A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY THAT EXAMINES AFRICAN

AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC

SUCCESS AT A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE

by

Brian Kelley Nix

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to examine African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to academic success. The central research question that guided this study is as follows: What factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success in attaining a four-year college degree? The information in this study could provide knowledge to other African American males, their families, and teachers regarding how these men could experience the same academic success as the participants. The participants consisted of 14 African American males from East Tennessee who graduated from a four-year college. The theories guiding this study are Oghu's (1986) theory of racial identity development, Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural theory, and Bourdieu's (1979) cultural/social capital theory. Data was collected through individual interviews, a focus group, and a personal narrative from the men participating in the study. The data collected during these interactions was analyzed, and the information that was gathered from this analysis was then separated into meaning and unit themes. These themes were then synthesized into a description of the experiences of the individuals. Once this description was formed, it was used to construct a description of the meaning and essence of the participants' experiences regarding this study (Moustakas, 1994).

*Keywords*: cultural capital, multicultural navigator, critical race theory, social network, oppositional culture, racial identity development, self-efficacy, and social cognitive theory, social constructivism.

**Dedication**

This study is dedicated to my wife and my kids that were patient with me and sacrificed valuable time together throughout this long process and helped me believe in myself that I could finish.  It is dedicated to my Chair Amy McLemore for persevering with me and not allowing me to quit.  It is also dedicated as a testimony that if a person has the faith that God will truly guide the outcomes they can achieve things that they never though possible.

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## List of Abbreviations

Average Yearly Progress (AYP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

School Improvement Plan (SIP)

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

**Overview**

The academic struggles that African American males face have been widely discussed and documented throughout current literature (Lareau, 2003; Schott, 2015; Tyler, Thompson, Gay, Burris, & Loyd, 2016; Webb, 2016).  These struggles have led to African American males either failing to graduate from high school or failing to attempt post-secondary education.  This lack of education leaves the members of this group with limited options in respect to jobs and opportunities for their future.  The goal of this study is to uncover how African American males who have graduated from a four-year academic institution perceive the factors that have led to their academic success.  This information should provide other African American males with specific examples of how they can increase their chances for academic success.  This study seeks to answer the following questions: What factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success?  And, why do the African American males participating in this study feel that some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?

This chapter is divided into the following sections: background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and summary.

**Background**

African American males encounter several factors that lead to difficulty in the academic environment.  Historically, African American males have faced a school system that has either been directly segregated or has provide them with a standard of education below students of other races.  They have also encountered a school environment that does not address their

individual cultural needs (Butler-Barnes, Varner, Williams, & Sellers, 2016; Rhoden, 2017).

Socially, many African American males have had to contend with a peer group and a social

structure that often places little value on educational success. They have also had to deal with a

lack of essential academic support from their home Allen, 2015; Schott, 2015). Lastly, the

struggles that African American males face academically can be better framed and analyzed

theoretically through Ogbu's oppositional identity theory (1986), Bandura's social cognitive

theory (1977), and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1962). All of these factors have

compounded to make academic success a difficult proposition for many African American

males.

**Historical**

The problem does not rest in the notion that African American students do not value

education or do not see the benefits of education. Rather, the problem lies in the belief of these

students that academic success is a possibility. The academic aspirations of this group do not

match their actions. Recent studies have illustrated that African American students acknowledge

that education will lead them to a better quality of life, but these same students continued to

struggle academically and did not apply themselves to their academic work (Ainsworth-Darnell

& Downey, 1998; Butler-Barnes., et al 2016).

This can be tied directly to an educational system that that has placed many roadblocks in

the path of academic achievement for African American males. From the beginning public

education in the United States has either completely excluded African American or provided

them an educational experience that is inferior to that provided to their peers. The idea of

separate but equal established by the Plessey vs. Ferguson Supreme Court case lead to African

American students being educated in schools separate from their white peers. While these

schools were separate, they were definitely not equal to the schools that white students attended

(Adams, 2012; Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2015; Ogletree, 2004).

As formal legal segregation ended, the American educational system was still left with

schools that were either predominantly white or African American. Busing was a program

enacted to allow African American students from impoverished neighborhoods to attend schools

in more affluent areas that would in theory provide them a better education. For several reason

this system only lead to more segregated schools and did little to address the achievement gap

between African American and white students (Delmont & Theoharis, 2017). The next attempt at

school reform took shape in the federal program No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This was a

federal program that would withhold funding from a school not meeting yearly performance

goals. It was hoped that this would give schools the motivation and incentive to address the

needs of all of their student population. In the end NCLB became a program of mandates and

ultimatums without the necessary support to make these mandates attainable. Instead of helping

close the achievement gap, NCLB became a game of schools systems and state governments

manipulating numbers and statistics to make it appear that student progress was occurring. In the

end the achievement gap that existed between African American students and white students still

existed in spite of the mandates established by NCLB (Jeynes, 2014).

Along with the challenges within the educational system, many African America males

have the belief that lasting academic success is beyond their reach. African American students

aspire to succeed academically but lack the belief and the drive to work toward that goal. As

Carter (2005) states, "While they are believers, Black and Latino students are not all achievers"

(p. 25). This notion has been replicated over several generations within the African American

community to create a culture of anti-intellectualism. Anti-intellectualism surfaces as the belief

that as African Americans, they lack the ability to succeed academically or that academic success will create a loss of social status within their peer group and community. This causes African American males to completely resist education or face possible emotional and mental trauma as a result of their academic endeavors (Butler- Barnes et al., 2016; McWhorter, 2001). This notion of anti-intellectualism threatens an entire society of African American males.

Fortunately, this culture of anti-intellectualism can be challenged and overcome. African American males can experience academic success while avoiding persecution from their peers. Carter (2005) gives examples of African American males who have succeeded academically while maintaining a link to their ethnic culture. She refers to these individuals as "straddlers." These individuals are able to straddle both dominant and non-dominant culture. Lacking, however, in the current literature are descriptions of what African American males are like as people and how the factors that have allowed them to achieve academic success have been perceived. In order to experience academic success, African American males need concrete examples after which to model themselves (Carter, 2005; Rhoden, 2017).

**Social**

According to a study by the Schott Foundation (2015), from 2012 to 2013, only 59% of African American males graduated high school on time compared with 80% of white males. This disparity is even greater in many individual states and cities. In the states of Georgia, New Mexico, Michigan, and The District of Columbia, African American male graduation rates fall below 50% annually. In the city of Detroit for the 2012-2013 school year, only 20% of African American males graduated high school (Schott, 2015). African Americans compose only 12% of the American collegiate population while white students compose 71% of this group (Lareau, 2003).

African American males are also overrepresented in the United States judicial system. Approximately one out of every six African American males has experienced jail or imprisonment. African American males are over four times more likely to serve jail time than white males. In states such as New Jersey and Wisconsin, African American males were over ten times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers. African American juveniles compose 58% of all youth ordered to serve time in state prisons, while only 11% of African Americans 25 years and older hold college degrees (Webb, 2016; Puzzanchera, Sladky, & Kang 2016). More recently, Green, Hilton, and Palmer (2008) noted that in 2000, "there were 188,550 more African American men incarcerated than enrolled in institutions of higher education" (p. 7). In 2014, African Americans made up 34% of the Total United States prison population. In that same year 52% of children cases sent to criminal court were comprise of African American defendants (NAACP, 2018). This lack of college completion is more prevalent in African American men than women. In 2006, 94,341 African American women received bachelor degrees while only 48,079 African American men earned degrees (Green-Powell et al., 2011).

One specific struggle that African American males experience in the academic environment is in regards to a lack of involvement in accelerated programs and an overrepresentation in special education programs. Thirteen percent of the African American student population receives special education services, compared to 9% of white students (Nickholas, Kotch, & Barry, 2010). African American males are underrepresented in gifted and accelerated learning programs. These students are also disproportionally disciplined in school and are more likely to be suspended and expelled than their peers (Hotchkins, 2016). In the United States, African American children are more likely to be born into an impoverished neighborhood, which leads them to attending a school that is underfunded due to low tax revenue

from their community (Bynum, 2011).  The dropout rate of these students is over twice that of

white students.  African Americans compose only 14% of the total United States student

population, but account for 19% of high school dropouts (Anonymous, 2009).  African American

males who do graduate high school often read and write on a 3rd or 4th grade level.  Forty-four

percent of African American males are functionally illiterate (Allen, 2015; Green-Powell et al.,

2011).

Dropping out of school leads this group of students to a future full of difficulties and

obstacles to success.  In modern American society, the number of jobs available to high school

dropouts continues to decline.  The jobs that dropouts can obtain require them to work more

hours per week while receiving less pay and fewer benefits (Allen, 2015).  Students who do not

complete high school are more likely to be involved in crime and become incarcerated.  A 2008

survey revealed that only 32% of youth offenders possessed a high school diploma (Urrieta, &

Martin, 2011).  Lower levels of educational achievement also increase the probability that an

African American male will return to the judicial system after being released from prison (Curtis,

Derzis, Shippen, Musgrave, & Brigman, 2013).  African American males are more likely to

develop addictions to drugs and require welfare benefits (Gasper, 2011).  All of these factors

place a great stress on American society and its citizens.

Not receiving a complete education also socially excludes many African Americans from

mainstream culture.  This exclusion can contribute to the inability of these individuals to advance

in society just as much as a lack of a diploma (Lareau, 2003).  Many of the African Americans

who do graduate still lack the cultural capital necessary to obtain a quality job and advance

themselves and their families.  This is caused by a society and education system in which a

majority of African Americans feel culturally alienated and out of place (Allen, 2015; Carter, 2005; Scott, Taylor, & Palmer 2013).

In many instances, African American students are tracked and funneled into academic paths that do not prepare them to be competitive in a changing job market.  While schools are addressing the gap that exists in test scores between African American students and their peers, schools are failing to equip these students with the skills the students need to compete in a global economy (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).  No Child Left Behind has made schools accountable for the test scores of African American students, but these schools still fail to address the cultural and personal needs of this group of students (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).  In order to be successful, African American males need a social network of teachers, coaches, community members, pastors, and peers that will support them and model for them how to attain this success.  This is a component that many of these individuals lack (Allen; 2015; Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009; Forster & Rehner, 2010;Webb, 2016).

