald), Janice, and Audrey; and my brothers, Marion (Douglas) and Richard (Ann) Cabble. Your support and encouragement can never be acknowledged adequately.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Educators continue to struggle to meet the challenges of declining academic achievement. Earlier versions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation outlined clear expectations for improving students' academic success. However, revisions have been made to these mandates, including restoring state authority in establishing performance ratings, eliminating adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements, replacing AYP requirements with a mandatory increase in the number of proficient students on state reading and math assessments, and empowering states to design school improvement strategies (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Despite high expectations, and continuing efforts to improve education, dismal data regarding minority male achievement, in particular, remain pervasive (Viadero, 2006). In addressing this concern, Viadero stated, "Demographic population shifts mandate that we attend to minority students' achievement if we expect to maintain our standard of living, level of prosperity, and place in the global economy" (p. 66). Minority achievement studies consistently reflect the fact that African American students are less likely than their White counterparts to take challenging academic courses in high school, complete high school, score high on college-entrance exams, or ultimately complete college (Noguera, 2003; The Schott Report, 2010).

Based upon 2010 national data, 10% of Black, Non-Hispanic males scored proficient in Grade 8 reading compared to White males who scored 30% proficient. Nearly 3% of African American male students in comparison to .98% for White males are classified as intellectually challenged, representing 20% of the intellectually

challenged classifications, though representing only 9% of total school population. Additionally, out-of-school suspensions disproportionately involve African American male students at nearly three times the rate of White, non-Hispanic male students (Noguera, 2003; The Schott Report, 2010). Demographic changes in the United States have caused an increase in minority student enrollment in school systems, especially in urban areas. In 2007-2008, the largest 65 urban school systems in the country, consisting of less than one-half of 1% of the nearly 17,000 school districts in the United States, educated about 14% of the K-12 public school students in the nation. These numbers include approximately one third of the African American students in the nation, a third of its English Language Learners, a quarter of its poor students, and a quarter of its Hispanic students of the nation (Council of the Great City Schools, 2010). Identifying influences, which support academic achievement and motivation, and incorporating these influences into the educational environment, can be instrumental in increasing academic success for this vulnerable population (Council of the Great City Schools, 2010).

Much of the research regarding African American male achievement has concentrated on the influences, which negatively impact academic achievement. Influences known to positively impact academic achievement of this vulnerable population exist in the research of successful achievement among male minority students. For example, religious commitment is one variable identified as having a positive impact on academic achievement of minority students (Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2001; Irvine & Foster, 1996; Jeynes 2003a; Jeynes 2003b; Suskind, 1998). However, few studies have examined minority male achievement from the viewpoint of students who have completed high school and are enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine, from the perspective of academically successful African American male college students, the impact of religious commitment, motivation, and influences other on their academic achievement. Academic achievement, for the purpose of the research, was defined as students' grade-point average of 2.0 or better after they have been enrolled, and successfully matriculated through a 4-year, college level program.

Background

In previous research studies, countless influences have been identified as having a positive impact on minority students' academic achievement. These influences include (a) high expectations, (b) resilience, (c) positive parental involvement, (d) instruction designed to address individual learning styles, (e) a culturally relevant curriculum, and (f) religious commitment. A similar number of influences have been identified as having a negative impact on minority students' academic achievement. Some of these influences include (a) low teacher and student expectations, (b) stereotype threat, (c) lack of effective parental involvement, and (d) low socioeconomic status (Aikenhead, 2001; Allen, 1992; Jeynes, 2003b). Determining what relationship exists between any of these influences and academic achievement of African American students could be a breakthrough for stakeholders seeking to improve academic achievement for this very vulnerable population. Very little research data has been collected from the point of view of African American students who have completed high school and are enrolled in institutions of higher education.

A novel entitled *A Hope in the UNSEEN*, written by Ron Suskind (1998), chronicles an inner city African American youth in Washington, DC, from middle school through high school, who ultimately matriculates through a University in Providence, Rhode Island. The student, Cedric Lavar Jennings, identifies several influences that impacted his academic success. These influences include strong parental involvement, religious commitment, high teacher expectations, self-efficacy, avoidance of negative peer pressure, and positive role models (Suskind, 1998). This information is of particular interest to the researcher because the student chronicled in this book attended the school where the researcher began her teaching career.

The researcher was intimately aware of the challenges that minority students faced at this school and was aware of the poor overall academic performance of the minority students, especially the African Americans. Challenges identified in this novel include race, social class, background, masculinity culture, religion, and faith. However, religion and faith were identified as having a major influence on the academic success of minority students (Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2001; Irvine & Foster, 1996; Jeynes 2003a; Jeynes 2003b; Suskind, 1998).

Blacks and Religious Commitment

The U.S. is considered a religious nation, and African-Americans score markedly more religious on a variety of measures, including the 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, than the U.S. population as a whole, including attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and the importance of religion in life. When compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to have a formal

religious affiliation. For example, 87% of African-Americans surveyed described themselves as belonging to one religious group or another. The Landscape Survey further indicated that nearly 8 in 10 African-Americans indicated that religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56% among all U.S. adults. A large majority of African-Americans, 78%, who are unaffiliated with any particular faith, indicated that religion plays at least a somewhat important role in their lives. In the survey, African-Americans stood out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation. Even African-Americans who are unaffiliated with any religious group pray nearly as often as the overall population (Frasier, 1978; Sagal & Smith, 2010).

Values Norms and Academic Achievement

Research correlating religious involvement and academic achievement has been around for quite some time. Spiritual and religious involvement affects educational outcomes more than income (Jeynes, 2003a). One analysis of Grade 10 students determined that for both Black and White students, the impact of pro-social values, with religion being one of these values, was stronger than the effect of socioeconomic status on reading and math proficiency (Hansen & Ginsburg, 1988).

Data showed that students with strongly held traditional values often have higher points on school outcome measures. Students who value work ethic often outperform students with weak work ethics by as much as 17 percentile points on GPA, 18 percentile points in math, and 22 percentile points in reading achievement. Students who have a high value for education outperform students with weaker education values by 16 percentile points on GPA and 12 percentile points on math achievement. Students with

high religious values outperform less religious students by 15 percentile points on GPA and 15 percentile points on discipline. This study also found that holding religious values was associated with higher math scores for Black students (Hansen & Ginsburg, 1988). Social science research indicated that religious practice has beneficial effects on the educational attainment of children, which is true especially for children from low-income neighborhoods (Jeynes, 2003a; Regnerus & Elder, 2003). The direct positive effects of students' religious practice include higher grade-point averages, more time spent on homework, and a significant decrease in high school dropout rates.

Religious Commitment Improves Academic Achievement

Studies by Jeynes (2002, 2003a) and Regnerus (2000) found that religiously committed urban children performed better on academic measures than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socio-economic status, race, and gender. These results, from various studies, were based upon analytic approaches, meta-analyses, nationwide datasets, and qualitative techniques. Specifically, religious students of color outperformed their less religious counterparts. Religious students of color from intact families showed even more progress than students from less traditional family structures. Attending religious schools further magnified these results, especially for middle and higher grades. Based upon the strong impact religion and family have on people, a lack of research studying these influences is evident in the literature base.

Church Activities Heighten Expectations and Achievement

Regnerus (2000) proposed and tested a multilevel model of involvement in church activities and schooling success among metropolitan U.S. public high school sophomores. He hypothesized that:

1. Involvement in church activities will be directly related to higher educational expectations and better achievement test scores in public school youth,
2. Religion's importance for schooling success is greater in lower-income neighborhoods, where community disorganization is more likely to occur than in wealthier neighborhoods,
3. Including other sources of educational socialization will prevent a significant church involvement effect (p. 364).

Results from Regnerus' (2000) study indicated that participation in church activities heightened educational expectations and achievement. Additionally, data supported the finding that more intensely religious students scored higher on standardized tests in mathematics and reading, irrespective of economic factors, including social class (Regnerus, 2000).

Religious Involvement Benefits Low Income Youth

A study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (2007) investigated whether religious involvement enhanced the likelihood that youth in low-income neighborhoods would stay in school and on track. This study determined, through multilevel modeling procedures, that although adolescents in low-income neighborhoods do not, differ in their church attendance patterns from their peers in

higher-income areas, their religious involvement allowed them to achieve greater academic benefits. Regnerus (2003) suggested that one explanation could be that religion for the advantaged is one resource in many. For poor students the effect of religious practice is significant because it may be one of the few positive influences in their lives.

Results further showed that as the level of poverty rises within the neighborhood, the relationship between church attendance and school success becomes more positive (Regnerus, 2003). This finding held even with adjustments for key risks and protective factors. These protective factors included neighborhood rates of unemployment, poverty, and female-headed households. Data indicated that in the presence of these factors, the higher the church attendance the greater the academic progress (Regnerus & Elder 2003).

Black College Students Indicate Religion Improves Achievement

Thornton (2004) conducted a study to measure the value of preferences of undergraduate students between 19 and 26 years of age enrolled in a historically Black college. Employing grounded theory, the researcher posited that this particular sample would value economic and materialistic things over family and religion. However, results indicated the opposite. Data analysis showed prayer and guidance were used as coping mechanisms; spirituality was being used in a social context; and social support was derived from religious institutions. Participants felt that these factors helped them remain in school.

Statement of the Problem

The plight of the African American male includes predictions of high unemployment, underemployment, education deficits, high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and a plethora of health issues including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, delinquency, high crime rates, and imprisonment (Majors & Gordon, 1994b). Popular media portray this vulnerable group of citizens as “punks, troublemakers, dope addicts, gang-bangers, lazy, and hostile” (Majors & Gordon, 1994b, p. xi). These factors are exacerbated by poor school attendance and lack of academic achievement. The positive impact of religion and regular church attendance lead to a healthy stable family life, strong marriages, and well-behaved children (Jeynes, 2003a).

Most importantly, from the educational and societal perspective, religious commitment has been shown to have a strong positive impact on motivation and academic achievement, especially for at risk populations, including minority males. Based upon the strong impact of religious commitment and family on educational outcomes, there is a lack of research studying these variables from the viewpoint of successful African American male students.

The achievement gap continues to widen while minority male students continue to fall further and further behind academically. Educators, churches, researchers, parents and community leaders continue to remain at a loss about how to address this national tragedy. Sparse, though convincing, research has indicated a positive relationship between religious commitment and academic achievement, particularly among African-American students (Jeynes, 2003a, 2003b; Regnerus & Elder, 2003). A need existed to further study this area of research. Therefore, this study examined the relationship

between religious commitment and motivation on academic achievement of minority male students enrolled in a 4-year university in the southeastern United States.

Research Questions

This study addressed one overarching research question and two sub-questions. How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?
2. How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that impact their academic achievement?

Significance of the Study

While research supports a relationship between religious commitment, motivation and academic achievement; identifying the specific elements of religious commitment, which most impact African American male college students, from their perspective would make a contribution to the research. In addition, identifying other factors that African American male college students feel have contributed to or hindered their academic success could provide insight to the educational community regarding ways to assist this very vulnerable student population.

Administrators and significant stakeholders desiring to enhance the educational environment by including factors that are known to increase academic achievement and motivation can be enlightened by the results of this study. Additional benefits could

include the ability to provide an educational environment where more students remain on task, an increase in graduation rates, and an opportunity for more students to pursue higher educational opportunities with the corresponding benefits these advantages could provide. As schools become more diverse, it is increasingly more important to know how the curriculum, students' culture, learning styles, and various other factors impact their motivation and academic achievement. An educated population provides benefits in countless ways to all members of society.

Method

The purpose of the study was to determine the impact of religious commitment, and other variables, on academic achievement of African American male students enrolled in a 4-year university. The researcher used a pragmatic framework for this study. The pragmatic paradigm places "the research problem" as central and applies all approaches to understanding the problem (Creswell, 2005, p.11). The pragmatic paradigm is informed by both quantitative and qualitative data. It includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods, inductive and deductive reasoning, and considers points of view from both research methods. Values and external reality are considered in interpretation of the data, while the researcher is able to choose explanations that best produce desired results (Creswell et al. 2003).

The quantitative data were collected through RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory. Qualitative data were used to build upon and help to clarify the findings of the quantitative data, individual and group interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The conclusions were based upon a combination of results, from the analysis of both

phases of data collection. While time consuming, the data are straightforward and easy to describe and report. Employing sequential mixed methodology is a way to obtain statistical, quantitative results from a sample, and then following up with several individuals to probe those results in more detail in order to provide a thorough understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Onweugbuzie and Teddlie (2003) supported that mixed methods are not limited to the triangulation of results, but can be used for:

- (a) Complementarity (seeking elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of the results from one method),
- (b) Development (i.e., using the results from one method to help inform the other method),
- (c) Initiation (i.e., discovering paradoxes and contradictions that lead to a reframing of the research question), and
- (d) Expansion (seeking to expand the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components). (p. 353).

In this study, mixed methods were used to complement, develop, and expand the data collection process. Surveys were administered to a sample population in a single setting. Upon completion of this process, students are solicited to participate in recorded focus groups. This process allowed the researcher to collect data that was unavailable from any other source. This process was designed to meet the specific purposes of the study, and it had the strength of consistent measurement (Babbie, 1998).

Other relationships were explored through responses to open-ended questions administered during the focus group sessions. The open-ended interview questions were

posed to focus groups of students who consented to participate in this data collection phase. The small group interview sessions lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Eliciting information, regarding how religious commitment, motivation and other variables have impacted the students' academic achievement, provided personal insights that could not be obtained in any other way. The interview sessions were recorded and transcribed. The answers provided information regarding what particular elements of religious commitment impacted minority male students' academic achievement. Other questions solicited information regarding the factors that have impacted the students' academic success. Focus Group Interview Questions are provided in Appendix A.