Another factor that contributes to the success or failure of African American students is the degree and perception of parental involvement (Allen 2015; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010).  In many cases, African American students hail from single-parent homes that fall into the low socio-economic bracket.  This often signifies a lack of parental support and monitoring in the academic careers of these students.  African Americans who do receive parental support and perceive their parents as taking an active role in their educational experiences perform at a higher level than African Americans who have a perception of parental disengagement (Williams, Banerjee,Lozada-Smith,Lambouths, & Rowley, 2017; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010; Wilson, 2009).  This involvement on the part of the parent is more effective if it is focused directly on the

academic work performed by the student and that student's plans for future academic achievement

**Theoretical**

The academic struggles that African American males have faced can be tired to three main theories. The first is the theory of "oppositional identity." This is the theory that people can develop an identity of resisting social norms and not conforming to societal system and structures. This can help explain why many African American males take pride in their disdain for and separation from the academic environment (Ogbu, 1986). The second is the social cognitive theory. Sociocultural theory can be used to explain how many African American males develop an oppositional identity and may also explain how the individuals who can function in multiple cultural groups acquire the skills necessary to develop this ability. This theory presents the notion that human beings have the ability to adopt the qualities of the people surrounding them. The third theory that helps explain the difficulty many African American males have in the academic setting is the socio cultural theory. Socio cultural theory outlines the concept of constructivism, this is the process by which a person acquires knowledge through the observing of and interaction with other people. This can help explain how African American males can acquire either a positive or negative attitude toward education by daily interaction with their family and peers. As a person interacts with the people and environment and faces problems and obstacles, they learn by solving these issues. Within the sociocultural theory there was more emphasis on the role of a person's social interactions in the acquisition of knowledge. This social interaction in an environment that does not place a high value on educational excellence can help explain the struggles of many African American males.

**Situation to Self**

I am a Caucasian high school teacher who has over 13 years of teaching experience at a school comprised of 21% African American students. According to the Tennessee Department of Education Report Card (2017), African American males attending this school are falling behind academically compared to their peers.  While I teach at this school, it is important to note that I am a football coach who works primarily with African American males.  In my observations I have witnessed first hand the struggles that African American males face when it comes to both home and the school setting.  I have seen the lack of academic support and encouragement that these individuals receive at home.  I have also witnessed them struggling to maintain motivation to perform at a high level in their daily classwork.  Along with this the students that do have the motivation often struggle to find teachers they can relate to and struggle to perform in advanced placement classes and high level math courses.  This is the overall reason I was compelled to educate myself more on how I can be a resolution to this problem by conducting this research.

I believe that the problems African American males face are associated with the negative mainstream stereotypes, lack of school and community support, and lack of parental involvement.  Therefore, these challenges need to be addressed in order to meet the needs of all students regardless of race.  To address the academic needs of African American male students educators need to be made aware of the challenges that African American males encounter in order to create a path of success on how to best support the academic development of these males.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), ontology is the study of being and what is in existence or reality at that point in time.  The ontological assumptions guiding this research come from my personal experience working daily with African American males.  Educators'

behaviors, attitudes, and expectations play a vital role in enhancing African American male's

student's educational development (Kafele, 2009; Rhoden, 2017).  In working with this specific

group of students, I have seen that their desires like others are to graduate from high school and

attend college.  However, this does not seem to be the end result for many.  Their desire and

dedication to fulfill their dreams is one I would like to personally assist with in any way possible.

     I have a deep epistemological and axiological belief that the participants of this study

have encountered influences and experiences throughout their lives that have caused them to see

the value of education and how it can impact their lives.  The participants, unlike many of their

same-race peers, have seen how education can benefit them as individuals and have either

observed or been taught skills that have allowed them to use academics to improve their quality

of life.  This resilience is developed through their life experience and the individuals who

influence their lives.  This, coupled with how individuals decide to respond to life experiences,

helps determine success or failure in a given endeavor.  This in turn helps to create a happy or

unhappy person.  A combination of these two factors develops a driven or non-driven individual.

My hope is that this study will reveal what types of interactions and experiences helped the

participants achieve academic success and develop a drive to achieve at a high academic level.  I

also hope this study will reveal how these individuals developed a mindset that caused them to

respond to adversity in their life and not allow challenges and adversity to deter them from their

goal. I will bring a participatory paradigm into this study (Creswell, 2007).  Purposeful sampling

procedures will be used to select the participants for this study (Patton, 2002).

     I believe the academic success of African American males is greatly dependent upon how

they view academic success and their perceptions of the factors that can either help or hinder

their academic progress.  Their view toward academics and its priority in their life greatly

influences the effectiveness of support mechanisms that are provided to them during their academic career. My axiological assumption is that providing certain support mechanisms is not as important as changing the mindset and perception of the individual student regarding education. Changing the view of African American males toward education will increase the effectiveness of support mechanisms that are provided to them. Uncovering the perceptions and beliefs of African American males that have attained academic success along with the factors that contributed to this success will lead other African American males to also experience this same success.

I have seen the lack of positive young role models for African American males to emulate in my school community. My rhetorical philosophical assumption is that this study will explore the factors that have led African American males in East Tennessee to succeed academically and to graduate from a four-year college, and how these individuals have perceived these factors. I hope that this study will provide examples for the students I coach and teach to follow and will help me better assist African American males in attaining academic success.

The research paradigm that was used for this is the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). The basis of this theory is that people acquire new habits and personality traits over time by mimicking the actions and choices of the people within their immediate environment. It is my belief that this theory can account for various individuals being able to influence the academic achievement of African American males both positively and negatively through their actions and the examples that they set.

## Problem Statement

Few studies have documented African American male students' perception of their academic success, even though the perceptions of African American students are critical in

helping educators further understand why African American male students continue to be underachievers in the college setting.  Completion of high school has a direct effect on the direction a student takes in society after leaving school. Therefore, the challenge for the educational system is to determine the best way to improve the academic success of all students. Understanding and knowledge concerning student achievement have grown considerably over the years, and research and theories have been presented on improving academic achievement (Butler-Barnes et al., 2016; Rhoden, 2017). It is vital for educators in the schools of the nation to increase academic success among African American students because education not only impacts dropout rates, which eventually impact the economics and welfare of communities, but it increases life chances for African American students. Policy, such as the NCLB Act (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002), requires school districts to address low academic achievement; however, low academic achievement continues to exist.

The graduation rate of African American students in the United States that entered college in 2010 after six years was 38% compared to 62% of white students (Shapiro, et al., 2017).  From 2012 to 2013, only 59% of African Americans males that enrolled in a four-year college in the United Sates graduated, as opposed to 80% of white males.  In several states, African American males ranked at the bottom in graduation rates from four-year colleges.  In many states the graduation rate of African American males was below 55% during this period and the gap between the graduation rate of white males and African American males was over 25 percent (Camera, 2016; Superville, 2015).  School leaders must be aware of how culture and climate in schools, cultural diversity, parental involvement, poor curriculum, role of principal, students' relationship with teachers, and changing demographics impact the success of African American male students. The problem is that little information exists concerning how African

American males perceive the factors that have contributed to their academic success at a four-year college (Allen, 2015; Carter, 2005; Donnor & Shockley, 2010; Schott, 2015).

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to determine African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic success at a four-year college.   The study participants attended high school in East Tennessee, an area that is rural and predominantly Caucasian, and graduated from a four-year college. Academic success in this study will be defined as graduating from a four-year college.  This study also seeks to explore factors in the lives of these individuals who have established and reinforced these belief systems.   The theories guiding this study are the social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1977), sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky (1962), and cultural/social capital developed by Bourdieu (1979).  The social cognitive theory helps explain why some African American males have a strong sense of self-efficacy and believe that they are in control of their own academic performance.  In parallel to this some African American males have a fatalistic view of their chances of achievement in school and feel they have little control over their academic performance.  Sociocultural theory relates to how African American males acquire knowledge and habits from their environment and the people that surround them on a daily basis.  This acquisition of knowledge concerning academic performance and the importance that is placed on academic performance has a strong effect on African Americans success or failure in the academic world.

## Significance of the Study

Current literature shows that an achievement gap exists between African American males and their white peers (Brown, 2009; Camera, 2016; Green 2011; Superville, 2015). Contributing

factors such as lack of parental involvement, ineffective and non-connected social networks, and various personal and cultural barriers compound to make achievement for many African American males an extremely daunting task (Fuller, 2017; Green, 2011; Rhoden, 2017; Rowley & Bowman, 2009). Much discussion in the literature centers around why these factors hinder some individuals more than others and what can be done to address these issues and help more individuals experience success.

McWhorter (2001) presented the argument that the culture in which these individuals live holds academic success in a negative light. The idea presented is that African American males that succeed academically will be looked at as betraying their race. Proponents of this "oppositional identity" theory argue that assimilating to the dominant culture on which American education is based signifies that African Americans are either ashamed of their African American culture or feel that it is inferior to the dominant "white" culture that is emphasized in modern education (Ogbu, 2003). This group questions the value African Americans place on education. This notion of disconnection and alienation emerges as African Americans become more aware of their racial identity and the racism that exists in American society along with its schools (Givens, Nasir, Ross, De Royston, 2016; Yancey, 2003).

A popular theory that helps explain how this culture of negativity toward education is transferred within a cultural group is Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory (SCT). This theory argues that individuals acquire new skills and qualities by passively mimicking individuals and groups that they interact with on a daily basis. This modeling develops over time as an individual takes on various aspects of other individuals and groups. Bandura (1977) believed that an individual is often unaware that this transformation is taking place.

Transformation occurs when a person takes individual actions or personality traits from another individual and incorporates them into their own actions and sense of self (Rogers, 1995). This can help explain how many African American males observe peers who perceive education in a negative light and place no emphasis on achieving at a high level academically. This negative outlook allows many African American males to achieve and maintain social status in their community. African American males then passively adopt this mindset into their own existence. As a result, their desire and motivation to achieve academically diminishes (Butler-Barnes et al., Givens et al., 2016; McWhorter, 2007). The potential for this to occur supports the need to provide examples of African American males placing value on education while maintaining the respect of their peers. This study will help give a voice to positive African American role models and allow their story to be heard.

Social cognitive theory leads to the effect of self-efficacy on the achievement of African American males. The idea of self-efficacy is that a person who has experienced success in one endeavor or aspect of life will take on other tasks with a more positive outlook and with a greater belief of personal ability to succeed and complete a task. Bandura (1977) observed this while working with individuals that possessed a phobia toward snakes. Bandura (1977) and his colleges were successful in eliminating snake phobias from the participants of their study. Unintentionally, researchers discovered in follow-up interviews that this success in conquering their snake phobia had led these individuals to perform tasks and undertake challenges that they had previously viewed as impossible. Conquering the snake phobia had given them the self-efficacy needed to succeed in other areas of their life (Lindzey & Runyan, 2007).

Self-efficacy has been shown to be one of the greatest determining factors in a student's academic success. Students that undertake a task with the belief that there will be a successful

outcome are more likely to persist and complete the task at hand. This is especially true in an academic setting (Carter, 2005; Franklin, Debb, & Colson, 2016; Butler-Barnes et al., 2016).

Experts in the field of African American education present research that supports the notion that many African Americans value education but have little faith in their ability to achieve academic success (Butler-barnes et al., 2016; Carter, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Proponents of the idea that African American males lack faith in their abilities to academically succeed also state that African American males lack the cultural capital necessary to achieve academically and in modern society. African American males that attain success academically while maintaining social status within their non-dominant cultural group are referred to as "straddlers" (Carter, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Straddlers are able to function in the dominant culture that exists in American schools while not alienating their peers in the non-dominant culture that exists in many of their communities. The goal of this study is to describe characteristics that young African American males can emulate in regards to academic achievement. Hopefully, this study will provide some insight into the mindset of academically successful African American males, their attitudes toward academic achievement, and the factors that have made them successful in the academic world. The previously mentioned information should serve as an example to African American males to assist them in developing an identity with peers that have experienced academic success. The study could also serve as a guide for both parents and educators on how to help African American males be academically successful and how African American males are perceiving the interactions they had with parents and educators during the educational process.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to determine

African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic success at a four-year college. The research was guided by the theoretical frameworks of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962), and cultural/social capital (Bourdieu, 1979) to gain a clearer understanding on how academically successful African American males acquired the skills that enabled them to experience academic success.

This phenomenological study focuses on the perceptions of African American males in the East Tennessee region who have graduated from a four-year college. These men will be asked to describe the factors they believe contributed to their academic success. The following research questions will guide this overarching research question guiding this study is as follows:

**Central Research Question.** What factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success in attaining a 4-year college degree?

Current literature shows that several internal and external factors may improve the likelihood of Africa American males experiencing academic success. Individual motivation and attitude toward the educational process and the culture of the educational system have been shown to have direct influence on the academic performance of African American males (Allen, 2015; Carter, 2005; Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 1986; Webb, 2016). External influences such as parental involvement, support from teachers and other school personnel, and peer influence have all been linked to the academic success of African American males (Allen, 2015; Hussain & Thomas, 2010; Kafele, 2009; McWhorter, 2001; Webb, 2016). It is hoped that the information gathered in this study will reveal what factors helped the study participants attain academic success.

The sub-questions that will assist in guiding this study are as follows:

**Sub Question 1.** Why do the African American males participating in this study feel that

some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?

Various factors have been shown to have an impact on the academic performance of African American males. In certain situations, some factors work better than others. In some cases, the impact of a coach or teacher in the lives of an African American male is the deciding factor in academic success (Carter, 2005; Kafele, 2009; Reeves, 2000; Scott et al., 2013). While in other factors like the involvement of a parental figure leads to improved academic performance. In some situations, the influence of a peer or sibling that has attained academic success helps empower an African American male with the drive and determination to pursue academic achievement (Franklin et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009; McWhorter, 2007; Williams et al., 2017). Hopefully, this question will reveal why some factors helped the individuals in this study excel academically and what some did not.

**Sub Question 2.** What factors do African American male college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress, and how were they able to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree?

Current literature gives a multitude of examples of factors that have been shown to hinder an African American male's chances of being successful in an academic setting. From environmental factors, such as community and friends, to a lack of emphasis placed on education in the home, many African American males face obstacles as they pursue a four-year college degree (Carter, 2005; Hotchkins, 2016; McWhorter, 2001; Scott et al., 2013). It is hoped that this study will reveal the obstacles that these participants faced and how they were able to overcome them.

**Sub Question 3.** How does the school environment of high school and a 4-year college affect an African American male student's ability to attain a college degree?

Much attention has been given in recent years to the effect school environment has on the success or failure of various groups. No group has shown more of a need to be involved with and include in the culture and environment of a school than African American males. Many African American males function daily in a culture that seeks to alienate themselves from the academic process and cast academic success in a negative light. When school can help combat this notion and create a culture and environment that caters to the wants, needs, and social norms of African American males, the performance of these individuals often improves. (Allen, 2015; Kafele, 2009; McWorter, 2001; Noguera, 2008; Ogbu, 1986; Rhoden, 2017). The goals of this study are that the data collected will reveal if this was a factor in the academic success of the participants and what aspects of the school culture and environment had the greatest influence on their success.

## Definitions

The following are terms that will guide this study:

1. *Academic Success* - This is defined within this study as the participant having graduated from a four-year college

2. *Cultural Capital* – This is the concept developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979). Bourdieu argued that, above and beyond economic factors cultural habits and traditions that are acquired from living in a higher socio economic environment play a large role in academic success. (Lareau & Weininger, 2011).

3. *Multicultural Navigator* - These are individuals who can navigate between dominant and non-dominant cultures. Multicultural navigators maintain the social traits of the non-dominant culture, such as dress and musical interests, but are able to excel in and

adapt to dominate culture.   These individuals cause others to buy into the notion of

upward mobility while retaining their cultural origins (Carter, 2005).

4. *Oppositional Culture* – In some minority groups a culture can develop that

   emphasizes dressing, behaving, and thinking opposite of the dominant cultural group

   (Ogbu, 2008).  Within African American culture, this collective view has been

   referred to as "acting white" (Ogbu, 2004).

5. *Straddlers and Emissaries* - These individuals maintain a healthy connection and

   relationship with their non-dominant ethnic backgrounds while functioning and

   exceling in a culture that has differing dominant traits from their own.  These terms in

   current literature are used to describe African American students who excel

   academically but still have social status and social interaction within their cultural

   group (Carter, 2005; Tatum, 1997).

6. *Self-Efficacy* - This concept addresses an individual's belief in their ability to

   accomplish a given task or reach a desired goal.  It does not address self-worth or

   self-concept (Bandara, 1977; Schweinle & Mims, 2009).

7. *Social Network* - This is a term used to describe persons that influence the life of an

   individual.  These are the people that an individual interacts with on a daily basis and

   have a direct influence over their actions and decisions (Scott, 2011).  For the purpose

   of this study, this network will include teachers, peers, coaches, mentors, and other

   community members.  Parents will be addressed in an individual category.

   .

**Summary**

The information gathered in this study will reveal perceptions of academically successful African American males regarding the factors relating to their graduation from a four-year college.  Current research lacks specific examples of the belief system that academically successful African Americans possess and the factors that enabled them to achieve success.  The African American males profiled in this study are the exception to the rule within their surrounding population and the student populations where they attended secondary school (Allen, 2015; Green-Powell et al, 2011; Nickholas, Kotch, & Barry, 2010; Scott et al., 2013).  It is hoped that the information gathered in this study will reveal practices that African American males, parents, and teachers in this area can follow and apply specifically to their lives.  This information could contribute to the body of research concerning African American achievement and how the achievement gap that exists within this group can be closed (Lareau, 2003; Schott, 2015).  As mentioned earlier, achieving this may benefit all members of American society (Bost, 2007; NAACP, 2018; Urrieta & Martin, 2011).

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

This chapter begins by examining the theoretical framework that supports this study to guide the line of questioning during the interview process and the investigation of current literature. The related literature section begins by creating a historical perspective of African Americans and academic success. Next, the perceptions of academically successful African American males that are present in current literature are examined. This section will be followed by a description of factors that contributed to the academic success of this population. The related literature section concludes with an outline of the contributions made by the educational community regarding the academic success of these individuals.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical focus of this study is how the academically successful African American males have acquired their personal mindset toward academic achievement. It will also examine how this mindset differs from many of their same race peers. This next section will cover various constructs that often contribute to the development of an African American male's mindset toward education and life in general. The main theories that will guide this study are racial identity development, social cognitive theory, and socioculturalism. Understanding these constructs should help the reader identify with how the participants have developed their view of education and why many African American males have a negative perception of the academic world.

### Racial Identity Development (Oppositional Identity)

Many African American males take on a mindset and persona that puts them at odds with the educational process in general. A trend that can sometimes develop in a minority culture is

the development of an identity that stands in opposition to the dominant or mainstream culture. This "oppositional culture" creates a disconnection for minorities from the mainstream society that they encounter on a daily basis (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Ogbu, 2008). Human beings typically identify with certain people and the qualities these people embody, while differentiating themselves from others who do not embody these qualities (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). The danger in this arises when individuals in the minority culture allow this oppositional identity to stand in their way of functioning in the dominant culture. This often leads to an inability to acquire and maintain jobs, function in social settings, and abide by laws and expectations set forth by that culture. This "ghetto culture" then becomes a detractor in the chances of people in this minority culture experiencing success and happiness in their lives (Wilson, 1987). This opposition makes it difficult for minorities to obtain jobs, function in social settings, and make connections that will advance them in their professional careers.

In many cases, venturing out of their own culture and interacting with the mainstream culture and taking on characteristics of that culture causes minorities to be viewed in a negative light by people in their own culture. Ogbu (1986) developed the term acting white to describe African American who had developed social traits similar to the mainstream white population. He outlined the concept that many African Americans viewed other African Americans who branched out from their traditional African American culture to obtain education or a job as being disloyal to their own people and attempting to be something there were not. Ogbu argued that the skills a person needed to function and excel in mainstream culture were the traits that many African Americans felt were part of the Caucasian culture and not a part of their own. The African Americans who start to dress like people in the mainstream culture, talk like the people

in the mainstream culture, and participate in the same social activities as those in the mainstream culture were ostracized in their own cultural group and made to feel as if they were turning their backs on their friends and family (Carter, 2005; Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1997; Frayer & Torelli, 2010). This development of a racial identity often coincides with how an individual identifies with the academic world.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory (SCT) can be used to explain how many African American males develop an oppositional identity and may also explain how the individuals who can function in multiple cultural groups acquire the skills necessary to develop this ability. This theory presents the notion that human beings have the ability to adopt the qualities of the people surrounding them. Because humans have this ability to rationalize their actions and determine in advance the likely results of their actions, SCT argues that humans create their own identity and self-concept by observing the actions of other around them (Bandura, 1977). People then assess how these actions would benefit or harm them as individual. Observing actions being reinforced and rewarded in a social setting, cause's people to begin to take on the characteristics of the individuals that are taking these actions. The ability of human beings to play through actions in their rational mind to their end result allows them to learn lessons and form actions and situations that never take place in reality. This can be dangerous when many of the perceived reinforcements and outcomes of certain actions are inaccurate and are reinforced by false and negative motivators (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2006; Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

The examples identified by SCT often lead African American males to perceive that taking on a certain identity and taking certain actions in their lives will allow them to attain social status and recognition. This is often carried out without also understanding the negative

long-term impact these choices will have on their lives. This concept emphasizes why it is important that African American males, like all children, have strong role models to emulate and pattern themselves after. Having a strong role model is often critical as an individual develops their own mindset in regard to education and academic pursuits (Angie & Richard, 2012; Barone, 2009; Lamont & Small, 2008; Reddick, 2012). A key concept within Bandura's (1977) social learning and cognitive theory is the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a person's beliefs of their ability to accomplish certain goals and complete certain tasks. This concept encompasses the mindset of an individual that is more likely to fail than succeed when facing a challenge. Self-efficacy is possibly the most accurate predictor of success among all motivational thoughts. When a person believes he/she has the ability to reach a goal, the likelihood of reaching the goal is much higher than if that person questioned their own abilities. Bandura felt that a person's ability to regulate thoughts and emotions was essential in learning new skills and information. In order for a person to construct knowledge, he/she must independently or with some assistance solve problems and complete tasks. The likelihood of a person accepting this type of challenge is much greater in a person who has the ability to see a task through to its completion (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1995; Graham & Weiner, 1996; Pajares, 2002).