The target population for this study included African American male college students ($N \leq 15$) at a 4-year university located in the southeastern United States. The selection of students was determined by convenience sampling. Students were solicited with the director of the Multicultural Center, and the Pathways to Success Organization. The Multicultural Center director identified participants and set up schedules for researcher conducted focus groups.

Demographic data were collected as an addendum to RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory instrument. The RCI-10 is designed to show ones' level of religious commitment based upon 10 Likert-type scale questions, valued 1-5, to determine level of agreement with the specific question asked (Appendix D). Permission to use the RCI-10 was granted by its author (Appendix E).

Scores on the RCI-10 has strong estimated internal consistency, 3-week and 5-month test-retest reliability, construct validity, and discriminant validity. The creators of the RCI-10 suggested, by using the most extreme scores within the specified ranges that

the normative mean for a general sample of United States adults is 26 with as standard deviation (SD) of 12. Thus, a full-scale RCI-10 score of 38 or higher would justify considering a person to be highly religious (Worthington et al., 2003).

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups, using open-ended format questions developed by the researcher, to elicit information regarding variables and experiences, which have impacted the students' academic success. Students also completed a demographic, researcher designed survey. Student participants were provided with, and signed, an approved informed consent letter, which explained the purpose of the study and indicating that their participation was voluntary. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. Permission was obtained from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning the research process. The researcher also obtained written approval from the research site after completing their IRB process.

The researcher sought to identify variables impacting academic success from the perspective of matriculating African American male college students. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software to determine if a relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement. Qualitative data, in the form of participant responses to interview questions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher analyzed all interview transcripts for recurring themes and patterns. Participant response data were coded based upon similarity of participant responses about influences impacting academic success. The researcher used an iterative process to develop themes, codes, and sub-codes. A narrative analysis was

used to analyze and synthesize the data. This analysis is reported as a narrative in Chapter 4.

Research participants consisted of college age African American male students enrolled in a university located in the southeastern part of the United States. Study participants were selected using a purposive, convenience sampling methodology. A total of 124 students completed surveys through freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior classes by professors who were willing to participate in this project, and who administered the survey. Participants, for qualitative focus groups, were chosen by purposeful sampling to ensure the selection of African American male college students. Contacts were made with Black campus fraternity organizations and the campus multicultural organization in order to solicit African American students. Interviews were held at times and locations convenient to the participants.

Limitations

1. One limitation was having adequate responses to the surveys to make the data valid due to sample size.
2. The population for this study was matriculating African American male college students.
3. Grade-point averages (GPAs) were self-reported and might have somewhat skewed the findings.
4. Not all students identified themselves as religious.

Delimitations

1. The qualitative questions assessing students' perceptions of religious commitment on academic achievement motivation was researcher developed; it has only content validity.
2. Academic success determinations were limited to self-reported GPA's.
3. Not all students identified themselves as religious.

Definition of Terms

Academic success. The term academic success refers to successful completion of high school and positive academic success at an institution of higher learning

At Risk Students. Students with a cumulative grade-point average of less than C

Religious Commitment. The degree to which a person holds to their values, beliefs, and practices and employs them in daily living (Worthington, 1988)

Successful students. Students with a cumulative grade-point average of C or better.

Summary

A critical review of the literature addressing poor academic achievement among students of color reflected concern regarding the educational outcomes of minority male students, particularly African Americans. Although countless theories identified possible causes of poor performance by minority groups, a common ray of hope appeared in studies that addressed the impact of religious commitment on motivation and academic achievement. Identifying specific ways that religious commitment affected motivation

and academic achievement was one goal of this research. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the impact of religious commitment on academic achievement of African American male students enrolled in a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the United States.

The study was accomplished through a mixed method pragmatic research design using religious commitment data, self-reported grade data, and qualitative data acquired through open-ended focus group interview questions. Acquiring this information could provide churches and schools with a potential resource to improve student academic achievement for a very fragile population of at-risk students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature on African American underachievement and concerns regarding the ever-widening achievement gap between African Americans and their White counterparts is a topic of frequent discussion. Countless researchers have weighed in on this national problem (Jeynes, 2003a, 2003b). Minority students, and African Americans, in particular are falling further and further behind academically (Regnerus & Elder, 2003). Many young African Americans remain in public schools in which literary instruction does not correspond to their needs (Tatum, 2006). In addition, African American students often perceive the school system as an institution that has labeled them without providing them an adequate opportunity to realize and develop their potential (Narine, 1992).

Various theories attempt to explain the poor academic achievement of minority students in general and of African American males in particular. One theory suggests that African Americans are inferior genetically (Welsing, 1991). According to Sternberg, Grigorenko, and Kidd (2005), studying a race represents a value judgment because race is a social construct and not a biological concept. A second theory suggests that the general educational system does not work effectively to meet the needs of African American males (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

An additional theory is that African Americans doubt their ability to be successful in a European American society (Fordham, 1986; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Further, Hilliard (1992) suggested that African American males' level of academic achievement

could be attributed to inadequate inclusion of African history and culture in educational materials and content.

Curriculum is important for improving educational outcomes for African Americans males; however, specific texts and text characteristics relevant to minority students often are absent or underrepresented in the curriculum (Booker, 2004). In addition, many texts contain author biases concerning African American people (e.g. stereotyping, distortions, and under representation) (Jones, 2005; Miller, 1998).

Numerous other factors are known to impact academic achievement of African American males, including socioeconomic factors, stereotyping, learning styles, teacher expectations, school factors, religious beliefs, and parental involvement. This chapter begins with a historical context of African Americans' presence and educational background in the United States, followed by a listing of obstacles and perceived barriers, sociocultural factors and psychological and motivational factors which are known to impact motivation and academic achievement of minority students, especially African American students.

Historical Context

Many African Americans in U.S. society found their origin in the institution of chattel slavery (Elligan & Utsey, 1999). One well-known example of enslavement was the use of Africans as free labor (Sawh & Scales, 2006). American society attempted to dehumanize and relegate African Americans to the status of servant and beast of burden (Morgan, 1985). According to Akbar (1984), the behavioral and psychological impact of the treatment imposed on the male slave included being forced to adopt new names, a

new language, and European view of the universe. African Americans were compelled to comprehend words and systems of thought that defined their color and culture as evil, savage, and heathen (Hale-Benson, 1986).

Historical Views of African American People

Patterson (1972) identified several ways of viewing the history of African American people in America. First, the *catastrophic* view, which maintains that African Americans in the New World experienced disasters and horrors inflicted by White oppression. Sociologists believed that African American people were devastated by slavery and post-slavery experiences. Such mistreatment led to the suggestion that compensation should have been given to African American people to assist with restoring and rebuilding their community (Hale-Benson, 1986).

Patterson's (1972) second point of view was *contributionism*. This view addressed the down play of African American contributions to civilization. The third point of view was called *survivalist*. This concept referred to the African American male as having to fight to maintain African roots in a destructive and hostile environment. African American people, in general, were taught that they had attained the highest level of culture by being brought to America and civilized by the White man. This type of teaching has led many African Americans to become disinterested in their roots (Hale-Benson, 1986).

Although slavery was abolished in 1865, the African American male continues to have challenges recovering from this experience and the harsh, brutal treatment brought on by the Jim Crow laws that legally established separate public facilities for Blacks and Whites (Elligan & Utsey, 1999; Zimmerman, 2005). As a result of slavery, Jim Crow

Laws, and institutional racism, many African American people, specifically males, have been denied equal educational opportunities (Russell, 2005).

African American Identity

When many African American children enter school, acculturation and enculturation occur. They are introduced to a system, which was based upon an acculturation (merging of cultures) process that places a negative value on enculturation (practicing one's own culture and values) (Hollins & Spencer, 1999). At the same time that they become involved in the educational process, African American children are still learning the norms for anticipating and responding appropriately to the behavior of other members of their culture. Additionally, they are still learning how to make sense of the world through culture-specific lenses. At the same time, they are learning who they are, where they are, and how they fit into the world (Hollins & Spencer, 1999).

James (1890) noted that self is how individuals identify their essence and how one processes that identity. James stated that knowledge of one's self provides existential answers to questions such as *Who am I? Where do I belong?* For African American people, the answer to these questions would provide persons with a sense of what it means to be both an American and to be of African heritage. According to Oyserman and Harrison, when the African American adolescent can answer the racial identity questions—from where he came and to whom he belongs, it will likely provide a sense of rootedness. Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) argued that when the African American adolescent becomes rooted in his heritage, he is more likely to perform successfully in school.

Deculturalization of African American Students

African American students experience academic and social alienation as a result of deculturalization. Many African American students are made to feel that they must reject their culture in order to succeed in the school environment (Lomotey, 1990). Hale-Benson (1986) argued that the under representation of African American culture in the curriculum and instructional inequalities foster negative classroom experiences for African American students and create barriers to their academic achievement. Rosenberg and (1972) and Coopersmith (1975) suggested that if African American students are oriented toward the culture, the lack of academic achievement, according to European American culture, might matter less.

The public school system has become an influential vehicle for promoting the deculturalization of African American students and introducing them to European American norms, while creating confusion in the conscience. African American students need to be freed from this confusion before their creativity can be released to remove the barriers of academic achievement (Lomotey, 1990).

Bennet (2002) used a secondary analysis of existing data built on Miller and McIntosh's (1999) findings, investigating the influence of certain cultural and contextual factors on school engagement in 131 African American youth. The results suggested that students who are competent biculturally and possess a positive ethnic identity are more likely to engage in school activities and perform well academically. Bennet indicated the need for future research to explore the role and function of race and culture on the academic achievement motivation of African American students.

Ethnic identity has been correlated with academic achievement of African American students. According to Okagaki (2001), in order for African American students to achieve academically, they need to develop a positive ethnic identity. Miller and McIntosh (1999) found that students who identify strongly with their ethnic group are able to negotiate potential negative environments, to deal with discrimination and prejudice, while maintaining high self-esteem. A strong sense of ethnic identity protects students from being influenced by negative pressure and threats that potentially could interfere with their academic performance (Daly, Shin, & Vera, 2007).

LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993) suggested that a healthy ethnic identity includes knowledge of both African American and European American cultures. This identity fosters favorable attitudes toward African American and European American cultures and positive social relationships in both African American and European American cultural groups. Additionally, this identity supports the belief that one can be true to one's ethnic identity and still function effectively in the majority culture (LaFromboise et al. 1993).

Obstacles/Perceived Barriers

Cultural Inclusion

African American children must exist in a dual society. As a result of this duality, learning the norms, values, practices, and perceptions of the African American culture and White, middle-class ways and perceptions must be mastered well enough to survive in the larger society (Hollins & Spencer, 1999). The White, middle-class standards of

behavior, measures of academic performance, and the separation of school knowledge from practical to cultural knowledge need to be addressed (Hollins & Spencer, 1999).

Incorporating components of African American culture in the educational process in ways that encourage academic success is a possible strategy for cultural inclusion. Providing opportunities for students to gain knowledge of and appreciation for the beauty in their own culture; providing opportunities to use culturally derived competencies to broaden knowledge of the world, while developing skills for sustaining the quality of life, are additional goals of cultural inclusion (Hollins & Spencer, 1999). In order to accomplish fundamental, meaningful change, the concept of cultural inclusion needs to become a basic tenet of schooling. An example of a multicultural instructional approach could be to integrate African American culture into the curriculum and increase the opportunity for African American students to participate fully in the learning process (Lomotey, 1990).

Internalized Racism

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) addressed many of the elements of internalized racism. They asserted that academically successful African American students must address the burden of being perpetually accused by the peers of acting White. The impact of this burden, Fordham and Ogbu contended is exhibited in predominantly African American and racially integrated school environments. Fordham and Ogbu further identified concerns such as social ostracism, exclusion from African American activities inside and outside of school, labeling, and physical attacks as challenges of which academic achievers must deal. Some researchers have labeled this concept, oppositional peer culture (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Ferguson, 2001).

Fordham (1986) noted that some high-achieving African American students adopt racelessness as a method of signifying that they are distancing themselves from African American culture, in response to the dearth of same-race peer support that they receive at school. Ogbu and Simons (1998) maintained that although African American students are usually supportive of their same-race peer's academic success, it is when their peers appear to embrace White attitudes and demeanors along with earning high grades that are considered problematic. Ogbu (2004) noted that the burden of acting White includes accusations of being an Uncle Tom or a sellout, showing disloyalty to the African American community, inflicting personal embarrassment, public humiliation, and lack of acceptance.

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) hypothesis has been the center of controversy in African American student achievement studies (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Ferguson, 2001; Spencer, Noll, Stolzhus, & Harpalani, 2001). These researchers concluded that African American students do not value education or academic achievement any less than the White peers from similar socioeconomic or familial backgrounds. Instead they posit that a relatively large number of high achievers have positive self-esteem, high goal orientations, and strong African American identities. Horvath and Lewis (2003) suggested in their study that the African American peer groups affirmed, embraced, and celebrated the participants' academic achievements.

Ferguson (2001) asserted that achievement is more negotiable among African American students than Fordham and Ogbu's work implied. His position was that students who are interested in school success are compelled to invest effort into academic

endeavors, while possessing an authentic sense of racial solidarity with their African American peers.

Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) argued that even while some African American students intentionally assimilate into White culture, it does not necessarily indicate that they know less about African American culture or have weaker racial identities. Instead, they believe that these students “have learned to become bicultural, developing a repertoire of expressions and behaviors from both the White and Black community and switching between them as appropriate” (p. 320).

The participants in Fries-Britt’s (1998) study reflected on the uneasy exchanges that have occurred with other African American students who were not in the program for academically talented collegians. Participants valued the affiliation with a program that facilitated interactions with other academically talented African Americans. However, they still desired opportunities to be connected to the larger African American student body at their university. Some students admitted to hiding their academic talents and their connection to special programs so that they would fit in with other African American students at the university. Fries-Britt (1997) addressed the needs and issues encountered by high-achieving African American men. She contended that the pressure to fit in with and gain the respect of their male peers is a powerful source of stress for these students.

Inclusion in Mainstream Culture

African American children experience dual existence in society. Part of this dual existence is the requirement that they learn the norms, values, practices, and perceptions of the African American culture in addition to White middle-class ways and perceptions, well enough to survive in the larger society (Hollins & Spencer, 1999). In order for

schools to change in a fundamental and meaningful way, the concept of cultural inclusion needs to replace the basic tenets of schooling that support acculturation. A multicultural instructional approach such as integrating African American culture into the curriculum and increasing the opportunity for many African American students to fully participate in the learning process could be a part of such an approach (Lomotey, 1990).

Understanding the relationship between culture and thought processes are essential to the education of African American children. Evidence indicates that African American students are able to use complex thinking skills on the street, but fall short using these skills in the classroom (Baratz & Baratz, 1969). Cole (1971) suggested that educators must understand the culture of African American children in order for them to effectively improve their learning outcomes.

Socioeconomic Barriers

Political, economic, and cultural changes have affected traditional family dynamics. Parenting and family structures differ, as is indicated by the increase in two-parent families in the workforce. An increasing number of children live in one-parent homes, and people who remarry create various blended-family relationships. Increasing numbers of mothers work outside the home (Olsen, 1996). One socioeconomic factor consistently associated with the achievement gap is the issue of poverty.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), African Americans have much higher poverty rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups. In 2005, 30% of African American children under age 18 lived in poverty, compared with 10% of Caucasian children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). By the time a student enters kindergarten and first grade, math and reading achievement gaps between

poor students, and more affluent students, already exist. Students in poverty often demonstrate weaker language skills as they enter the school system due to a lack of proper exposure to language development in the home (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005).

The achievement gap, which begins in early childhood, actually increases as students move from grade to grade (Alonzo, Tindal, & Robinson, 2008). A study conducted by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation indicated that students from families with an annual household income of less than \$20,000 were twice as likely to report a “D” or less in school as those from families making \$50,000 or more per year. In addition, African American youth who acknowledged not attending school in the previous school year in which this study was conducted were also identified as being from the families making less than \$20,000 per year (Toldson, 2008).

In the United States, 72% of African-American children are born to single mothers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). Data show that single mothers have a much greater risk of being poor. Further, the cycle of poverty is very likely to be passed on to their children as well (Lewis, 2005). Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Vaden (1990), conducted a study which determined that being an African-American male and growing up in poverty in a single parent (mother-headed) household are risk factors for childhood maladjustment. An additional survey administered to second through fourth grade teachers, regarding the behaviors of African-American boys in the classrooms, indicated that teachers viewed African American males as exhibiting more misconduct and having more behavior problems than their non-minority counterparts (Patterson et al., 1990).

Poverty exacerbates problems for adolescents. African-American children in inner cities frequently live in neighborhoods with inadequate resources. Such communities offer less desirable housing conditions, which might create increased health risks. The literature supports the assumptions that these factors limit the ability of families to prepare children to function successfully in society (Colbert et al., 2005). In addition to poor housing conditions and lack of essential resources, other risk factors frequently found in low-income families include parents' occupations, parents' educational levels, large family size, and absence of one parent (Luthar, 1991).

Historically, children who live in poverty are disproportionately at risk for academic failure. At-risk students often attend schools with low academic performance levels and inadequate resources. Experience indicates that social behaviors of low-income and minority families often differ from what is deemed appropriated by the mainstream population.

Negative peer pressure

In studies conducted by Ferguson (2001), many students discussed peer pressure that accompanies school success. Some students indicated that they were embarrassed to ask teachers for help, for fear that others would notice. Thus, students would rather pretend to do their work, or simply act out. The inability to complete tasks often leads to student frustration and anger. Ogbu (1998) and Ferguson (2001) each espouse their own theory on peer pressure and the impact it has on students.

Ferguson (2001) stated that African American boys are more likely than Caucasian students to tease their classmates for making mistakes. Ogbu (1998) found that high achieving African American students (particularly boys) are often accused of acting

White. The students that were interviewed in one study (Barnes et al., 2004) claimed that they feared being labeled as acting White if they attempted to improve their classroom performance.

Likewise Franklin (1999) found that African American male peers are a significant influence on the thoughts and behaviors of African American males. For instance, he discovered that some African Americans felt guilty about attaining educational and career successes because their African American peers did not have the same opportunities. Several of the successful males felt the accomplishments violated some type of allegiance to their racial-gender subgroup. Consequently, many African Americans males downplayed their successes in order to feel comfortable among peers.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Included in a culturally relevant curriculum (CRC), for African American adult learners is an Afro centric philosophy. Similar to critical race theory (Bell, 1993; Crenshaw et al. 1995), Afrocentric philosophy validates the experiences of African Americans, and emphasizes race as a guiding principle for understanding their status in the United States. Adult education scholar Hunn (2004) noted that an Afrocentric philosophy asserts that location in one's own cultural center is significant. In addition, this philosophy combats racism; it is postulated that these ideas, beliefs, and practices can work together to empower and validate African American history, knowledge, and culture in adult educators' discourse.

A qualitative study conducted by Sealey-Ruiz (2007) determined the importance of a CRC to 15 African American adult, female learners in a required first year, second-semester freshman composition class, *Translating Experience into the Essay*. This study

investigated how the participants responded to a curriculum that centered on their life experiences and their social and historical backgrounds. The participants were fulltime students enrolled at a Harlem, New York Liberal Arts College. All the participants were self-identified as Black or African American (acknowledging family roots in the United States) from poor or working class backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 23 to 57. The findings indicated that using a CRC with African American female adult students can ameliorate their learning experience. It also was discovered that the participants were culturally bonded, as proven by their dialogic exchanges with each other and with the researcher. Using a CRC is a critical first step in creating a classroom that includes all voices (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Sociocultural Factors

Frequency and Stigma of Special Education

More African American students continue to be referred for assessment, and placed in, special education classes than their peers. Fierros and Conroy (2002) found that 16% of European American students with disabilities received special education services in separate placements (spend more than 21% of the school day in restrictive classrooms) in comparison with 33% of African American students. Race, culture, and disability influence the disproportionate representation of ethnically diverse students in self-contained classrooms. Schools have often failed to examine how these influences relate to student performance, thus failing to provide educators with the resources and supports necessary to meet the needs of ethnically diverse students, especially those in urban schools (Shealey & Lue, 2006).

Many minority students frequently are assigned to restrictive classroom settings that increase their risk for academic failure. Stigmatizing disability labels are assigned regularly to African American students. These labels and frequency of use include Emotional Disabled (ED) 1.68 times more often, Mentally Retarded (MR) 2.41 times more often, and Learning Disabled (LD) 1.13 times more often than their White counterparts. Assignment of these labels usually places student in lower educational settings (Jackson, 2005).

According to Jordan (2005), teacher evaluations and labeling of African American students are influenced by some teachers' personal beliefs that these students lack motivation, possess limited intellectual ability and have inadequate home environments. Harry and Anderson (1994) argued that identification and labeling of students might have more to do with the social processes that occur in schools and classrooms rather than the individual pathology of the students being labeled. However, little consideration is given to the ways the educational environment impacts the personal and educational experiences of students, especially the African American male (Jordan, 2005).

Anderson (1988) argued that public education for African American students appears to be geared toward helping them accept and adjust to subordinate roles in society, which was premised upon racist myths and mental inferiority. The Commission on Excellence in Special Education reported the following:

Several factors were responsible for this over-representation, including the reliance on IQ tests that have known cultural bias. This may result in more minority children being identified in the mental retardation category as opposed to the Specific

Learning Disability (SLD) category. Minority children are much more likely to be placed in the emotional disturbance category because of behavioral characteristics associated with the cultural context in which a child is raised. A major factor is the role of teacher referral. In some studies, teachers refer more than 80 percent of children who are placed in a “high-incidence” category (President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2001, p. 26).

Curriculum Development

European American-centered consciousness remains the basis of curriculum development and instruction in the public school system. European resettlement, referred to as American History or United States History provides European Americans with a sense of connectedness to their history. However, these same history books present slavery as the most important historical contribution of African Americans. Minimal discussion is provided of prior experiences in Africa or the conditions that led to their enslavement that brought them to this country. Such curriculum biases give students the impression that African Americans were the only group of people to be enslaved (Hollins & Spencer, 1999).

Such historical gaffs leave African American students unable to see themselves in a positive way in the United States schools, thus negatively impacting their academic aspirations and performances (Bass & Coleman, 1997). Curriculum content should help African American children maintain their cultural identity through reference points in Africa as a sense of connectedness to African people, African American cultural heritage, along with historical experiences within this society. Such a curriculum would create a

sense of connectedness with people of different cultures through a study of human experience and the human condition (Hollins & Spencer, 1999).

Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culturally responsive instruction pertains to classroom practices that draw meaningfully on the culture, languages, and experiences that students bring to the classrooms in order to increase engagement and academic achievement for students of color (Au, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). “A few of the most common tenets of a culturally responsive pedagogy include (a) acknowledging that valuable knowledge resides in students’ home languages and cultures and that this home knowledge is not always valued in the schools; (b) pursuing academic success for students of color; (c) creating valuable connections between students’ home and school experiences; and (d) fostering social justice” (Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, & Lin, 2008, p. 269-300).

Scholarly research related to culturally responsive instruction has identified the cultural disconnect between teachers and students or the ability of teachers to misunderstand the behavior of African American students. Misunderstanding could severely impact the process of over identification for special education referrals and the underachievement of students (Howard, 2001; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). This idea also relates to the mismatch between school culture and home culture.

For example, the home culture for many African American males consists of a firm parental-controlled environment, where African American parents tend to be more domineering and less agreeable to their child’s demands as compared to a more permissive, nonassertive, un-authoritative style found in many classrooms run by

Caucasian female teachers. For these students, a soft spoken, non-directive manner may be perceived as non-direct and nonassertive. This may suggest a lack of authority to African American youth (Baumrind, 1967; Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Mandara, 2006).

In addition, the school cultures tend to be centered on communicative, instructional, and curriculum-related material, which is often not aligned with Afro-centric cultural elements. One study investigated how teachers' misunderstandings of students' cultural behavior impacted placement and referrals to the special education program. As Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) indicated in their seminal work on cultural, misunderstanding and teachers' perceptions stated that stylized movement was one of the dimensions of African American culture.

One example of stylized movement is a certain walking style called a stroll. The stroll used by some African American males was characterized as "a deliberately swaggered or bent posture, with the head held slightly tilted to the side, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend" (Neal et al., 2003, p. 50). Neal and his colleagues initiated a study to determine if the stroll walking style of African American males influenced teachers' perceptions of the students' academic capabilities, their propensity for aggression, and their need for special education assistance. Results indicated that teachers perceived students who walked in a stroll manner as "lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special education services" (Neal et al., 2003, p. 50).

Cultural Learning Factors

When learning occurs in the context of culture, the opportunities to learn are maximized because different learning styles are employed and the students' different learning expectations are satisfied. Research suggested a close relationship between learning styles and cultural background (Katalin, 2001). African American students have their achievement tied to oral experiences and relationships between persons (Katalin, 2001). Teachers should integrate cooperative learning and role-playing, and have various provisions for completion of assignments. Assigning research projects to students where the focus is on issues applying to a particular cultural group is also significant in bringing the context of culture to learning (Hollins, 1996). The principles of culturally relevant teaching overlap by including culture in the context of learning; learning-centered interaction is enhanced, as are positive perspectives on the families of African American students. The relationship of communication to culture and learning cannot be overemphasized because these variables are at the core of the educational processes (Gallien et al., 2005).

Stereotype Threat

A phenomenon known as the stereotype threat, which impacts the way teachers view students and the way students view themselves, is found in literature. Stereotype threat influenced teachers' low-achievement expectations for poor and minority students. Teachers' lower expectations for minority students are based upon perceptions of the students' performance rather than the students' potential to perform (Kober, 2001). Children live up or down to teachers' expectations. Teachers in urban schools say that maintaining high expectations for students in poverty-ridden environments is critical.

Feeling sorry for students because of their environment, and subsequently lowering demands, does a disservice to the students (Diffily & Perkins, 2002).

Research indicated that the burden of stereotypes plays a pivotal role in the achievement gap. Stereotype threat is stress caused by fear that a person's own behavior might confirm a negative stereotype about a specific group or race (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Ferguson, 1998). Specifically, African American males are affected by the negative stereotypes and perceptions about them found in our culture. African American male youth "are often described using disparaging terms such as dysfunctional, lazy, uneducable, or dangerous" (Gibbs, 1998; Kunjufu, 2001; Mincy, 1994; Strayhorn, 2008).