**Sociocultural Theory**

Constructivism is the process by which a person acquires knowledge through the observing of and interaction with other people. As a person interacts with the people and environment and faces problems and obstacles, he/she learns by solving these issues. Within the sociocultural theory there was more emphasis on the role of a person's social interactions in the acquisition of knowledge. Vygotsky (1962) believed that people were not simply passive receivers of knowledge, but played an active role in the learning process. He also developed the

concept of scaffolding.  Scaffolding creates a series of support mechanisms for the learner that supports the lessons previously learned and continues to guide further learning (Kalina & Powel, 2009; Vygotsy, 1962).

When a person is constructing his/her own self-image, the parent or guardian is considered the most influential of all groups.  This is due to the fact that parents or guardians are the first influences a person encounters in life and often the last influence they turn to when making decision and choices in their life (Johnson, 1981).  The idea of Sociocultural Theory ties directly to how an individual develops a personal mindset in regard to the importance education has in their lives and what their expectations are of their personal success or failure.

**Social Capital**

The ideas within the sociocultural theory coincides with how individuals acquire cultural and social capital.  A good example of social capital was outlined by Lareau (2003).  She described the differences that exist between how middle-class families interact with teachers and the educational process versus how lower income working class families interact.  Lareau (2003) gives examples of middle class families functioning more fluidly within the educational system and possessing the cultural and social skills necessary to interact with teachers and people in positions of power, therefore giving their children an educational advantage over other students. In contrast, working class parents often seem uncomfortable in the social setting of a school and lack the ability to relate to and interact with the staff of a school.  In many cases, this leads to their students also feeling uncomfortable in the academic setting.  This increased level of discomfort often leads to students disengaging from the academic process and performing at a level below their potential.  This social capital developed in middle and upper-class families extends beyond school and education into the everyday lives of the individuals that either acquire

this capital or lack sufficient capital to function in the mainstream culture.  Social capital

includes the language that that is spoken in the home, the leisure activities that a family regularly

participates, and the specific steps taken by parents to help their children function in mainstream

society.  It is no coincidence that these cultural traits fall in line with the values and culture of

mainstream educational and business institutions.

Bourdieu (1984) included food, music, books that were read, and even home decorating

practices as being aspects of cultural capital imparted to children in upper and middle-class

families that gave them an advantage in mainstream society.  Bourdieu (1984) called this

concept "Habitus."  Habitus is comprised of social norms and tendencies that guide the actions

and motives of individuals.  These norms are created over time through an individual's

interaction with a culture and social structure.  Adopting qualities of the mainstream culture and

knowledge of pursuits and interests that people in the mainstream culture value is a trait that

often separates individuals of different classes and different races.  This study will examine how

the African American males involved learned to function within their own social group while

acquiring the cultural capital necessary to function in mainstream society and the academic

world (Bourdieu, 1984; Carter, 2005; Lareau, 1987**;** Lareau, 2003).

**Related Literature**

This related literature section is organized around the major themes that were identified

as the ways that African Americans function in the academic world and how this status and

performance has been shaped over the course of history.  This section is divided into four parts.

It starts with an overview of how African American education has progressed historically in the

United States and how this history has affected the current academic performance of African

American students.  The second section outlines how current literature depicts the perceptions of

African American males toward education. The third section discusses factors that have been shown to contribute to African Americans experiencing academic success. The fourth and final section focuses specifically on how schools and educators have contributed to the academic success of African American students. The information gathered in this section will help guide the development of the research questions used in this study. It is hoped that this study can provide a view of this topic that current literature has not. Current research documents well the factors that contribute to the academic struggles of African American males along with factors that have helped address these struggles. What is lacking in current literature is the voice of African American males that have themselves achieved academic success sand how individually they were able to achieve this success. It is the goal of this study to let these voices be heard.

**Historical Perspectives of African American Males and Academic Success**

The history of African American education in the United States has created an education debt. The obstacles that have been placed in the way of African Americans receiving an education on par with that of their white peers have caused this group to fall behind in the academic world. In order to understand this debt fully and to address the academic issues it creates, the history of how it occurred must be examined (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

**Segregation.** The idea of segregation existed in America from the beginning of the country's history. Segregation is the public policy that keeps races or groups of people separated from each other. In America, this separation included separate public facilities for individual races. Along with these facilities, schools were also used as a means to separate American society based on race. This cultural ideal separated blacks and whites in American society and was upheld by the law and the social structure in a large portion of the United States (Naylor et

al., 2015; Van Delinder, 2008). Many whites in the 19th century believed that African Americans were genetically and intellectually inferior to them. This idea became known as the "color line" (Dubois, 1953). The notion that African Americans are inferior genetically and intellectually to white contributed to the ruling in the 1896 Supreme Court case Plessy vs. Ferguson. This case established the concept of "separate but equal." This notion asserted that separate public facilities and schools were acceptable in American communities as long as the white facilities were equal to the facilities provided to African Americans. After this landmark case, public schools could legally be segregated (Ogletree, 2004).

The issue with the notion of "separate but equal" was first that separate was not equal. African American schools along with other public facilities and services designated for African Americans were not equal. This lead to an established segregated society that turned race into a social class. Whites and African Americans were now not only separated by race, but by the social class that was created as a result of segregation. Adams (2012) and Reber (2011) stated that the United States would never be truly united until this legally and culturally supported segregation ended.

As the lack of equality that existed in the Plessy ruling became evident, many African Americans, along with whites, began to challenge the rules and statutes that the Plessy case legitimatized and legalized. The concept of "separate but equal" was legally over turned in the 1954 Supreme Court case of Brown vs. The board of Education of Topeka Kansas. The plaintiffs in this case brought to light that the education that African Americans were receiving in segregated schools was not equal to that of their white peers. This landmark ruling would be the beginning of the end of legally segregated education in the United States, but not before lasting damage had been done to a large percentage of the African American race.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, several states enacted a program in an attempt to further desegregate school. This program became known as "busing." Students from predominantly African American schools were transported on buses to predominantly white schools outside of their typical attendance area. It was hoped that this would lead to more equality for the African American students by sending them to schools that were traditionally better funded and staffed (Delmont et al., 2017; Woodward, 2011). In some states, attempts were made to bus white students to predominantly African American schools, but were met with much resistance. Therefore, the largest percentage of students bused were African American (Woodward, 2011). It was also hoped that school districts would be forced to eliminate creating attendance zones based on race. School systems that resisted this program were met with restricted funding and sanctions from state governments.

School busing was met with resistance from both African Americans and whites. Many African Americans felt that this was eliminating their rights as parents to choose where their students attended school. Busing also did nothing to address the trend in most major cities of building newer, better funded schools in predominantly white areas and doing little to assist schools in predominantly African American communities. Busing would not help the academic struggles of the African American kids that remained in their original school. Many African American families also feared for the safety of their child being bused to a school due to the racial tension that was created. (Delmont et al, 2017; Nutter, 2010; Woodward, 2011). Many white families were opposed to their children attending school with African American students. Busing lead many white families to either enroll their children in private or non-public schools or move to a community further outside the city.

In large metropolitan areas such as Boston, Massachusetts and Nashville, Tennessee, many urban areas saw school enrollment shift from 60% white in the late 70's to 15-20% white by the late 90's (Delmont et al, 2017; Nutter, 2010; Woodward, 2011). In 1999, Boston schools voted to end race based school assignments and many school districts around the country followed suit. Historian Ronaldo Formisoano described school busing as "a war nobody won" (Nutter, 2010, p. 71). In the end, busing only lead to more segregated schools and many families turning away from public schools to educate their children. In the majority of cases, little to no academic gains were seen for the schools and students involved in busing programs (Woodward, 2011). In most cases, busing gave way to new programs, such as Nashville's School Improvement Plan (SIP), designed to provide financial and organizational support to predominantly African American schools with a student body experiencing academic struggles. It was hoped that assisting these schools directly would better address the academic challenges their students were facing (Woodward, 2011).

**Government Reform.** In 2001, the United States federal government issued a plan with the goal of addressing the needs of students that were struggling in American public schools. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) established a mandate that by the end of the 2013-2014 school year all students in American public schools would be proficient in reading and math. It was hoped that this mandate, which was directly tied to school funding, would create both pressure and motivation for school districts to address the needs of their entire student body. In turn, the achievement gap that existed between white and black, rich and poor students would be narrowed and eventually eliminated (Kreig, 2011; McEntire, 2010; Moussaoui, 2017).

In the end, NCLB did little to achieve its intended goals. School systems throughout the country used the flexibility of the assessment component of NCLB to manipulate numbers that

showed their students were making average yearly progress (AYP). In many states proficiency standards were lowered to give the perception that schools were making progress, but in reality were actually challenging students at a lower level than before NCLB was enacted. While NCLB did force school systems to at least consider the needs of their struggling students, it provided little support or resources to make this a reality. Between the years of 2008-2009, one third of U.S. schools did not make AYP. In the same year, in nine states including the District of Columbia, over half of public schools did not make AYP (McEntire, 2010).

Another area NCLB that did not meet its goals was the effort to close the achievement gap between black and white students. Studies showed NCLB had little to no effect on the black-white achievement gap (Gorey, 2009; Jeynes, 2014; Kreig, 2011). The lack of effectiveness of NCLB illustrated the ineffectiveness of curriculum and testing mandates to close achievement gaps and improve student performance. Effective mandates must also be accompanied with the support necessary to assist teachers in implementing curriculum and students in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to excel in testing. Without support, all the standards in the world will not alter student performance (Gorey, 2009; Jeynes, 2014; Kreig, 2011).

As the history of African American education in the United States is examined, it is easy to see how a white-black achievement gap has been created. From the days of slavery and the early twentieth century, getting just a basic education was a challenge for many African Americans. When education was made available to the majority of African Americans, factors like segregation diminished the quality of their education. Several attempts have been made to address the achievement gap, but the majority of these strategies have focused more on schools, policy, and curriculum and very little on the African American as an individual. Hopefully, the

information gathered in this study will illustrate how individual African Americans have experience academic success and what factors have made this success possible.

**Current Statistics Concerning African American Males and Academic Success**

Current statistics show that an achievement gap exists in the American educational system between African American males and their peers (Schott, 2015). Along with illustrating the academic struggles that African American males face, current statistics also show that African American males are more likely to be imprisoned and unemployed than other ethnic groups in American society (Barton & Coley, 2010; Spohn, 2015). All of these issues contribute to the challenges that African American males face in their attempt to attain educational success

**Achievement gap.** Current literature concerning both education and society addresses the growing achievement gap that exists in the United States between African American males and their peers more and more each year. Education Trust Senior Carlton Jordan stated, "Wherever I go, African American boys are always on the bottom" (Varlas, 2005, p. 1). A school board member in Prince George's County Maryland, a suburb of Washington D.C. commented, "Many of the black boys that attend these schools are at the bottom in every respect, in every academic indicator" (Sommers, 2000, p. 39). As was mentioned in chapter one, according to a study by the Schott Foundation from 2012 to 2013, only 59% of African American males graduated high school on time compared with 80% of white males (Schott, 2015).

From the 1970's to the 1980's, the achievement gap between African American and white students in the content areas of reading and math narrowed. This narrowing of the gap began to slow in the late 1980's and has continued to remain stagnant. There were actually years in the 1980's in which the achievement gap was narrower than in recent years. The narrowing of this gap in the 1980's has been attributed to factors such as smaller class size and an increase in

the perceived chances for academic opportunities and success in African American students.

While these factors have shown to play a role, it has been difficult to pinpoint exactly what

caused the gap to narrow during this time span and why this narrowing slowed, but then

increased in some areas (Barton & Coley, 2010; Bereends, Reardon, 2015; Ladd, 2008).  The

goal of this study is to reveal aspects of the educational experience of the participants that

enabled them to achieve academic success, and how the participant perceived the factors that

lead to their success.  These factors can provide educators with tools that can be used to continue

the process of narrowing the achievement gap and increasing the academic performance of their

African American students.

       **Unemployment and incarceration.** The issues that African American males face are not

limited to the classroom.  One out of every four African American males is in jail or under court

supervision (Bailey, 2004).  More African American men in their twenties are under court

control than are enrolled in college (Bailey, 2004).  This high rate of incarceration and criminal

activity has been directly linked to a lack of academic achievement and educational progress

(Justice Policy Institute, 2007; Barton & Coley, 2010).  African American male's ages 15 to 24

are murdered at a rate 15 times the rate of young white males (Cose, 2005).  African American

males have a 1 in 21 chance of being murdered in their lifetime compared to 1 in 104 for African

American females and 1 in 131 for white males (Boyd, 2006).

       Education is also a key determinant in the future employment rates of African American

students.  African American males born from 1970 to 1974 with 12 years or more of schooling

have a 68% employment rate as opposed 47% of African American males born during that time

period with 9 to 11 years of schooling.  A lack of education also creates a gap in the lifetime

earning potential between African American males and their peers (Barton & Coley, 2010;

Hirsch, & Winters, 2016).  Whites born during that same time with 12 years or more of

schooling, experience an 87% employment rate.  The most striking fact revealed by correlating

education with future employment is African American males born from 1970 to 1974

experienced an 89% employment rate as opposed to 95% of white males born during that time.

So, not only does increased education improve the employment rate of African American males,

but higher education drastically reduces the employment gap that exists between these two

groups.  Four more years of education equals a 13% reduction in the employment gap between

these two groups (Barton & Coley, 2010; Hirsch & Winters 2014; Owens, 2016).

The problems that African American students face begin to work in a circular pattern.

Just as a lack of education is linked to lower rates of employment, being born into a lower

socioeconomic household decreases the chances for an individual to experience academic

success.  Minority income is 60% that of the majority (Hirsch & Winters, 2014; Sharkey, 2009).

The net worth of minority families, that is the amount of money a family earns versus the

outstanding debt they possess, in the United States is only 18% of the majority net worth.  What

makes this statistic even more frightening is the lack of upward mobility that exists in the

African American population.  Only one out of every four African Americans born into the

bottom two quintiles of economic standing will experience upward mobility as opposed to three

in five white born into this same demographic.  So, not only are African American children born

into lower socioeconomic environments, but they are also less likely to move out of this group as

life progresses.  Living in a lower socioeconomic environment can cause African American male

students to perceive that they either cannot or will not experience academic success (Owens,

2016; Ziol-Guest & Lee, 2016).  The African American males involved in this study will serve as

an example of how to break this cycle and how altering the perceptions of these young men can help them improve their chances for success in not only school but in life.

**Contributing Factors of African American Male Academic Success**

Major factors that contribute to the academic struggles that many African American males face is the negative self-concept that many of these young men have along with a negative influence that is constantly reinforced by their peers (Butler-Barnes, Estrada-Martinez, Colin, & Jines; Carter, 2005; Tyler et al,. 2016; Ogbu, 2004). Negative Parental views toward education or a lack of involvement in the educational process is also often a deterrent for African American males (Hussain & Thomas, 2010). A lack of a social network that will allow them to develop cultural understanding and connections that will be needed to function in high level academic and work environments also creates a gap in the ability of African American males to achieve at the highest level possible in the academic setting (Kafele, 2009).

**Self-Concept and peer influence.** African American males face many factors that stand in the way of their academic success. One of the most prominent factors is the motives and identities of the students themselves. In many cases, African American males feel that academic success will lead to rejection by their peers (Givens et al., 2016; Ogbu, 2004; Tyler et al., 2016). A fear is developed by African American males that they will be viewed as race traitors by assimilating to the dominant culture and attempting to function at a high level in the academic world (Carter, 2005). African American males hold the view that excelling academically will cause them to be labeled as "acting white" and will cause them to lose social standing. This is where the concept of an "oppositional identity" (Carter, 2005) comes into play. In order to address the needs that exist in this group of learners, educators must understand some of the

attitudes and mindsets these students possess (Allen, 2015; Carter, 2005; Webb, 2016; Ogbu, 2004; Ogbu, 2008).

All adolescents are preoccupied with acceptance from their peers, but this factor plays an even greater influence in the lives of African American males.  Many of these boys are more concerned with the approval of their peers than with any other aspect in their lives.  Academic success, for most of these individuals, pales in comparison to their desire for social status and peer acceptance.  Kafele (2009) states that many African American males believe that demonstrating intelligence or a desire to succeed academically will show them to not be, "down, cool, or black" (p. 19).  In turn, this means that in order for them to act "black," African American males cannot appear to be intelligent or focused on improving their intellectual abilities (Carter, 2005; Givens et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 2004). In many situations, African American males automatically associate academic achievement with being white.  It is hard for high achieving African American students placed in gifted and advanced placement classes to identify themselves as being both gifted and black (Cleveland, 2011; Fries-Britt, 1997; Webb, 2016).

African American males must first have a strong sense of themselves as individuals in order to have the confidence necessary to extend themselves in the academic setting and branch out into the dominant culture.  Racial identity is a very complicated concept for African American students in general.  Gifted African American students have an even greater challenge in achieving a healthy racial identity.  Striving for academic success causes a great deal of social and emotional conflicts in the lives of African American males due to the perceived separation from African American culture (Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Webb, 2016).  Fordam (1988) addresses the issue that many African American students adopt a raceless persona to help them

deal with the pressures of adopting characteristics that their African American peers view as being part of the white mainstream culture.

Just as African American males have trouble separating the idea of academic achievement from being white, many males of all races have trouble separating academic achievement from being a feminine quality. African American males feel achieving academic success makes them less manly. This situation is made worse in the lives of African American males due to the lack of positive male role models that are available to counteract this notion. The media also contributes to this mindset by glorifying strong male figures that embody qualities that seem masculine, but reject qualities that are necessary to make an individual successful academically and in society. All of these factors reinforce the notion in the minds of many boys that being different from their peers and striving for academic excellence will make them appear weak and soft (Cleveland, 2011; Tyler et al., 2016). The ridicule and social pressure that academically successful males often face is multiplied in the lives of African American males (Kunjufu, 2007; Tyler et al., 2016; Webb, 2016).

Kafele (2009) stated, "Too many educators are spending inordinate amounts of time addressing issues associated with self-esteem, self-image, self-discipline, self-respect, and self-actualization without first addressing the issue of self-identity" (p. 58). It is the responsibility of educators to assist these young men in understanding who they are as individuals and what it means to be an African American male. If students are receiving a negative image of what it means to be an African American male, teachers and other mentors must help reinforce positive aspects of not only the individual, but also of the African American culture. Before academic success can be addressed, African American males must first be given a strong sense of self and confidence in their personal identity. Studies have shown that African American youth that feel

confident, aware of their identity as an African American, and have an in-depth understanding of their racial group show a more positive outlook toward education and increased academic performance (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Webb, 2016). Strengthening racial identity is one of the reasons that positive mentors have shown to improve the academic performance of African American students. A strong mentor allows an African American youth to develop a positive concept of what it means to be an African American. This improved racial identity has an impact in all areas of a student's life (Hurd, et al., 2012; Kafele, 2009; Rhoden, 2017).

Language can also be a social barrier for many African American males. African American males are expected by their peers to speak Ebonics and to use slang in their daily conversation. However, for them to succeed in the academic and professional world, they must also be able to fluently and intelligently speak Standard English. The peer expectation to use Ebonics often causes many African American males to not participate in classroom discussions or interact with their teachers in the school setting. The ability to maneuver between these two dialects is something many African American males either will not do or do not understand why altering how their communication is important. The need for African American males to acquire the cultural capital necessary to function in mainstream society is made evident through the effect dialect has on African American male's chances for academic success. The analogy of Ebonics versus Standard English shows that while African Americans speak English communicating with individuals in mainstream society may still be a struggle. This language deficiency can also hinder an African American from discussing subjects that they are not comfortable with and have little background knowledge. Discussions over topics like family traditions and common childhood practices become very difficult if a person lacks the language

capital to effectively communicate (Kafele, 2009; Lareau, 2003; McWhorter, 2001; Miciak, Wilkinson, Alexander, & Reyes, 2014).