Cohen et al. (2006) further postulated that ethnic minority students, on average, experience higher levels of stress in school because they are cognizant that if they happen to do poorly, it would confirm the negative stereotype about the intellectual ability regarding their race. Another ramification of the stereotype threat is that some students would rather be seen as lazy because they did not thoroughly complete an assignment as opposed to being labeled as unintelligent for having completed an assignment that was incorrect.

African American Males and Academic Under Achievement

African American male students' academic challenges are not new. For decades African American male students in elementary and secondary schools have been more likely than any of their counterparts to be suspended or expelled from school; to be placed in special education classes; and to be absent from honors and advanced placement courses, and to drop out of school prior to graduation (Noguera, 1997, 2003a,

2003b; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Many African American male students enter higher education institutions after having spent much, if not all, of their academic careers in environments that Harmon and Ford (2010) characterize as *hostile*—“environments that are not designed for and do not adapt, validate, or channel the ways these male children think, speak or behave into constructive learning and developmental experiences and skills” (p. 13).

Much research has addressed factors contributing to the ever increasing gap between the achievement scores of white and black students. The unique challenges of raising the achievement of African American male students have been categorized into school, family, community, and cultural problems (Roach, 2000). Societal problems have included beliefs, practices, and conditions that negatively influence African American male students’ educational experiences, including social justice and inequalities and “the lure of the streets” (Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 7). School factors contributing to achievement gaps include limited participation of students of color in rigorous courses; less qualified or experienced teachers in the classrooms of students of color; teachers’ low expectations of students of color; resource disparities between high-minority schools and other schools; and school climates in high-minority schools that are not conducive to learning (Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 7).

Still other suggested explanations for African American males’ lagging achievement scores are due to a decline in leisurely reading among African American males and a possibly related increase in the popularity of hip-hop music; and the possibility that young African American males are more attracted to careers in sports or

music than to academic pursuits (Noguera, 2003; Palmer & Maramba, 2009; Roach, 2001).

According to Cuyjet (1997), in higher education a large percentage of the group of black men who enroll in college are not prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education; due to factors such as “attending academically poorer elementary and secondary schools, lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement, peer pressure; disdain with personal educational accomplishments and education as an outcome, financial hardships, limited educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers owing to racism” (p. 6-7).

Underachievement of black students cannot be explained with school, societal and economic background factors. The black middle class students present something of a challenge for researchers in that even black middle class and upper middle class students’ achievement scores and grade-point averages lag behind those of their White middle class counterparts (Jencks & Philips, 1998; Noguera, 2003; Steele, 1997). This could leave the observer to assume that beyond class, some type of racial component affects the scores of Black students (Steele, 1999).

Steele’s (1997) research, which examines the underachievement of middle and upper middle class, and academically well-prepared Black students, identifies psychological factors causing racial anxiety, which may contribute to these students’ underperformance. One such factor, he asserts, is stereotype threat, defined as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999, ¶ 10) can impede the academic performance of Black students by placing the burden of overcoming racial

stereotypes. Students who do not belong to groups that are negatively stereotyped in similar ways to Black students do not have worry about this problem.

Additionally, African American male students in particular may be plagued by what Lee (1996, as cited in Cuyjet, 1997) called development disadvantage, defined as “those social, cultural, and economic forces that combine to keep Black men from attaining traditional masculine roles and that, therefore, prevent them from mastering crucial developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence that, in turn, negatively affect their social, academic, and career successes later in life” (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 7). Having to deal with competing definitions of masculinity is a uniquely difficult challenge for young African American males. These young men are forced into choosing between seemingly competing definitions of manhood. Making the *wrong* decision may result in problems with socialization and acceptance in mainstream society in general and in educational settings in particular.

Psychological or Motivational Factors

Teachers and Academic Achievement

Teachers play an important role in the true, viable, authentic, and healthy development of their students (Erickson, 1968). Teachers’ roles include personal and academic encouragement as they communicate to the student that their talents and potential have been noticed and are valuable (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005). Teachers must become supporters, sanctioning adolescents’ capabilities encouraging students’ efforts, while identifying and searching out what they do well (Ames & Archer, 1988; Hamman & Hendricks, 2005).

According to Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998), supporting students might be easy to do with high achieving students but might propose a challenge to low-achieving disengaged students. Erickson (1968) supported the notion that teachers should avoid making negative judgments about low achieving, disengaged adolescent students, who are seeking identity. Negative judgments from teachers have the potential to destroy academic initiative and alienate adolescents (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005).

Brophy (1983) contended that positive and negative teacher expectations of students could have a marked influence on student achievement. Teachers' expectations not only affect the way they treat students, but teacher expectations strongly affect the academic self-image and the scholastic performance of students (Denbo, 1986).

According to Hamilton, Sherman, and Ruvolo (1990), many commonly held views on student achievement originate from stereotypes about a certain group. According to Reyna (2000), stereotyping creates internal barriers to success, by propagating self-doubt, hopelessness about the future, and loss of confidence.

Research indicates that teachers accept academic underachievement of minority students as the norm. In so doing, they underestimate students' academic potential. Parents, in many cases, do not provide reinforcement of the connection between academic success and future success as adults. Even when minority students are driven to succeed, they still have to overcome other cultural aspects such as peer culture that is unfriendly to school and learning. This negative social pressure, combined with a culture of low expectations, means that minority students become poor academic achievers (Wilson, 2003).

High Expectations

When teachers, parents, and administrators expect students to achieve consistently to meet high standards, students try to live up to these expectations. When high standards are communicated effectively, students become intrinsically motivated and develop a healthy self-concept (Hollins, 1996). The John D. O'Bryan School of Mathematics and Science High School offered advanced placement (AP) calculus to 29 students who had never scored 3 or higher on the AP exam. In partnership with the Department of Mathematics and School of Education at Northeastern University, the school created a comprehensive curriculum that included Algebra 1 for Grade 8 students, tutoring for students, coaching for teachers, and a summer calculus preparation program on the Northeastern University campus. Students who took the AP calculus exam earned a score of 3 or higher. The following year, 39 students enrolled in the AP Calculus Program (Wilson, 2003). This program supported the importance of expectations for students. Even though the students were performing poorly in calculus, the teachers and administrators held high expectations, providing students with the motivation to work hard and eventually do well on the AP calculus exams.

Parental Involvement

In addition to factors related directly to the individual student, parental involvement also impacts a child's education and achievement. Toldson et al. (2006) and his colleagues found that parent-child interactions were the most robust predictors of African American adolescent success. Mandara's (2006) article indicated that when African American parents are involved actively in the sons' academic efforts by monitoring homework as well as other academic pursuits, limiting nonproductive, and

destructive activities (e.g., television, radio, and video games), and creating a constant and positive dialogue with the teachers and school officials, they increased the odds of their son succeeding in school (Mandara, 2006).

However, certain barriers could hinder parental involvement. There could be an attitude of mistrust between parents and school staff and/or parents' work schedules or lack of transportation may not facilitate involvement in school decision-making or school activities. Additionally, parents might be uncertain about the role in the children's education, or they simply might not understand how to work effectively with their children. These barriers to parental involvement can be overcome when parents and school staff work together (Martinez, 2004).

Positive Role Models

Children need adult mentors, to serve as role models worthy of respect and admiration (Brown et al., 2007). Doing one's best and overcoming extraordinary obstacles is not defined by color, gender, or position in life. Rather, ordinary people can be role models, setting positive examples (Brown et al., 2007). Access to role models, as sources of information and normative reinforcement, is considered an important aspect of social capital. As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) stated, "Much of the socialization for youth occurs through the process of role modeling—observing, evaluating, emulating and filing away for later use the behavior, examples, and values of others" (p. 312). Role models accessed through religious involvement provide "examples of life practices shaped by religious moral orders that constructively influence the lives of youth, and offer positive relationships that youth may be invested in preserving through their own normatively approved living" (Smith, 2003, p. 22).

Positive role models in the church include youths and their young peers who serve as sources of information and as sources of normative reinforcement. Their very presence may “crowd out” (Muller & Ellison, 2001, p. 160) negative influences. As Martina (2005) noted, youth peers are often the least intimidating and, therefore, the most accessible institutional agents—“those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly or to negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 116-117), such as information about school programs, academic tutoring and mentoring, college admission, and assistance with career decision-making for other youths.

Resilience and Academic Success

In addition to the family’s rules, resilient children and high achievers often conform to school rules and practices in order to achieve success. The literature is consistent in identifying traits that resilient, high achieving students possess. These students usually have positive personal relationships and are actively engaged in the community and school, exhibit wellness, superior conduct, the ability to solve problems, and have a sense of purpose (Brown et al., 2007).

The above traits and characteristics are important, but one stands out in the literature as being consistent throughout the studies. One of the most widely reported predictors of resilience is the presence of a positive or close relationship with either a caring adult and/or parental figure. This relationship correlates to that of positive outcomes for children facing life stresses (Kenny et al., 2002).

Some of the characteristics associated with resilience in high achieving students include academic success, positive personal relationships, active engagement in the

community and school, wellness, superior conduct, problem solving skills and a sense of purpose (Brown et al., 2007). Additional explanations for explaining resilience in students include presence of a supportive, nurturing family and home environment, as well as positive interactions and relationships with concerned educators and other adults.

Gayles (2005) conducted a study of three high school students from the least affluent high school in Florida. His research involved finding the reasons why some African-American students exhibit resilience despite living in dismal environments. Two themes emerged regarding resilient youth: they were confident that their academic achievement would enable them to level the playing field with others in society, home, and community reference points were not perceived as hindrances. Resilient youth felt that because they started off with nothing, it made them want to break out of their current class status (Gayles, 2005). They understood the connection between the importance of getting good grades and reaping the benefits later. These students were able to separate their achievement from their social status and as a result did not experience negative social consequences. These students believed their behavior would help to transform their futures.

Self-efficacy and Academic Success

Self-efficacy provides the groundwork for all motivators and guides human behavior. Thus, individuals' self-efficacy influences their thought processes, motivation, perseverance in times of adversity, quality of emotional wellbeing, and decision-making skills (Bandura, 1997; Bandura et al., 2001). Bandura et al. (2001) explored how self-efficacy beliefs shape career aspirations and found that children with high degrees of academic efficacy achieve academic goals and have a strong efficacy for career fields in

science, education, and medicine, which require advanced educational development. They also determined that when a child demonstrates academic efficacy, it has the greatest impact on the child's career efficacy. Furthermore, Barak's (1981) work on vocational interests complemented Bandura et al.'s (2001) findings on how self-efficacy influenced career aspirations. Barak found that better understanding of how people perceive their ability to fulfill certain job requirements could lead to more understanding of how individuals set career goals.

Protective Factors and Academic Success

Many African-American adolescent students living in poverty do succeed academically. Some studies have been conducted to show the differences between high and low achieving students from similar backgrounds (Fear et al., 1998). Not all adolescents within urban communities share the same experiences. The students that succeeded exhibited a positive, rather than a negative, outlook, which helps them develop a healthy, positive, psychological well-being. These youths were able to deal with problems more effectively by having a good sense of humor, talking to their parents or siblings about what bothered them, and going along with parent requests (Fear et al., 1998).

Protective factors are traits that help people facilitate positive outcomes for at-risk students (Brown et al., 1991). These factors may include personal or social control (e.g., religious beliefs, parental monitoring), involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., church), and commitment to conventional institutions. Additionally, protective factors could have a direct impact on developmental outcomes, and could act as a buffer between these outcomes (Murray & Brody, 1999). Protective factors found in resilient

children include coping efforts, warm, supportive social environments, high self-esteem and self-control, internal locus of control, and the presence of educational and occupational opportunities (Brown, 2006). Colbert et al. (2005) identified other factors which include supportive adults, positive peer relationships, enrollment in honors classes, participation in extracurricular activities, a strong sense of self-confidence, and effective coping skills for dealing with negative aspects of home and school.

Richman and Bowen (1997) created a framework to help provide protective conditions for at-risk students, which include stability, load balance, and participation. Stability means the presence of close, stable, and caring relationships with individuals such as parents, friends and teachers. Load balance is concerned with the link between environmental demands and the student' capabilities, while participation provides chances for meaningful involvement in family, school, and community environments (Richman & Bowen, 1997).

Brown (2007) stated that research on risk and resilience identifies student traits, family, social and environmental circumstances as buffering a child from risk and serving as targets for strength-based intervention. These protective factors, found in children that experience risk, distinguish students who are likely to have positive outcomes from those that are negatively affected.

Spiritual Beliefs

Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with fully 87% of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's

Forum on Religion & Public Life. Latinos also report affiliating with a religion at a similarly high rate of 85%; among the public overall, 83% are affiliated with a religion.

African Americans attend a high number of religious activities such as, church services, prayer meetings, and Bible study. In addition, African Americans have a higher number of personal religious commitments in comparison to Whites (Johnson, Elbert-Avila & Tulsy, 2005). Attending church services connects African Americans with their past and provides them with a sense of group identity, community affiliation, and racial socialization for their children (Brega & Coleman, 1999). Their spiritual beliefs and practices serve as a source of expression, meaning, refuge, and provide a framework for understanding and overcoming oppression, mistreatment, racism, and economic conditions (Johnson, Elbert-Avila, & Tulsy, 2005).

Religious Commitment

Worthington (1988) defined religious commitment as the degree to which a person adheres to religious values, beliefs, and practices and uses them in daily living. He theorized that a highly religious person evaluates the world through religious schemas and integrates religion into life experiences. Religious commitment has been operationalized and measured in several ways, including membership in religious organizations, non-membership in religious organizations, the degree of participation in religious activities (e.g. frequency of attending church), the attitudes and importance of religious experience, and belief in traditional religious creeds (Hill & Hood, 1999).