Another issue that must be addressed in African American male students is the stereotype threat that exists within this group. In many social and academic settings, African American students in general are stereotyped as having abilities below that of their peers. Just as Asian students are often stereotyped to be more likely to succeed academically, African American students are stereotyped to be less likely to experience academic success. These lowered expectations filter through to the psyche of these students. After years of this notion being reinforced in both school and in society, these students begin to adopt these low expectations for themselves. African American student's belief that their racial group is inferior to mainstream culture can cause them to doubt their ability to succeed academically and take on the mindset that African American culture is a hindrance to their academic success (Fordam & Ogbu, 1986; Noguera, 2008; Tyler et al., 2016; Webb, 2016).

In some cases, these stereotypes are overtly demonstrated while other times they are displayed in more subtle manners. Stereotypes often materialize in how students are treated daily in a class or the way teachers interact with African American student's verses their peers. While people may not be telling African American students directly that they have a lower probability of success, this notion may be reinforced in their daily interactions with these students. Because of this stereotyping, many African American male students struggle academically due to the lack of self-confidence stereotyping creates. Through this, a stigma develops that these students do not possess the ability to succeed. Once a stigma becomes associated with a certain person or group, it is very difficult to dissolve (Bottiani, Bradshaw, &

Mendelson, 2016; Noguera, 2008; St. Mary, Calhoun, Tejada, & Jensen, 2018; Paige & Witty, 2010).

Another factor that creates a void between African American males and the academic world is the lack of role models and representation in higher-level academic activities and classes. In most schools, there are more African American males on sports teams than on debate teams or in advanced placement classes. This fact makes it hard for African American males who may want to become involved in non-athletic extra-curricular activities or enroll in honors classes to feel comfortable doing so. This also creates a void of peer examples for younger students to emulate in the academic setting. This issue is one of the main motives for this research project. A goal of this study is to uncover the qualities that have made the African American males in this study successful and to provide younger African American males with people to emulate. This information will also provide teachers and parents with specific examples that can be used to inspire and motive their children and students (Barone, 2009; McWorter, 2001; Noguera, 2008; Reddick, 2012; Rhoden, 2017).

**Parental influence.** While several factors exist that influence the academic performance of African American males, none may be more influential than parental involvement. Parental involvement has been shown time and time again to be a predictor of future outcomes in the academic setting for African American males. By simply helping children with homework, having a casual conversation that reduces television watching, and being actively involved in the life of can have a positive impact on academic success. Parental influence has a greater impact on the academic success of African American students than white students (Williams & Portman, 2014; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Hussain & Thomas, 2010).

Some specific aspects of parental involvement have been shown to have a direct impact

on the achievement level of these students. The first aspect of parental involvement that has been shown to effect academic performance are the attitudes of the parents regarding the importance of academic and social skills. Parents that emphasize academic performance and show their interest in their student performance on academic measures such as tests, quizzes, and classroom projects have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic success of African American boys (Gonzalez-DeHass & Reynolds, 2008; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Parents that take a direct role in the home by assisting with the completion of homework and actively planning with their child future educational and career goals have shown to have the greatest impact on student performance (Gonzalez-DeHass, & Reynolds, 2008; Williams & Bryan 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014; Joe & Davis 2009). Parents are often the first influence children encounter regarding education. If parents have a positive attitude toward school, it is more likely the child will also.

Showing concern and interest in a student's performance gives evidence to a child that academics are important and should be given ample time and attention. Recognizing a rewarding performance will give African American students more motivation to succeed. Perceived parental involvement and support has a direct impact on the academic success of African American students (Jeynes, 2014; William, & Portman, 2014). High expectations from parents in regards to academic success and educational attainment lead to a higher level of accomplishment in the lives of African American students (St. Mary et al., 2018; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). Praise and recognition from peers for achievement in the academic world is often lacking in the lives of African American students. It is important that parents fill this void.

Another aspect of parental involvement that has been shown to correlate with increased

achievement in African American males is the frequent discussion of racial and ethnic heritage. Parents attempting to make their sons and daughters feel comfortable with their ethnic heritage and as a member of a cultural group have shown to pay dividends in academic success. As mentioned earlier, confidence in their racial identity is an area African American males often struggle with. This lack of confidence often leads to an uneasiness and feeling of alienation in a social setting like school where the dominant cultural trend may be different form their own (Bottiani et al., 2016; Joe & Davis, 2009; Webb, 2016).

When parents frequently discuss the issue of race and heritage with their children, it shows the importance of this issue and also shows the child that the parents are comfortable with the issue and confident enough to discuss it with their children. This demonstration of confidence can serve as a model for African America males to follow in regards to their cultural identity. If ethnic identity has been addressed before African American males encounter it in a social setting, it is more likely that they will respond in a positive manner to any negative emotions that could be experienced regarding race and culture. This mindset and confidence level can be very important in the academic success of African American males. Studies have also shown that an active maternal support of racial identity directly decreases social anxiety and stress in African American adolescents (Williams et al, 2017; Rowley, Varner, Ross, Williams, & Banerjee, 2012; Stevenson & Arrington, 2011; Thompson, 2009).

Discussing issues, such as skin color and hair, will help African American students feel more comfortable with the personal qualities that make them unique individuals. Parents should also directly discuss stereotypes and ignorance that is posed by both African Americans and other races regarding race and culture. Once African American children understand that most of the stereotypes people have of them are based on ignorance and lack of knowledge, this

knowledge will better equip them repel the negative impact that these stereotypes can often have (Jeynes, 2014; Rowleyet al., 2012; Joe, & Davis, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Thompson (2009) emphasized the need for parents of African American children to "keep reminding our children that they are not inferior, don't deserve second class citizenship, and must not believe the lies and stereotypes that continue to be spread about African Americans" (p. 77). One of the main benefits of research and uncovering the role parents play in the academic success of African American males is the creation of support mechanisms that can better assist the parents of these children in the future. Parenting programs that educate parents on how to better prepare their children to start school can pay big dividends in the long-term success of African American males. This set of knowledge can also help schools and communities to design pre-school programs that address the specific needs of African American males (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Joe & Davis, 2009). The actions that the parents of the African American males involved in this study took while raising them will serve as an example for other parents of African American males to follow in the future.

**Social network.** Apart from parents, the social network of an African American male may be the most influential factor in determining the likelihood of academic success. This social network can be defined by a person's peers, educators, religious figures, and siblings (Strayhorn, 2010). All of these figures combine to influence the mindset and disposition of an individual. Parker (2008) says 70% of black children are born into single parent homes. In most cases, this parent is the mother. Through their educational experience, the majority of their teachers will be white females. This void of positive African American male mentors encourages these individuals to reach out to the wrong people as a source of guidance and support. In many cases, the African American males that these adolescents have access to are not the people worthy of

emulating (Given et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009). This fact emphasizes the need for positive African American male role models. This need makes this study extremely relevant to the lives of African American males, their families, and the teachers that educate them.

Social networks are influential in the lives of all human beings, but hold an even greater influence in the lives of African American males (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010; Webb, 2016). Resent research has shown that African American males from higher socioeconomic families receive higher grades in college than that of their same race peers from a lower socioeconomic subgroup. Hailing from a higher socioeconomic group leads a person to form a social network that differs greatly with that of a person from a low socioeconomic group. African American males from higher socioeconomic groups will be exposed to more situations that will be prepared to excel in an academic setting. A higher socioeconomic background also provides more social and cultural capital that will lead to functioning in higher level academic classes and social settings. As Strayhorn (2010) documents, this enhanced ability to function with various levels of society will better prepare those individuals to obtain higher level jobs, as well as, higher level education

Functioning daily in a higher socioeconomic social network allows a person to build more cultural capital. The difference between social and cultural capital is that cultural capital is associated with a set of tastes, preferences, and values that help a person function at a higher level in mainstream society. In most cases, this fact carries over into the academic setting. Accumulating this cultural capital is a powerful predictor of success for all individuals, but even more so for African American males. Low socioeconomic classification increases the relevance of cultural capital in a person's life (Bourdieu, 1977; Hussain & Thomas, 2010; Strayhorn, 2010; Wiebold & Spiller, 2016).

Within the social network of African American males, the church and religious figures carry a large influence in the success of these individuals in not only academics, but in life. Studies have shown that religion and interaction with religious figures has a positive impact in the academic lives of African American males (Byfield, 2008; Jordan & Wilson 2015). Religion creates a heightened sense of commitment and dedication in the life of an African American male. These attributes help African American males function at a higher level academically (Hussain & Thomas, 2010; Jordan & Wilson, 2015). This religious interaction is once again more significant in the lives of African American males than females (Harris, 2003).

It has already been discussed that attitude has a strong effect on the academic performance of African American males. Another aspect that has not been examined is the concept of African American males purposely alienating themselves from mainstream society in order to find belonging and strength. This idea had been referred to as "Therapeutic Alienation" (McWhorter, 2005). This ties very closely with the idea of oppositional identity described by Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998). This concept of therapeutic alienation for African Americans began to arise in the counter culture of the 1960's. At that time, African Americans found power and belonging by aligning themselves with other Americas that were fighting the establishment of society and government. These African Americans found identity in this alienation; it was "therapeutic" for them. This mindset has carried over into modern hip-hop culture and street gangs. It has led to African Americans adopting fashion, language, and music that are directly opposed to mainstream culture. By aligning themselves with this modern counter culture, many African Americans have made it difficult to fit into and function in the dominant American culture. This differs from oppositional identity, in that oppositional identity is often acquired in a passive way with the person that embodies this trait unaware of this

mindset. Therapeutic alienation is often a choice by the individual to actively lead a life opposed to mainstream culture (Allen, 2015; Lareau & Weininger, 2011; Ogbu, 2003; Tyler et al., 2016; Webb, 2016). In many cases, making this conscious decision creates a social disconnect for African American males and creates a situation where both the ability and the desire to attain any social capital in the dominant culture is lost. For many African American males attaining cultural capital would mean turning their back on a culture of alienation that has been created by themselves and their environment. This separation hinders the academic achievement of countless African American males in the United States.