In his study of the effects of religious commitment on academic achievement, Jaynes (2003a) found that religiously committed urban Grade 12 students, from all ethnic backgrounds investigated, performed better on a higher number of academic measures

than their less religious counterparts. The results of this study support the argument that attending religious schools is associated with higher levels of academic achievement among low-SES students. The studies from which this meta-analysis derived, generally took into consideration gender, race, and various other factors, including parental involvement and the extent to which a program of the school was demanding. His recommendations included a call for future research efforts to consider the effects of religion at the individual student level.

In a recent study by Harper (2012), during which he interviewed 219 African American men regarding interventions that enhanced their educational experiences, the following findings were presented. Participants represented 42 colleges throughout the US, including HBCUs, liberal arts colleges, and private universities and colleges. Qualitative interviews with participants showed that nearly all were Christians; three were Muslims. They ranged from ordained ministers, to sons of pastors, choir members and bible study leaders. The majority of achievers attended church during their time in college, though doing so was difficult due to other campus leadership commitments.

While their religious engagement sometimes wavered, most participants said they prayed often and had become noticeably more spiritual in college. One of the most interesting findings in the study pertains to attribution for their success. Several achievers had what I have termed a *spiritual locus of control*, meaning they believed their lives, academic accomplishments, and destinies were predetermined by God. On the one hand, they recognized that certain choices they made (for example, studying instead of partying all weekend) influenced their outcomes. Others attributed their success to God's favor and plan for their lives, parents, mentors, and influential others whom had positively

affected their college success. Most, without exception, spoke extensively about God “working things out,” “ordering their steps,” and “directing their paths.” They credited God for their high GPAs, scholarships and honors, leadership positions to which they had been elected, and the unusual opportunities they had been afforded.

Impact of Religious Schools

Few would argue that a sense of community is important in any school, including Christian schools. The construct is related closely to research by Glynn (1981) and Royal and Rossi (1997) who argued that common goals and values are essential elements of community, and by Strike (2004) who theorized that normation (that is, the willingness of students to internalize group-shared expectations) is an important aspect of a learning community. Students attending a Christian school might also be expected to hold an amount of religious commitment that fluctuates or strengthens as Christian students mature and move into the upper grades.

Another possibility is that religious schools require students to do more homework (Mentzer 1988). Other researchers believe that religious schools are less likely to have violence or threats of violence, which can often serve as major distractions for students trying to learn (Hudolin 1994; Irvine, & Foster 1996). Still other social scientists believe that a higher level of racial harmony exists at religious schools because of the common thread of faith and Christian brotherhood (Irvine & Foster 1996). Still, some social scientists suggested that religious schools are likely to have modes of discipline that make them more prone to success (Morris 1994; Sander 1996).

A final reason could be family factors or a broader sense of what Coleman described as social capital, which results from both family-based and community-based

sources (Coleman 1988; Coleman & Hoffer 1987). Educators, sociologists, and psychologists have been quick to point out that religious people are more likely to remain in intact families, become engaged in their children's education, and provide intact parental structure and community that encourage an atmosphere of morality and self-discipline (Jeynes, 2003a, 2003b, 2007). The fact that religious schools promote Christian, Jewish, or other form of devotion might yield positive results (Irvine & Foster 1996).

Religious Commitment and Academic Performance

Research continually demonstrates a strong positive correlation between religion and academic achievement (Brown & Gary 1991; Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2001; Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote 2002; Jeynes, 2003). A study by Jeynes (2003) found that religiously committed urban children performed better on academic measures than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Regnerus (2000) proposed and tested a multilevel model of involvement in church activities and schooling success among metropolitan U.S. public high school sophomores. He found that participation in church activities heightened educational expectations and achievement.

Additionally, he found that more intensely religious students scored higher on standardized tests in mathematics and reading, irrespective of economic factors, including social class. However, his hypothesis that the power of church involvement in predicting these outcomes would be greatest for students in poorer neighborhoods, was unsupported by empirical evidence. Regnerus and Elder (2003) subsequently found that, though adolescents in low-income neighborhoods do not differ in their church attendance

patterns from their peers in higher-income areas, their religious involvement is more likely to contribute to their academic progress than it is among youth in higher income neighborhoods. This finding held even with adjustments for key risk and protective factors.

Considering factors behind the relationship between religious involvement and educational outcomes, additional research is being conducted to identify the potential role social capital played. Incorporating social capital into their analysis, Muller and Ellison (2001) found adolescents' religious involvement to be consistently and positively associated with various forms of academic progress. While the estimated effects of religious involvement on academic progress were explained largely by family and community, social capital and religious involvement remained modestly but significantly linked with desirable outcomes, even when controlling for social capital and students' background.

Toldson et al. (2006) examined the potential role of social capital and extracurricular participation in mediating the relationship between religious participation and academic achievement, dropping out of high school, and attachment to school. Results indicated that religious attendance promotes intergenerational closure, extracurricular participation, and access to educational resources and normative reinforcement through friendship networks. However, those intervening variables accounted for only a small part of adolescent religious participation's influence on educational outcomes, indicating that the mechanisms behind the significant and positive relationship between religious involvement and successful educational outcomes need to be further explored and explained.

Using a representative sample of urban high school seniors, Barrett (2009) found religious involvement to relate significantly and positively with educational outcomes. Like Muller and Ellison (2001), Barrett hypothesized that social capital would ultimately explain and mediate much of the salutary influence of religious involvement on adolescent socialization. While this was the case for White students in the sample (controlling for social capital as well as key demographic variables such as gender and socioeconomic status wiped out the statistical significance of religious involvement as a predictor of positive educational outcomes among them), the results among Black students in the sample were very different.

Although some of the relationship between religious involvement and educational outcomes for Black students was explained by social capital and other demographic factors, religious involvement remained the most effective predictor of positive educational outcomes. Despite evidence that religious involvement appears to act as an important source of access to educationally instrumental social capital for these students to a much greater degree than it does for their White counterparts, there are other mechanisms not strictly related to social capital by which religious involvement appears to promote positive educational outcomes among Black students in the sample (Barrett, 2009).

Social scientists have looked at the influence of religious commitment, religious schools, and family structure on educational outcomes of students of color (Jeynes 1999), 2003b). A variety of analytic approaches such as meta-analysis and qualitative techniques have found a consistent positive relationship between variables such as religious commitment, Christian schooling, an intact parental family structure, and school

success (Jeynes, 2002). These trends exist specifically for religious students of color (defined by both intrinsic and extrinsic measures). Religious students of color outperform their counterparts who are less religious (Jeynes 1999, 2003b). Considering the impact that religious and family variables have on people's lives, a dearth of studies have examined the influence of these factors on the achievement gap (Jeynes 1999, 2002, 2003b).

A study entitled *The Impact of Religion, Intact Families and the Achievement Gap* (Jeynes, 2007) examined why the achievement gap between minority and majority students is less in religious, mostly Christian schools, than in public schools. The research examined social scientists views of the influence of religious commitment, religious schools, and family structure on educational outcome of students of color. Data were collected from the National Analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and meta-analysis supported by statistical analysis; data sets, and qualitative techniques were used to draw conclusions.

Results indicated a consistent, positive relationship between religious commitment, Christian schooling, intact parental structure, and student achievement, especially for children of color. Implications of this study indicate that attending religious schools, due to factors such as school atmosphere, racial harmony, level of violence, school discipline, and amount of homework, positively impact student achievement (Jeynes, 2007).

A study, *School, Community and Church Activities: Relationship to Academic Achievement of Low-income African American Early Adolescents in the Rural Deep South* (Irvin, Farmer, Leung, Thompson, Hutchins, 2010), sought to identify the

relationship of participation in school, community, and church activities to academic achievement. Data collection involved examining grades of Black youth in low-income communities. Data were examined for middle school Grades 7 and 8 (male and female). Teacher reports were used to gather interpersonal competence or social adjustment of students. Student reports were used to gather school, community, and church activities. Parents provided socioeconomic information and family involvement. The study concluded male and female Black students in school and church activities had higher achievement and interpersonal competence (Irvin et al., 2010). It was noted that gender might have skewed results since females tend to participate in more church activities than males. However, participation in church activities was predictive of achievement *beyond* school activities.

Church is a source of support for impoverished Black youth in rural areas, male and female. Numerous researchers have demonstrated a strong positive correlation between religion and academic achievement, including Glasser and Sacerdote (2001). Findings indicated that religiously committed urban students scored higher in more academic areas than their less religious counterparts, irrespective of social class (Jeynes, 2003). When schools work collaboratively with churches, social, and civic organizations to provide role models, mentors and tutors, students show social, emotional, and academic improvement (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

The need for additional study is evident. There is a gap in the research of the existence of academically high achieving, economically challenged African American males (Thompson & Lewis, 2005). Additionally there is a limited body of scholarship

that portrays the lives of African American young men who beat the odds and excel academically (Simons, 2003).

Summary

Researchers have introduced many causes for minority male underachievement and countless theories have been proposed. Examples include, historical influences, lack of positive inclusion of Blacks in school curriculum, stereotypes, low teacher and student expectations, learning styles, as well as socioeconomic and sociocultural factors. In addition, parental involvement, peer pressure, discriminatory treatment, and a litany of other factors have been proposed as causes of poor academic performance by minority students, and especially African American males. Much of the research has been directed toward the causes of this problem; however, the researcher has chosen to examine successful Black college males to determine what factors have contributed to their academic success.

Variables associated with positive academic achievement of minority students have included resilience, self-efficacy, protective factors, positive parental involvement and support, positive role models and spirituality, and religious commitment. This research was designed to determine, from the perspective of the successful African American male student, if and how, religious commitment along with numerous additional factors have impacted their academic success.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides information regarding the methodology employed to complete this study. Specifically, it includes (a) introduction, (b) research questions, (c) research methods, (d) participants, (e) context, (f) instrumentation, (g) data collection (h) data analysis (i) data reporting and (j) summary. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of religious commitment, motivation, and other factors on academic achievement of African American male college age students. Poor academic achievement continues to plague the educational community.

Minority students, and especially African American students, are populations for whom there is an increasing level of concern. One goal of education is to enable students to become productive citizens. Consequences of marginally educating students are dire for multiple segments of society. Increasing prison populations, higher crime rates and poor employment outlooks are just a few of the problems associated with poor academic achievement. Numerous studies concentrate on poor academic performance of minority students, especially African American males. However, there is a lack of information on factors that positively impact the academic achievement of this population of students, especially successful college age students. This study is intended to add to the limited body of information regarding academically successful students in this fragile population.

Thereby, this study is important in providing information to teachers, parents, school administrators, college level stake holders, legislators as well as business and

community representatives regarding what influences positively impact academic achievement of African American male college students, from their perspective.

Research Questions

This study addressed one overarching research question and two sub-questions. How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?
2. How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have influenced their academic achievement?

Research Methods

A pragmatic framework was used for this study. The pragmatic paradigm places "the research problem" as central and applies all approaches to understanding the problem (Creswell, 2003, p. 11). The pragmatic paradigm is informed by both quantitative and qualitative data. It includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods; inductive and deductive reasoning and considers points of view from both research methods. Values and external reality are considered in interpretation of the data, while the researcher is able to choose explanations that best produce desired results (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

This mixed-method, pragmatic study collected quantitative data through two separate instruments: RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory and a researcher created demographic data survey. Qualitative data were collected through researcher led focus group interviews designed to elicit participants' views regarding factors that have

impacted their academic achievement. The researcher conducted interviews with student participants to elicit their perceptions, through the use of semi-structured interviews, which explored the impact of religious commitment and other influences on their academic achievement. This method of data acquisition allowed the researcher an efficient means to ascertain various perspectives on a common topic from key participants (Glesne, 2006).

Interviews were an appropriate research tool because they yield information regarding how new situations evolve from prior events, experiences, and decisions. Interviews with matriculating college students yielded views from students to provide stakeholders in the educational environment with information to influence decisions made at various levels to improve academic success of all students.

The interview is used as “a principal research tool” for information gathering by many social scientists, including historians, sociologists, political scientists, and educators (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 3). Qualitative interviewing is an academic and practical tool which allowed the researcher “to share the world of others to find out what is going on, why people do what they do, and how they understand their worlds” (p. 5).

Interviewing uses conversational skills of participants and researcher, however, qualitative interviews are different from ordinary conversation in that the interview is utilized as a research tool, with the intent of “learning about people’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences” (p. 2.). When used in qualitative research, interviewing provides the researcher the opportunity to explore what cannot be seen and to consider alternative explanations for what is seen (Glesne, 1999). Interviewing individuals enabled this

researcher to explore a topic from the perspective of the individuals being interviewed, and provided a means to learn about what others think and feel (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The aim of the present research was to explore participants' perceptions about the influences that contributed to their academic success. The term academic success refers to successful completion of high school and positive academic success in an institution of higher learning. The study design allowed data collection via surveys that made up the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase consisted of researcher conducted focus groups. This phase provided a rich data source for the research study. Participation in the student focus groups was voluntary. Focus group discussions occurred in a one-time setting mutually agreed upon and convenient to study participants and the researcher.

Participants

Research participants consisted of college age African American male students enrolled in a university located in the southeastern part of the United States. Study participants were selected using a purposive, convenience sampling methodology. A total of 124 students completed surveys through freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior classes by professors who were willing to participate in this project, and who administered the survey. Surveys were collected from the professors and delivered to the researcher. A sample (N = 42) was taken from 124 students who completed the survey. This number was based upon the number of participants who identified themselves as African American males. Focus discussion groups were composed based on availability of African American males who were willing to participate in this process. Students understood that participation was voluntary and they signed an agreement to that effect.

Context

The study site for this study was a 4-year university located in the southeastern region of the United States. According to its own description, this university is devoted to academic distinction in teaching, scholarship, and service. Its hallmark is a culture of bridging theory and practice, expanding the learning environment beyond the classroom, and promoting student growth and life success. Additionally, this site avails itself of nationally accredited academic programs in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional studies. It enrolls a diverse population and prepares its undergraduate and graduate students for leadership and service as world citizens. The University takes pride in its faculty, which is dedicated to excellence in teaching and the development of a learning environment providing for a free exchange of ideas, high academic expectations, and individual responsibility for academic achievement. Its student-centered environment is enhanced by technology, transcultural experiences, private and public partnerships, and stewardship of a safe residential campus recognized for its natural beauty.

Finally, the university fosters access to its educational programs, provides a comprehensive and fulfilling university experience, and enhances quality of life in the region through collaborative relationships supporting education, health care and human services, cultural experiences, scientific and technological advancement, athletics, and regional development (University website, 2013).

Instrumentation

Quantitative Data Instrument

The Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10); a Likert-scale instrument, which identifies ones' level of religious commitment, was used to collect information regarding religious commitment (Appendix D). The instrument poses 10 questions, whose responses are valued between 1 and 5. Possible scores range between 0 and 50. (Appendix D). Permission to use the RCI-10 was granted by its author (Appendix E). The authors reported the development of the Religious Commitment Inventory--10 (RCI-10), used in 6 studies. Sample sizes were 155, 132, and 150 college students; 240 Christian church-attending married adults; 468 undergraduates including (among others) Buddhists ($n= 52$), Muslims ($n=12$), Hindus ($n=10$), and nonreligious ($n= 117$); and 217 clients and 52 counselors in a secular, or 1 of 6 religious counseling agencies. Scores on the RCI-10 had strong estimated internal consistency, 3-week and 5-month test-retest reliability, construct validity, and discriminant validity (PsycINFO Database Record, 2010). Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated using scores on the full-scale RCI-10 and each subscale for the first administration and the second administration. The 3-week test-retest reliability coefficients for the full-scale RCI-10, Intrapersonal Religious Commitment, and Interpersonal Religious Commitment were .87, .86, and .83, respectively.

The creators of the RCI-10 suggested, by using the most extreme scores within their specified ranges, that the normative mean for a general sample of United States adults is a less moderately religious score of 26 with a SD of 12. Thus, a full-scale RCI-10 score of 38 or higher would justify considering a person to be highly religious (Worthington et al., 2003). The quantitative survey instrument, RCI-10, Religious

Commitment Inventory, was administered by university faculty members who agreed to participate in the process, to 142 students attending a liberal arts university in the southeastern United States.

Additional quantitative data were collected through a researcher designed demographic data collection survey, which contained questions regarding age, student status, religious affiliation and self-reported grade-point average (GPA's). Additional data was entered based upon RCI-10 total scores. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Studies (SPSS) to determine if there was a relationship between religious commitment and academic achievement.

Qualitative Data Instrument

In order to collect qualitative data, the researcher, in consultation with the methodologist, developed four interview questions, which were posed to participants during focus group sessions. The focus group interviews were designed to reveal participant perceptions about factors impacting their academic success. No question allowed for a simple *yes* or *no* response; however each question was designed to elicit a full, context rich descriptive response. The researcher, personally, facilitated each interview session. Participant responses were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher made observational notes during the interview process. Each focus group interview lasted between 30-45 minutes and occurred in a natural setting, on the campus of the research site, scheduled at the convenience of the participants and the researcher.

Prior to conducting focus group sessions, participants were provided a copy of the IRB approved letter of informed consent that explained the purpose of the study and

specified that participation was strictly voluntary. The letter also indicated that the student could end participation at any time for any reason without penalty.

Data Collection

Surveys were administered to freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes by various professors who agreed to participate by allowing their students to respond to the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) instrument and to the researcher-designed demographic survey. Professors distributed surveys to willing student participants. They monitored the process, collected the surveys and mailed them to the researcher. A total of 124 students completed surveys through various university classes. A sample ($N = 42$) was taken from the 124 students who completed the survey. This number was based upon the number of participants who identified themselves as African American males.

The researcher contacted the Multicultural Student Center Director to get his assistance in finding African American male students who were willing to participate in the research project. A total of 10 students agreed. Focus discussion groups were composed based by identifying members of the target population and their availability to meet with the researcher on the identified date. The student schedules, interview room location and times were arranged by the Center Director and provided to the researcher when she arrived on campus; all interviews occurred on the same day. Participants' academic classification ranged from freshman to senior. Pre-determined questions, agreed upon with the help of the methodologist, guided the group discussions (Appendix A), which were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The interview protocol allowed the researcher to pose questions which addressed influences associated with the students'

academic achievement. Students were given time to respond to each question in their own ways. With full consent and knowledge of participants, all focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for later review by the researcher who identified themes used in the final qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Studies (SPSS) software to determine if a relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were derived from the quantitative data. The self-reported grade-point average data were compared with the RCI -10 religious commitment inventory score using the Pearson 2-tailed correlation to determine if there was a relationship between the grade-point average and religious commitment score.

Qualitative data analysis included a review of recorded transcripts of student responses to the four specific focus group questions. The researcher transcribed and analyzed all interview transcripts for recurring themes and patterns. This required reading transcripts and underlining recurring themes to questions based upon student responses. Responses such as parents, church members, teachers, older siblings, or teachers, for example were recorded as mentors, if the question asked, "What influences have made an impact on your academic achievement?" Similar themes were created, based upon the question and the responses. Participant response data were coded based upon similarity of participant responses about factors impacting academic success. In this study, the

researcher used an iterative process to develop themes, codes, and sub-codes. A narrative analysis was used to synthesize and summarize the collected data.

Reporting the Data

Analyzed demographic data and results of the RCI-10 Religious Commitment inventory along with other quantitative results are reported in tables with textual explanations of the analysis. Responses to qualitative research questions have been organized by theme and are reported in narrative format. All results are presented in Chapter 4.

Summary

This study addressed one overarching research question and two sub-questions. How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?
2. How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have influenced their academic achievement?

To answer these questions the researcher administered a 10 question Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10), a researcher created demographic data survey and facilitated focus groups with 10 students who volunteered to participate in this process. The Religious Commitment Inventory contained 10 five-point Likert-type scale questions to determine the level of students' agreement with questions regarding their religious

activities. A total of score of 38 on this inventory indicated that the student is highly religious; possible score ranges are 0-50. The demographic survey provided data regarding the students' ages, year in school, religious affiliation, race, and sex. The level of religious commitment, the independent variable was compared to the self-reported grade-point average, the dependent variable, in order to determine if a relationship existed between them. Focus group interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher to identify common themes and to collect additional information regarding the students' perceptions of factors that have influenced their academic achievement. These data were used to answer the research sub-questions based on common or recurring themes.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between religious commitment and academic grade-point average of African American male college students. The study also sought to identify specific influences that have impacted the participants' academic success. This pragmatic, mixed method study included participants' completion of a religious commitment survey and a demographic data survey as well as participation in interviews with the researcher.

Using this mixed methods pragmatic design, the researcher surveyed 124 college students. Quantitative data were collected through two survey instruments and follow-up qualitative data were collected during focus groups conducted by the researcher. Of the 124 students surveyed, 42 students identified themselves as African American males, the primary qualification for participation. As part of the qualitative phase, 10 of the 42 students were interviewed to determine their perceptions regarding the factors that impacted their academic achievement.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Studies (SPSS) software to determine if a relationship existed between religious commitment and academic achievement. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were derived from the quantitative data. The self-reported grade-point average data were compared with the RCI-10 religious commitment inventory score, using the Pearson 2-tailed correlation to determine if there was a relationship between the grade-point average and religious commitment score.

In addition, qualitative data collected by the researcher were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes in order answer the question, "How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have impacted their academic achievement?" Results from these analyses are reported in this chapter along with an overall summary.

Research Questions

This study addressed one overarching research question and two sub-questions. The overarching question asked, How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?
2. How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have influenced their academic achievement?

Research Design

A pragmatic framework design guided the flow of activities in this study. The design generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Using semi-structured interview questions, the impact of religious commitment and other factors on students' academic achievement were explored. The design allowed data collection via surveys and student focus group interviews. The focus groups provided a rich data source for the research study. Participation in the student focus groups was voluntary. Focus group discussions occurred in a one-time setting convenient to study participants and the researcher. The

RCI-10, Religious Commitment Inventory, is designed to indicate ones' level of religious commitment based upon 10 Likert-type scale questions, valued 1-5, to determine level of agreement with the specific question asked (Appendix D). Permission to use the RCI-10 was granted by its author (Appendix E).

Findings

Demographic Profile of Participants

Tables 1 through 8 provide results of quantitative data regarding name, age, academic status; religious affiliation; self-reported grade-point averages.

Table 1

Focus Group Participant Data

Pseudo-name	Age	GPA	Classification	Religion
Adam	18-20	C	Freshman	Baptist
Byron	18-20	B	Freshman	Baptist
Carl	18-20	C	Sophomore	Baptist
Donald	21-29	B	Junior	Methodist
Eric	18-20	A	Junior	None
Frederick	21-29	C	Senior	Baptist
Garland	21-29	C	Junior	Protestant
Harold	18-20	B	Sophomore	Methodist
Isaac	21-29	B	Senior	Baptist
Jerome	18-20	B	Sophomore	Baptist

Ten students participated in focus group discussions. The data above represents their pseudo-name, age range, self-reported grade-point average, classification and religion.

Table 2

Age Range of Student Participants

Age range	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid 18 – 20	32	76.2	76.2	76.2
No response	10	23.8	23.8	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Only 32 students responded to this question; making the valid percent for age of participants was 18-20, with 72.6% of participants identifying this age. The age range of other participants is unknown.

Table 3

Academic Status

Academic designation	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Freshman	6	14.3	14.6	14.3
Sophomore	14	33.3	34.1	48.7
Junior	15	35.7	36.6	85.3
Valid Senior	4	9.5	9.8	95.1
Other	2	4.8	4.9	100
Total	41	97.6	100.0	
Missing System	1	2.4		
Total	42	100.0		

Academic status choices ranged from freshman to senior, with “other,” as an option for students who may not fit into any of the other categories. There were 2 students (4.9%), selecting the “other” category. Freshmen represented 14.6% of the participants; sophomores represented 34.1% of the participants; juniors made up 36.6% of the participants while seniors made up 9.8% of the participants. Two students indicated other (4.8 %) and one student did not respond to the question (2.4%).

Table 4
Religious Affiliations of Participants

Religious Orientation	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Catholic	2	4.8	5.4	5.4
Protestant	3	7.1	8.1	13.5
Baptist	20	47.6	54.1	67.6
Valid Methodist	3	7.1	8.1	75.7
None	7	16.7	18.9	94.6
Christian	2	4.8	5.4	100.0
Total	37	88.1	100.0	
Missing System	5	11.9		
Total	42	100.0		

Participants were asked to choose from a selected category of religious affiliation or to indicate a religious preference. Table 4 indicates the religious affiliation selections. Baptist was the most frequently selected category representing 20 (47.6%) of the participants. Two students indicated they were Christian and five students (11.9%) did not indicate a religious preference. The majority of students, 30 (75.7%), however, did indicate a religious affiliation, making the valid response percent 75.7. Almost 1/3 28+ % of respondents either left the answer blank or did not respond.

Table 5

Self-Reported Grade-Point Average

GPA	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
A	11	26.2	26.2	26.2
B	23	54.8	54.8	81.0
C	8	19.0	19.0	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Students selected from letter A – F to indicate their most recent grade-point average. Eleven ($n = 11$) students selected their average GPA as A. The majority of the students 23 ($n = 23$) indicated B as their average overall GPA, eight ($n = 8$) indicated C as their average GPA. No student indicated a grade-point average of less than C, indicating that all participants would be considered academically successful.

Table 6

RCI-10 Questions Mean Scores

Question	Initial	Mean Score
Religion is important to me because it answers questions about my life.	1.000	3.74
My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.	1.000	3.62
It is important to spend time in private religious thought.	1.000	3.46
I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation.	1.000	3.45
Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in my life.	1.000	3.38
I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.	1.000	3.32
I enjoy working in activities of my religious affiliation.	1.000	3.13
I make financial contributions to my religious organization.	1.000	2.93
I often read books and magazines about my faith.	1.000	2.29
I keep well informed about my local religious group and have some influence.	1.000	2.24

Religious Commitment Inventory RCI-10 questions ordered from greatest mean response to least mean response. Possible responses ranged from 1-5.

Table 7

*Correlations-Religious Commitment/GPA***Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Religious Commitment	31.19	10.336	42
Report your most recent GPA	3.07	.677	42

Table 7 shows the mean scores for the 42 participants who completed the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory and reported their grade-point average. The mean religious commitment score is 31.19 with a standard deviation of 10.336 and the mean grade-point average is 3.07 with a standard deviation of .677.