The reoccurring themes of the various factors influencing the performance of African American males to a higher degree than their peers illustrates how imperative it is for mentors and role models to become more involved in the lives of these students. Also, an important aspect is that African American males are exposed to positive influences as early and as often as possible to increase the probability of academic success. By examining the impact that the social network of the African American males involved this study has had on their lives, this study will uncover ways that people outside of a child's immediate family can help mentor and guide the child to academic success (Allen, 2015; Donner & Schockley, 2010; Given et al., 2016; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Of all the possible mentors, educators may have the greatest ability to effect change in the lives of African American males. To completely understand how African American males can attain academic success, the contribution the world of education has made directly must be examined.

**Education's Contributions to African American Males' Academic Success**

In order to help a certain group of students, a school must first identify the specific needs that this group requires to achieve academic success. The school must then identify aspects of

the school environment that can help address these specific needs.  In many cases, the general

school environment needs to be addressed.  Educators and administrators alike must take steps to

address an environment that in many cases makes African American males feel alienated and

unaccepted.  The overall environment of the school must be designed so that all social and ethnic

groups feel welcome and engaged (Butler-Derge, 2009; Fashola, 2003).

  **School culture and climate.**  School environment should translate directly into the

classroom.  Classrooms should provide a direct link to both the social and cultural experiences of

African American male students (Walker-Bowen, 2007).  The instructor should take special care

in managing the class so that individual cultures and ideas mesh with the culture of the African

American males in their class.  Instructors must make engaging African American males in the

daily working of a class a priority.  These students must have an active role in the activities that

are taking place and must have a vested interest in learning the material.  In most cases, lecture

and direct instruction based classrooms will not successfully disseminate information to the

African American male student (Walker-Bowen, 2007; Noguera, 2003).

  Students that have a strong bond with a school's culture will perform at a higher level in

the academic setting.  A factor that has been shown to strengthen the social and cultural bond of

African American males to the school environment and increase their academic success is their

involvement in clubs and student organizations.  African American males that were involved in

student government and community service organizations performed higher than their same race

peers that were not involved in these types of social organizations (Strayhorn, 2010).  This could

be attributed to these individuals socializing with and surrounding themselves with people who

were more academic and socially minded and wanting to take part in activities that were going to

better them as people.  It is also interesting that involvement in a fraternity showed to have a

negative impact on academic performance. This illustrates that simply having a support network will not necessarily help African American males succeed. What is important is having a support network that will help develop the person and encourage them to focus their time and energy on activities that will help them grow socially and intellectually (Strayhorn, 2010).

A qualitative study in 1997 of a high school composed of a student body of predominantly minority and low-income students showed academic success for the students of this school improved as the culture of the school improved (Nolly, 1997). The focus of the leadership of this school was to establish a culture of caring for the individual student. This idea was used to drive all instructional practices and decisions. Teachers were asked to put the students first and ensure that first and foremost the students felt that the staff of the school cared for them as an individual. As a result of this culture of caring, the academic performance of this school as a whole improved (Nolly, 1997). This study illustrates the need for support from the school culture.

**Teachers.** The person that can often be the greatest influence over not only the social organizations African American males are involved in, but also influence their lives is their teacher. Due to the lack of parental influence in many African American homes regarding achievement in education and social mobility, a teacher may be the only person to provide this type of leadership to an African American male. In order to accomplish this, teachers must form bonds with their African American male students. Teachers of African American males must show a genuine interest in both African American culture and in African American students as individuals. Teachers must reach out and make the effort to learn what African American students face in day-to-day life. Teachers must go into African American neighborhoods and the homes of African American students to see in person what these students have to deal with and

endure on a daily basis (Kafele, 2009; Palmer, Wood, Dancey, & Strayhorn, 2014).

Learning about a student's culture helps educators engage in what Gay (2000) calls "culturally responsive teaching." This method uses the culture and past experiences of a student to make curriculum and instruction more engaging. This not only helps an educator address issues that may arise with African American male students, but also shows them that someone cares and is willing to sacrifice time to learn about them. Rigorous classes, along with a skilled and motivated teacher, can overcome the limits that are often placed on Africa American males due to socioeconomic factors (Palmer et al., 2014; Reeves, 2000).

Another way for teachers to create bonds between themselves and their African American students is through community outreach programs that help both the students and the parents. Programs that assist parents in understanding how they can help their child succeed academically have shown to have a positive effect on the academic progress of African American students (Sheely-Moore & Bratton, 2010). Making parents feel valued in their children's academic progress will increase the interest the parents take in helping them succeed. This increased parental activity creates an even stronger bond between a teacher and a student (Sheely-Moore & Bratton, 2010; Sommers, Owens, & Pillawsky, 2009). A strong student-teacher bond increases the confidence of African American males and the likelihood of them achieving academic success (Cleveland, 2011; Kafele, 2009; Rhoden, 2017; Scott et al., 2013).

Teachers of African American males, to fully appreciate and understand the culture these students come from, must also familiarize themselves with the music that these students listen to. Teachers must be aware of the negative impact rap music can have on students and how as mentors teachers can help combat some of the negative messages delivered by this music. One genre of rap music that can be extremely detrimental to the mindset of African American males

is "gangsta rap" (Kurbin, 2005). This is rap music that depicts the daily activities of gangs and gang members. The majority of the lyrics glorify drug use and violence while degrading women and send anti-law enforcement messages. Much of "gangsta rap" focuses on the concept of respect. This respect is obtained through force and violence not through knowledge and understanding (Kafele, 2009; Kurbin, 2005). This glorification of force and violence as a means to respect and social prowess can diminish the importance of intellectual power and academic accomplishment in the psyche of African American males (Tyson & Porcher, 2012).

"Gangsta rap" is not the only culprit in rap music that can hinder academic performance. Many mainstream popular rappers diminish the importance of education in their lyrics and promote the idea that education may not benefit an African American. Rapper Kanye West in a popular song describes how uncomfortable he was in school and how one of his classmates that finished at the top of their graduating class served him food at a restaurant recently (West, 2004). Due to West's popularity, this oppositional image toward school and education is cemented into the psyche of many African American males.

Rap music in some cases also solidifies the fear in many African Americans that even if academic success is achieved it will not result in obtaining a better job or having a more stable economic future. Popular rapper 50 Cent stated in one of his songs, "I'm the dropout that made more money than these teachers" (Jackson, 2003). Lyrics from rapper Jay-Z boast, "I'm the proud new owner of the nets, no diploma no regrets" (Sean Carter, 2005). Now deceased rapper The Notorious B.I.G opens his first album with the dedication, "This is to all the teachers that told me I wouldn't amount to nothing" (Wallace, 1994). Lyrics like these illustrate two things: first, in popular culture, the disconnect that many African American males feel from the educational process is cemented by the people they idolize. The second is the viewpoint of many

African American males that their teachers do not care about them and have no hope for their futures.   This last point brings into focus the importance of the relationship between the student and teacher, and how an individual, years after graduating and achieving national fame still valued the relationship with their teachers and were still affected by the negative aspect of this relationship (Emdin, 2010; Scott et al., 2013).

However, not all rap music is bad, and some rap lyrics actually promote a positive racial identity of what it means to be an African American, giving young people a sense of cultural and ethnic pride.  Rap music can be utilized in the classroom as a means to connect with African American students by allowing them to compose raps containing content from that class's curriculum and using rap lyrics to discuss culture and current events (Kurbin, 2005; Washington, 2018; Zillman et al., 1995).  Understanding how both rap music influences African American youth both positively and negatively will help teachers and parents form a stronger bond with their children and students and be able to address the potentially negative messages that rap music can transmit.

In order to maximize the potential for academic success in their classes, teachers must develop an energetic, student-centered classroom.  High standards must be established and maintained for these students.  Teachers must show African American males that they believe in their potential for academic success.  Teachers must also be willing to provide the support necessary to help African American students accomplish academic success.  In many instances, this is often not the case.  Many teachers harbor the belief that African American males either are incapable of sustained academic success or lack the proper motivation to achieve in school.  This attitude needs to be replaced by a demanding and supportive mind set.  This student- teacher bond plays a pivotal role in the academic success of African American male students (Allen,

2015; Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008; Hotchkins, 2016; Strayhorn, 2008).

Teachers of African American males should design lessons and interactions that are motivational, as well as, instructional for African American males.  In the end, the most important factor in teachers helping African American males to succeed is the teachers' understanding that they may the most important positive influences in the lives of African American students.  This belief in their ability to make a difference in the lives of African American students will lead educators to find ways to make this success a reality (Howard, 2006; Rhoden, 2017; Kafele, 2009).  Examining how teachers have influenced the lives of the African American males in this study will serve as an example of how both teachers and students can reach out to each other to help make the academic process a success.

<p style="text-align:center"><strong>Summary</strong></p>

An achievement gap exists in American schools between African American students and their white peers.  Clearly, this gap is even greater between African American males and their white peers (Schott, 2015).  Theoretical factors that contribute to this gap are the oppositional identity toward school that is adopted by many African American males.  This identity is often developed by these individuals by both socially learning this mindset through observing the people and culture around them and constructing this identity through their daily lives and decisions (Ogbu, 2008; Ogbu, 2004; Bandura, 1977).  Many of the African American males that struggle academically lack both the ability and cultural capital to function in the educational environment, while maintaining their bonds to their own African American culture.  This often causes them to lose confidence in their ability to succeed in both academics and in the professional world (Lareau & Weininger, 2011; Wiehold & Spiller, 2016).

Statistics proclaim African American males are more likely to be incarcerated and killed than any other group in this country (Green, Hilton, & Palmer, 2008; Marabel, 2008). African American males are often subject to the racial stereotype that they are incapable of excelling academically. A culture exists in many African American communities that views educational achievement as being subversive and traitorous to their identity as an African American (Ogbu, 2008; Webb, 2016). These young men are often left without mentors in their lives that can model both social stability and academic success (Barone, 2009). In many cases, African American males are bombarded with messages from popular culture that discourages them from academic success and encourages them to seek identity and strength in areas that are in direct opposition to upward mobility in academics and careers (Botianni et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009; McWhorter, 2007; Webb, 2016). A myriad of evidence explains the factors that cause the struggle an African American male experiences in the pursuit of academic achievement. Several examples of interventions to help African American students succeed have been researched. The missing aspect in helping African American men experience success are academically successful mentors who share their same traits and backgrounds.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to determine African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic success at a four-year college. This chapter outlines the research design, provides information about the participants and setting, and details how data will be collected and analyzed. It will conclude with a discussion of trustworthiness promoting the validity of this study and the ethical issues that will be addressed during this process.