Table 8
Pearson Correlation GPA-Religious Commitment

Pearson Correlations		Religious Commitment	Report your most recent GPA
Religious Commitment	Pearson Correlation	1	-.117
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.462
	N	42	42
Report your most recent GPA	Pearson Correlation	-.117	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.462	
	N	42	42

Table 8 shows the Pearson correlations between the religious commitment scores and the students' self-reported grade-point average. These data indicate a negative correlation between grade-point average (GPA) and religious commitment among this population. Religious commitment scores for this population were above the US average of 26 with a standard deviation of 10.336. Sample ($n = 10$) size may have been factor in these findings, making generalizing difficult for this particular population. The average score for 42 participants was 31.19 for total religious commitment. This data was based upon the students' completion of the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory. The creators of the RCI-10 suggested, by using the most extreme scores within the specified ranges that the normative mean for a general sample adults of the United States is 26 with a standard deviation of 12. Thus, a full-scale RCI-10 score of 38 would justify considering a person to be highly religious (Worthington et al, 2003).

Research Question 1

Research question one asked how does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? Statistical correlations, in this study, indicate that religious commitment and grade-point average had a negative (-.117) Pearson correlation.

Research sub-question 1. Research sub-question one asked, “What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of minority male college students?” To answer this question, the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory data were entered into SPSS and reviewed per the instructions; a score of 38 or higher is considered highly religious. The religious commitment mean score for students in this study was 31.19. A mean score of 26 with a standard deviation of 12 on the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory (Worthington, 2003), is considered moderately religious. Therefore the research participants are considered to be moderately religious. The student participants reported grade-point averages of 1.93 which rounds to a C average. The results of the Pearson 2-tailed correlation (-.117) indicates a negative correlation between grade-point average and religious commitment based upon the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory and grade-point average correlations (Table 6).

Research Sub-Question 2

“How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have impacted their academic achievement?”

A total of 10 students participated in researcher-conducted focus groups. Four groups contained two persons each and two students were interviewed individually, due to scheduling conflicts. Group sessions lasted from 45-60 minutes each. Responses were

audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Listening to the audio-tape and recording, analyzing the transcriptions and notes from the responses, the researcher identified four major themes. The themes identified are as follows:

1. **Perceived barriers:** challenges to academic achievement, low expectations, desire not to become a statistic, negative pressures
2. **Sociocultural factors:** openness to others' ideas and culture, stereotype threats, negative expectations
3. **Motivational factors:** Internal/personal pride, external/community, role models, family, church
4. **Spiritual beliefs:** Church teachings, religious beliefs

The 10 students in the focus group participated enthusiastically, were polite, and seemed genuinely sincere and forthright in their responses. They listened attentively to the response of their fellow participant and often provided additional information to support their peers' perspective. Individual participants were equally cooperative and candid in their responses. Students have been identified by pseudo names assigned by the researcher (Table 1). The following questions and responses were recorded:

Interview Question 1: What additional influences have impacted your academic success?

In response to this question, **Motivational Factors** of: *internal/personal pride and external/community, role models, family, church* were voiced by 8 of the 10 participants. Isaac responded,

Honestly, when it comes to success I think it has to do with your mentality of how you approach it. I do think there are some people who think that some people cannot

be successful or who are not smart. I don't necessarily agree with that. I feel that you can train yourself to think smart and to believe that you are smart, that your actions will branch out from that. There is a quote by Frederick Douglas, which says something like this "Whatever you do that you let consistently occupy your thoughts will magnify in your life." So if people think and focus more on their grades and say when they are around people "I'm really trying to focus on their grades" but on the inside, they are not really focused on their grades and there are a lot of things that they have that preoccupy them such as parties, but their number one thing is not religion or academics. And with that mentality they do not try hard enough to get good grades because good grades come with a lot of effort and you have to put in the work for it and the more you do it, the more it becomes easier. And you have to focus on that before you focus on anything else if you really do want to be successful.

Six participants identified, **Motivational Factors**, *community, family, and church support* as having impacted their academic success. Carl's response was, "My oldest brother is the one that pushed me to go to college. He did not want me to have to work 12 hour shifts like he had to.

Two students identified, **Spiritual Beliefs**, *church teachings and beliefs*, as impacting their success. Nine responses were recorded for, **Perceived Barriers**, *external influences, motivation, and competitive spirit*. A larger number of responses exceed the number of participants due to multiple responses by some participants.

Interview Question 2: Tell me about a time when your convictions or beliefs have led you in an academic pursuit.

Eight students identified, **Spiritual Beliefs**, *faith, beliefs, religion or spiritual convictions*, as being major factors in their academic pursuits; the remaining two participants identified, **Motivational Factors**, *personal pride, internal motivation, community support, role models, family, and church*. Frederick responded,

I would say religion played a big part, but also family members and people just always making education a major factor at a point in my life." Frederick further stated, "I was raised in my religion and I attended church regularly and was encouraged to read the Bible and applied it to my life.

Eric responded this way,

My faith includes praying every day and believing that God would make a way when things were not going well in the house. I would leave household problems at home and believed that God would help me out and that he really wanted me to focus on my school work and get that done.

Harold put it this way,

After getting my grades for the first semester, I realized that if I didn't do what I was supposed to do, I was on my way out of here and that I was ruining my life. That made me realize that school was important.

Interview Question 3: Share an experience or example of how your beliefs or convictions have impacted your behavior.

Six of 10 participants identified, **Spiritual Beliefs**, *church teachings, religious beliefs*; they were willing to share their beliefs or personal convictions with others and to explain how their beliefs impacted their behavior. Three participants identified, **Perceived Barriers**; *external influences*, one identified, **Motivational Factors**, and two noted, **Sociocultural Factors**, *openness to other ideas and cultures*. Responses ranged from being selective about whom you share your beliefs with, listening to advice from elders and mentors and deciding not to get involved in risky behavior. Frederick said that he recalls his pastor saying, "When you find yourself in a situation that you do not know how to handle, ask 'What would Jesus do?'"

Donald responded in this way,

The statistics have dire predictions for our future, including probability of being in the jail system. It is a constant fight. I have heard that since I was six and it is still instilled in my mind. You are going to be a statistic either way you can be a positive one or a negative one; it's really a struggle not to be a negative one because so many people

around you are negative statics. From a student perspective, it is going to be difficult at times. As a young African American male, some people do not want you to succeed. You have to succeed to prove yourself right and to prove others wrong. You need a good support group to encourage you to do well. Being a mentor to support the young men to help them become successful is a good way to help.”

Isaac cited the importance of role models when he stated,

My fourth grade teacher, who was the first African American male teacher that I ever had, gave me my push. Seeing how he acted and related to us, even though we were in 4th grade, I wanted to be that guy.

Interview Question 4: What additional influences have impacted your academic success?

Similar themes and responses continued to occur: five responses for, **Perceived Barriers**, two responses for, **Sociocultural Barriers**, five responses for, **Motivational Factors**, and one response for, **Spiritual Beliefs**. Eric’s responded,

Toward my late teens, I saw a path that members of my immediate circle were going down. My convictions said that you can follow suit with them or you can make something of yourself and not worry about some of the pressures they are dealing with.

Harold echoed that he grew up in a place where people were from a variety of cultures. This helped him, to be more “open to all types of people.”

Garland said,

I came to this university through a program called Pathways to Success, a mentoring program so my mentor has definitely been a good figure that I should be striving toward. I have support group of friends and others who encourage me to ‘be great, be the best you can.’

Several participants noted that, **Motivational Factors**, *personal convictions* impacted their success. As one student put it,

As a young African American male, some people do not want you to succeed. You have to succeed to prove yourself right and to prove others wrong. You need a good support group to encourage you to do well. Being a mentor to support the young men to help them become successful is good way to help. To educators, we are different, but we are the same, because we have different obstacles and circumstances. We are often judged by stereotypes and our appearances, and we are generalized without having an opportunity to prove ourselves. Our experiences make us different, we are a multicultural world and we have to learn to live in it.

The idea of *not being a statistic*, a **Perceived Barriers**, was heard in this response from Jerome. “Not becoming a statistic. As a Black guy, there is a lot of pressure on us to do well, and I don’t want to be one of those guys who drop out. The statistics part. You will hear a lot of statistics throughout your life; just don’t listen to them. I have a lot of friends who bought into the belief that the negative statistics about African American males is true. I would advise them not to listen to it. Some African Americans decide, ‘Why try if this is what’s going to friends who did not make it through high school because they bought into it and they have the attitude of ‘why try?’ They tell me, You made it. I tell them I did not make it; I just did not listen to the statistics.

Summary of Research Findings

This study consisted out of African American male participants (n=42); 4 were seniors, 15 juniors, 14 sophomores, 6 freshmen, 2 other and one provided no response. Self-reported grade-point averages showed 11 students recorded their most recent average as A; 23 indicated their grade-point average was B and 8 indicated they had a C grade-point average. Results of the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory reflect a negative correlation between grade-point average and religious commitment. Findings from focus group discussions showed that students’ religious beliefs could have some impact on the decisions in their lives. However, quantitative data do not support that

premise. Based upon the data in this study, there is a negative correlation between religious commitment and academic grade-point average.

The participants (n=124) responded to instructor-distributed surveys, which identified students' levels of religious commitment and collected demographic data. Of the 124 respondents, 42 were African American students, the requirement for participation in the research project. Potential participants attended a 4-year university located in the southeastern United States. Quantitative religious commitment survey data were analyzed by adding the total scores for each question asked, with scores ranging from 0-5 for each answer. A total score of 38 on the RCI-10 indicated that a person would be considered highly religious. Participants had an average score for religious commitment of 31.8 out of a possible 50. However, seven of the questions were rated above the average 2.5 on a scale of 5.0. In fact, two of the statements were rated above 3.5, showing that participants agree that "my religious beliefs lie behind ..." and "Religion is important to me because it answers..." (I find it interesting to note that these two statements are what I consider really beliefs). All others in the list require these men to *do* something such as make financial contributions, participate in activities, spend time growing, spend time with others, or spend time in religious thought. While their overall scores on the RCI-10 did not show participants to be highly religious, their high scores on these two indicators show their strong religious beliefs and commitments.

Analyses of the focus group interviews with 10 students were used as a qualitative means to gain insight into students' perceptions regarding factors which have impacted their academic achievement. Patterns and themes emerged and were analyzed to derive

conclusions regarding experiences and influences that have impacted their educational outcomes.

Summary and Transition

This chapter provided an analysis of the data and how the data addressed each research question. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of these findings regarding how they relate to the existing literature, and the researchers' interpretation of results and the implications for future stakeholders in their decisions making processes. Additionally, Chapter 5 will expound upon this study and provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poor academic achievement continues to plague the educational community. Minority students, especially African American students, represent a population for whom there is an increasing level of concern. One goal of education is to enable students to become productive citizens. Consequences of marginally educating students are dire for multiple segments of society. Increasing prison populations, higher crime rates, and poor employment outlooks are just a few of the problems associated with poor academic achievement. Numerous studies concentrate on poor academic performance of minority students, especially African American males. However, there is a lack of information on factors that positively impact the academic achievement of this population of students, especially successful college students. The purpose of this study was to add to the limited body of information regarding academically successful college students in this fragile population.

This study addressed one overarching research question and two sub-questions. How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among African American male college students? The sub-questions are as follows:

1. What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?
2. How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have influenced their academic achievement?

The data for this study were gathered through the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10) and a researcher-created instrument designed to collect demographic and grade-point average data. Surveys were administered to classes through various professors who agreed to facilitate this process. Surveys were collected from the professors and delivered to the researcher. A total of 124 students completed surveys, which were collected from the professors and delivered to the researcher. A sample (N = 42) was taken from 124 students who completed the survey. This number was based upon the number of participants who identified themselves as African American males. Qualitative data were collected through researcher facilitated focus groups at times and locations convenient to participants and the researcher. Researcher-developed questions guided the group discussions (see Appendix A), which were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The interview protocol allowed the researcher to pose questions, which addressed factors associated with the students' academic achievement.

Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

Quantitative Research

The quantitative section of this study addressed the research sub-question: What relationship exists between religious commitment and academic achievement of African American male college students?

Quantitative analysis of the participant scores on the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory show that the research participants were not highly religious based on the criteria for determining religious commitment; a score of 38. However,

responses on the RCI-10 questions regarding specific religious beliefs, students frequently showed positive responses regarding how religion impacts their behaviors. This finding could lead some to conclude that religious beliefs have a stronger impact on them than the quantitative Likert-type scale scores indicate. The average score for research participants was 26, indicating a moderate level of religious commitment. Further data analyses of the quantitative findings indicate a negative correlation between grade-point average and religious commitments based upon the RCI-10 Religious Commitment Inventory.

Qualitative results revealed more insights into the thinking of the research participants. Previous studies have indicated a positive relationship between these two variables. Jeynes (2003) found a consistent positive relationship between variables such as religious commitment, Christian schooling and intact parental family structures, and school success. Additional research (Jeynes, 1999, 2003b; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus, 2000) indicated similar findings, but especially so for students of color.

The qualitative section of this study addressed the research sub-question: “How do African American male college students describe motivational factors that have influenced their academic success?” When used in qualitative research, interviewing provides the researcher the opportunity to explore what cannot be seen and to consider alternative explanations for what is seen (Glesne, 1999). Interviewing individuals enables a researcher to explore a topic from the perspective of the individuals being interviewed, and provides a means to learn about what others think and feel (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The researcher organized the themes into four general categories:

1. **Perceived Barriers:** challenges to academic achievement, low expectations, desire not to become a statistic, negative pressures.
2. **Sociocultural Factors:** openness to others' ideas and culture, stereotype threats, negative expectations.
3. **Motivational Factors:** Internal/personal pride, external/community, role models, family, church.
4. **Spiritual Beliefs:** Church teachings, religious beliefs.

Interview Question 1: What additional influences have impacted your academic success?

Themes which emerged from this question include *personal pride, motivation, community, family, church support, religious convictions, and beliefs, including religious beliefs*. Research participants' responses to this question confirmed the findings of Harper (2012) who determined, through qualitative interviews with African American male college students in 42 colleges throughout the United States that their college success was due to God's favor and plan for their lives, parents, mentors, and other influential persons in their lives. Similarly, Toldson et al. (2008) found that religious attendance promotes intergenerational closure, extracurricular participation, and access to educational resources and normative reinforcement through friendship networks. However, those intervening variables, according to Toldson, accounted for only a small part of adolescents' religious participation and its influence on educational outcomes, leading him to conclude that the mechanisms behind the significant and positive relationship

between religious involvement and successful educational outcomes need to be further explored and explained.

Interview Question 2: Tell me about a time when your convictions or beliefs have led you in an academic pursuit.

Additional themes of *faith, beliefs, religion, and spiritual convictions* emerged through responses to this question. Religious commitment is one variable identified as having a positive impact on academic achievement of minority students (Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2001; Irvine & Foster, 1996). A study by Jeynes (2003b) found that religiously committed urban children performed better on academic measures than their less religious counterparts, even when controlling for socioeconomic status, race, and gender. Regnerus (2000) proposed and tested a multilevel model of involvement in church activities and schooling success among metropolitan U.S. public high school sophomores. He found that participation in church activities heightened educational expectations and achievement. Additionally, he found that more intensely religious students scored higher on standardized tests in mathematics and reading, irrespective of economic factors, including social class.

Interview Question 3: Share an experience or example of how your beliefs or convictions have impacted your behavior.

Participants' responses addressed the impact of *church teachings and role models* on their behavior. Muller and Ellison (2003) found that religious service attendance, participation in religious activities, and considering oneself a religious person is associated with social capital in the community and family resulting in greater parental expectations and a moderate association with locus of control. Additionally, student

participants indicated that their convictions impacted their behaviors, which subsequently had a positive impact on their academic success.

Interview Question 4: What additional influences have impacted your academic success?

Responses included convictions and a sense of right and wrong, being a competitive person and not wanting to be outdone, mentors and a program called Pathways to Success, and not wanting to be a statistic. Finally, participants indicated that *conscience; personal beliefs, personal motivation, mentors, and a desire to succeed* also played a role in their academic success. Mentors were mentioned as factors in their academic success by student participants. A study by Harper (2007) addressed the ideas of stereotype threats, confrontations, and low expectations. Findings indicated that African American males are required persistently to deal with obstacles in their efforts to remain academically successful. Mentors play an important role in helping overcome obstacles. Students in the focus groups mentioned family support, high expectations, and personal motivation as influences contributing to their academic achievement, echoing similar findings by Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2006), in which participants' indicated that family and teachers holding high expectations for students were contributing factors in their success. Student participants in the focus groups mentioned family support, high expectations, and personal motivation as factors contributing to their academic achievement.

Summary

The overarching research question in this study was: How does religious commitment impact academic achievement among minority male college students? Upon analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, a negative correlation can be shown between religious commitment and academic achievement among African American college students. Statistical analysis does not support a positive relationship for this particular group. Small sample size could have been a factor in this determination. Many qualitative responses by the students implied that the majority of the students felt strongly about their religious values and commitments.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher and participants developed an immediate rapport with each other. Their comfort level with the researcher could have account for their honesty in responding to the questions posed to them. Additionally, the researcher did not administer the quantitative surveys to the large groups of students. She administered them only to the focus groups. Although the surveys seemed straightforward to the researcher, students might not have perceived the surveys that way. Participants also might not have understood the need for completing the surveys and perhaps their responses reflected this misunderstanding.

Qualitative data collected, by the researcher, regarding religious commitment and academic achievement of successful African American male students in college provided further insights. Based upon the qualitative data, students who have been successful in college identified *personal pride, motivation, community, family, church support, religious conviction and beliefs, including religious beliefs*, as factors in their success. Other studies (Jeynes, 1999, 2003b; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus 2000; Thornton,

2004) have identified religion and beliefs as strong motivational factors, which improved students' academic performance. Therefore, while student participants in this study were not shown to be highly religious by quantitative data, they did reveal several factors, including religion, which have supported them and helped them to be successful in their academic careers.

The findings of this study reflect the perceptions of the African American male participants who attend a 4-year university in the southeastern part of the United States. These findings might not be reflective of the perceptions of any other group of African American male students in the United States; however, the researcher found that the students in the interview groups were very interested in answering the questions and some even thanked her for listening to their concerns. They were very open and forthcoming in their responses.

Implications

Despite the lack of quantitative data to support a positive relationship between religious commitment and academic achievement, very powerful information is gained from the qualitative data. Students were very straightforward regarding barriers to their academic achievement. Significant barriers are the impact of low expectations, the power of labeling African American males as *statistics*, and the value of personal motivation, in various forms, which have impacted positively academic success for these young men. The implications of this study extend beyond African American male college age students. The results of this study have implications for teachers, principals, superintendents, and boards of education, parents, community leaders, mentors, churches,

and countless other stakeholders. Churches can use this information to inform their youth and young adult programs. Parents, mentors and community leaders can recognize the impact of these factors on the young men whom they work. Teachers and school administrators need to be made aware of the impact of low expectations and the power of the word *stigmatic*, stereotype threats, and other negative connotations on the motivation of young men of color. Even community leaders, news personnel, and other stakeholders can be more aware of how labels are used to define and portray minority groups and the psychological impact that these portrayals have on these populations of young men.

Recommendations

This study examined the impact of religious commitment, motivation, and other variables on academic achievement of African American male college age students. The focus of the study was limited to the specific 4-year university located in the southeastern United States. The population studied included 42 African American male students who completed the Religious Commitment Inventory and a demographic data survey along with 10 students who participated in qualitative interviews. Though adequate for this research project, it provided a limited number of participants. It is recommended that this study be replicated on a larger scale involving a greater number of participants at various universities across the United States. The research could be more broadly studied and could include other minority male populations to determine if findings are similar.

This study investigated perceptions of a non-probability sample of students. A more comprehensive study should include a larger population of students and include at least one more minority male population. It is recommended that future researchers study

this vulnerable population of students and include other minority populations whose academic achievement is of concern to all educational stakeholders. The researcher believes that there is great benefit in hearing what the population has to say regarding their plight rather than making decisions and drawing conclusions without their input.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs Institutional Review Board (IRB)	
Phone: 912-478-0843	Veeney Hall 2021
Fax: 912-478-0719	P.O. Box 8005 Statesboro, GA 30460
IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	

To: Beverly Logan
Dr. Missy Bennett

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Initial Approval Date: 10/16/12

Expiration Date: 06/30/13

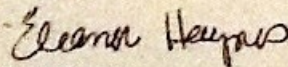
Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered H12497 and titled "Identifying the Impact of Religious Commitment and Motivation on Academic Achievement on Black Male College Students." it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to a maximum of 15 subjects.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research to be conducted at Georgia Southern University.

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator prior to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer

APPENDIX B
PERMISSION TO USE RCI-10 SURVEY

PERMISSION TO USE RCI-10 SURVEY

Re: Religious Commitment Survey

...

Everett L Worthington/FS/VCU <eworth@vcu.edu>

From: ...

Add to Contacts

To: Beverly Logan <bjclogan@yahoo.com>

6 Files Download All

RCI-10 Worthington et al. 2003.pdf (82KB); RCI-10 02-03-11.doc (23KB); RCI-10 Christian counseling effectiveness.pdf (175KB); RCI-10 History 05-12-28.doc (22KB); RCI-10 Manuscript to JCP 2002 02-07-12 accepted final cut-off scores marked.doc (190KB); RCI-10 Scoring Manual.doc (49KB)

Yes, feel free to use.

Ev

Everett L. Worthington, Jr.
 Professor of Psychology
 Box 842018
 806 West Franklin Street (Mailing)
 800 West Franklin Street, Room 101 (Office, do not use for mailing)
 Richmond, VA 23284-2018
 804-828-1150
 804-828-2237 (FAX)

From: Beverly Logan <bjclogan@yahoo.com>
 to: eworth@vcu.edu
 Date: 09/22/2010 10:18 AM
 Subject: Religious Commitment Survey

Hello Dr. Worthington,

I am an EdD. student at Georgia Southern University, working on a dissertation about the impact of religious commitment on minority student achievement. I have seen copies of the RCI 10 Religious Commitment Survey and am interested in using it to collect part of this data. I plan to identify the level of religious commitment of the students, and compare that to their academic performance.

Would your survey be a good source for collecting this data? How is it scored? Would you grant permission for its use?

Thank you for any assistance that you can provide me.

Beverly C. Logan

APPENDIX C
RCI-10 SURVEY

RCI-10 SURVEY

Instructions: Read each of the following statements. Using the scale to the right, CIRCLE the response that best describes how true each statement is for you.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Mostly	Totally
	true of me	true of me	true of me	true of me	true of me
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I often read books and magazines about my faith.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I make financial contributions to my religious organization.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.					
6. I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation.					
7. Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life.					
8. It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I enjoy working in the activities of my religious affiliation.					
10. I keep well informed about my local religious group and have Some influence in its decisions.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX D
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

study entitled: Identifying the Impact on Religious Commitment and Motivation on Academic Achievement on Black Male College Students.

1. This dissertation is the culminating project for completion of my degree.
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to identify from successful Black male college students, the specific variables which have positively impacted their academic achievement.
3. Procedures to be followed: Participation in this research will include completion demographic data; a 10 question Religious Commitment Inventory and provide self-reported current grade point averages. Students who volunteer to provide additional information, will be asked to participate in focus groups of 3-4 students to answer, more in-depth, what variables have impacted their academic success.
4. Discomforts and Risks: Some of the questions and discussed during the focus groups may cause embarrassment or require you to recall of unpleasant experiences. If this happens, you will not be required to answer any such question.
5. Benefits:
 - a. The benefits to participants include providing information to teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders on how to better to improve the educational experiences of future generations, especially Black male students.
 - b. The benefits to society to provide, qualitative, first hand information on educational experiences of successful Black male students which can be incorporated into educational experiences of future generations to improve educational opportunities for this vulnerable population of students.
6. Duration/Time required from the participant: Survey completion time should be about 30 minutes. Volunteers who agree to participate in the focus groups may have to spend an additional 45 minutes.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: Information provided to the researcher will only be accessible to her, her dissertation committee (if necessary). The researcher will maintain the surveys and recorded, transcripts will be securely maintained in digital format by the researcher for a period of three years following completion of the study. After that time, they will be appropriately and permanently discarded by the researcher.

APPENDIX E
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Beverly C. Logan, I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. I am conducting a study entitled: Identifying the Impact on Religious Commitment and Motivation on Academic Achievement on Black Male College Students.

1. This dissertation is the culminating project for completion of my degree.
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to identify from successful Black male college students, the specific variables which have positively impacted their academic achievement.
3. Procedures to be followed: Participation in this research will include completion demographic data; a 10 question Religious Commitment Inventory and provide self-reported current grade-point averages. Students who volunteer to provide additional information, will be asked to participate in focus groups of 3-4 students to answer, more in-depth, what variables have impacted their academic success.
4. Discomforts and Risks: Some of the questions and discussed during the focus groups may cause embarrassment or require you to recall of unpleasant experiences. If this happens, you will not be required to answer any such question.
5. Benefits:
 - a. The benefits to participants include providing information to teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders on how to better to improve the educational experiences of future generations, especially Black male students.
 - b. The benefits to society to provide, qualitative, first-hand information on educational experiences of successful Black male students which can be incorporated into educational experiences of future generations to improve educational opportunities for this vulnerable population of students.
6. Duration/Time required from the participant: Survey completion time should be about 30 minutes. Volunteers who agree to participate in the focus groups may have to spend an additional 45 minutes.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: Information provided to the researcher will only be accessible to her, her dissertation committee (if necessary). The researcher will maintain the surveys and recorded, transcripts will be securely maintained in digital format by the researcher for a period of three years following completion of the study. After that time, they will be appropriately and permanently discarded by the researcher.
8. Right to Ask Questions: You have the right to ask questions of me, Beverly C. Logan and to have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact me or my faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

9. Compensation: No compensation for participation in this research project will be provided by me, the researcher or by the university listed above.
10. Voluntary Participation: Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may end their participation at any time by telling the researcher, not returning the instrument or not volunteering in the focus groups. If you do volunteer to participate in the focus group, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.
11. Penalty: You are advised that here is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study; you may decide at any time they don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
12. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below:

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H12497.

Title of Project: THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND MOTIVATION ON BLACK MALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Principal Investigator: (Beverly C. Logan, Atlanta, Georgia, 404-629-5699, bjclogan@yahoo.com)

Faculty Advisor: (Dr. Missy M. Bennett, P.O. Box 8134, Statesboro, Georgia 30460, mbennett@georgiasouthern.edu)

Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX F
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please shade or write in the requested information. No name is required or expected, this ensures anonymity.

1. Which category below includes your age?

- 17 or younger
 18-20
 21-29
 30-39

2. Identify your student status

- Sophomore Junior Senior Other
- Other (please specify)

3. Indicate your racial identity

- Black or African-American
 American Indian or Alaskan Native
 Asian
 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 Other

Other, please specify

5. What religion do you practice?

- Catholic Protestant Muslim Baptist Methodist None

6. Report your most recent GPA (overall grade-point average)

- A
 B
 C
 D
 F