## Design

A transcendental phenomenological approach is the best research method for this study due to the ability it gives me to gain a subjective view of the phenomenon being studied. Transcendental phenomenology allows me to bracket the phenomenon apart from other influences and situations, and apart from my own personal biases and beliefs. The bracketing involved in a transcendental study allows for a deeper understanding of the subject. This allows the researcher to reach a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to the academic success of the participants of this study (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). The focus of qualitative research is to understand and explain a topic on which very little has been written (Creswell, 2003). Creswell (2013) instructed researchers to build an understanding based on the ideas of the participants' responses. Bloomberg & Volpe (2008) state that qualitative research places an, "emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description" (p. 8). This design matches the intentions of this study to understand more about academically successful African American males and how they have perceived the factors that have led to their success.

Phenomenology was chosen because this research method seeks to give meaning and perspective to a specific phenomenon that has been experienced by a select group of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). This perspective is gained through first-person interactions (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This description matches the interview process that will be used in this study to gain the perspective of academically successful African American males. The focus of this research is not to gather information on what factors helped the participants achieve academic success, but to understand how they perceived these factors and why they feel certain factors made more of an impact on their academic performance than others. This aligns with phenomenology as described by Langdridge (2007) since it "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them" (p. 4).

A central theme in phenomenological research is to understand the essence of an experience or phenomenon. The idea of an essence is best described as the basic logic or motivation behind a feeling or experience. Phenomenology attempts to give an understanding of a feeling or idea at its most basic level in order to better understand how this idea came into existence (Van Manen, 1990; Dukes, 1994). Four qualities that are considered "celebrated themes" common to the school of phenomenology: description, reduction, essences, and intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The essence and intentionality of a phenomenon are basically the core or total meaning of an idea. This total meaning can be attained by gaining the perspectives of multiple individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Moustakas (1994) asserts that the data collected from a group of individuals who have experienced a common phenomenon helps uncover the essence of an experience. The goal of this research is that the interviews of African American males who have graduated from a four-year college will help uncover the essence of how they perceived certain factors that contributed to their academic success.

This study is intended to uncover the perceptions of the participants as it pertains to their educational experiences. My goal is to allow the participant responses and interactions to guide and develop the themes that will be studied in detail (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). This study is intrinsic in nature with a collective aspect. It is collective in sampling procedures, but intrinsic due to my personal interest in what factors contributed to the academic success of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

## Research Questions

The following research questions guide this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study that will examine the factors that contributed to the academic success of African American males:

**Central Research Question:** What factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success?

**Sub Question 1:** Why do the African American males participating in this study feel that some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?

**Sub Question 2**: What factors do African American male college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress, and how were they able to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree?

**Sub Question 3:** How does the school environment of high school and a 4-year college affect an African American male student's ability to attain a college degree?

## Setting

The setting for this study is a predominantly rural Southern region. This area was selected due to the researcher teaching in this area and being familiar with the culture of this

area.  The area is unique due to its predominantly rural landscape and a student population that is

composed of small groups of African American students in an area with a small African

American population overall.  The cultural and geographical make-up of this area should add a

unique perspective to this study.  The majority of information in current literature on African

American educational achievement comes from larger urban areas (Allen, 2015; Schott, 2015).

The fact that the participants in this study live in a predominantly rural area should provide a

unique set of both cultural and environmental experience that are not commonly exposed when

studies are focused around a more urban area.  Uncovering the factors that helped the individuals

in this study should expose some unique perspectives and experiences due to the geographical

location if this study.  According to the United States Census Bureau (2015) the demographic

breakdown of the area from which participants will be selected consisted of 6% African

Americans, 91% Caucasian, 3.5% Asian, and 1.5% Hispanic.  Seventeen percent of the citizens

in the study area were classified as being below poverty.

**Participants**

The participants of this study were selected using a purposeful sampling method.  Patton

(2002) states, "The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information rich cases whose

study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 46).   This sampling method will allow this

study to "purposefully inform an understanding of a research problem and central phenomenon

of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125).  African American males who have graduated from a four-

year college were selected as participants in of this study.  The participants were gathered from a

pool of African American males that received a degree from a four-year college. Potential

participants will be selected through personal contact with principals from two high schools in

East.  These principals emailed me a list of 25 potential participants.  Once I received IRB

approval, I emailed the IRB consent form to the potential participants. Of the twenty-five letters sent, sixteen individuals responded with fourteen of them agreeing to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their confidentiality. All participants were provided with a consent form that described the confidentiality of the information that was gathered and the ability they have as participants to remove themselves from the study at any time. These forms were given to them during their initial interview. All fourteen of the participants signed the consent form. This form was kept in a locked file cabinet along with the master list of pseudonym names. The list of pseudonyms and consent forms were kept separate from the interview data and consent forms.

## Procedures

The initial step in this study was to send emails requesting letters of approval from the school administrators that will generate the list of possible participants that they provide. This letter stated that they would provide this contact information and approve of the researcher contacting these individuals concerning this study.

Prior to IRB approval, an expert review was conducted to ensure the face and content validity of the interview and focus group questions, as well as the stimulus for the reflective narrative timeline. Two colleagues who have doctorate degrees reviewed the interview questions to ensure that the questions are sensitive to the racial and personal issue involved with this study while probing deep enough into the personality of the individual. This expert review will help account for personal bias in the questions (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006).

Once IRB approval was granted, a pilot study was used as a small scale version of my main study. I recruited three African American males from the school system I teach in via the same means I recruited potential participants in the actual study (Maxwell, 2005). Participants

were informed that they were taking part in a pilot study and that their responses would not be used in the final study (Yin, 2011). I also utilized the same procedures that were used during the data collection part of my main study. These procedures included individual interviews, a focus group. As with the primary study recruitment pool, these participants were required to have a minimum of a pilot study helps to test how effective the interview questions are in soliciting desired responses from a set of individuals that will not be included in the actual study. Pilot studies help to test and refine multiple aspects of a study before actual data collection takes place (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006). Through a pilot study the researcher will "learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision. They will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview" (Seidman, 2006, p. 39). The purpose of the pilot study was to provide the researcher a greater understanding of the theories and concepts that are held by the participants of this study. This pilot allowed the researcher to test participant recruitment procedures, refine and emphasize the use of epoche, and to refine my interview questions (Moustakas, 1994).

Once the pilot study was complete, the researcher contacted two principals in East Tennessee who agreed to participate in this study to request a list of potential participants for this study. These administrators sent a list of twenty-five potential participants. Once this list was received, the researcher mailed an IRB formatted recruitment letter that be found in Appendix C, and an IRB consent form that can be found in Appendix D, to the potential participants. Once these letters were sent, sixteen of the letters received a reply. After emailing and talking with the sixteen individuals that replied, fourteen agreed to participate in the study. The consent forms were signed by the participants upon arrival for their personal interview.

I have a direct relationship with several administrators in this area. I contacted these administrators via email to request a list of possible participants and their contact information. A focus group, personal interviews, and personal narratives were used to collect data during this study (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). The focus group, as well as the individual interviews, were audio recorded using a laptop computer and a cell phone as a backup device. Notes were taken during the focus group and individual interviews in relation to the subject and their reactions and responses to specific questions. The recordings were transcribed by me after the sessions were complete (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

### Researcher's Role

The subject of academically successful African American males applies directly to my professional position. I am a coach and a teacher with 13 years of experience in middle school and high school and frequently work with African American males who struggle academically. Uncovering the qualities that academically successful African American males possess will help other African American males succeed academically and socially. I looked at this study through the lens of critical theory. Critical theory entails "empowering humans to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender" (Creswell, 2007, p. 27). Creswell (2007) states, "Race is not a fixed term, but one that is fluid and continuously shaped by political pressures and informed by individuals lived experiences" (p. 28). The past experiences of the participants have shaped their view of race and how they can shape the racial views of others. It is my hope that through critical theory as I present the data collected from this study, I can empower and give a voice to African American males in the educational world and alter the way people in American society view them as an ethnic group.

I bring a participator paradigm into this study (Creswell, 2007).  My role is both a teacher and an advocate. I will also be an advocate for African American males and will illustrate their potential to succeed academically while maintaining ethnic social status (Giorgi, 2009).  I will help readers to understand the qualities that the participants possess and how these qualities can be applied in the lives of others.

My role is that of a human research instrument in the gathering and analyzing of data in this study (Maxwell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).  Data was gathered from personal interviews, focus groups, and personal narratives.

## Data Collection

Once IRB approval was received and the participants had received the IRB approved recruitment letter and had expressed interest in participating in the study, they were asked to participate in the data collection activities. The initial data collection method was personal interviews of the 14 participants; furthermore, each participant signed the IRB approved consent form prior to starting the interview. (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). The second form of data collection was a focus group of 8 participants (Morgan, 1997; Prance, 2011).  The third form of data collection was a personal narrative that was completed by all fourteen study participants the goal of this narrative was to add depth to the data collected.

### Focus Group

The focus group portion of the data collection consisted of eight participants. (Prance, 2011).  Twelve of the fourteen participants agreed to participate in the focus group.  On the night scheduled for the focus group activity only eight participants were able to attend.  Two participants called me that night to say they had a scheduling conflict.  I contacted the other two that night but was unable to reach them.  The other two contacted me within the next two days to

express their apologies for not attending. This data collection tool was used to generate

information from the selected participants to allow an opportunity for more candid responses in a

group setting due to their shared similar academic experiences. Focus groups also allow for

brainstorming and elaboration to interview response. The questions were very general to allow

for the researcher and the group members to have open dialogue about the subject (Prance,

2011). Focus groups are so named since selected participants share either common experiences

or common opinions in regard to a specific subject or idea (Yin, 2011). The strength of a focus

group lies in the focus of the researcher and the interaction of group members. I directed the

group so that specific amounts of data on the interview topic are generated. When the

participants for a focus group are selected, careful consideration must be given by the researcher

to how they will interact with each other as well as the researcher. Group dynamic plays a big

role in the success of a focus group (Morgan, 1997; Prance, 2011). My role as the researcher in

this focus group was as a moderator with the goal to elicit a more authentic and deeper response

from the participants. It was hoped that the participants would be more comfortable in a group

setting of their peers than in a one on one interview situation and that this comfort would lead to

deeper and more genuine responses. The focus group was conducted in the family room of my

home to help create a more relaxed atmosphere. The focus group was audio-recorded using my

phone as a primary recording device and a digital tape recorder as a secondary device. Written

notes were taken during the activity. As a moderator it was also my role to ensure that one or

two participants do not dominate the conversation and limit the input of the other group members

(Yin, 2011). The participants were selected through a purposeful sampling method due to the

need for all of them to be African Americans males and have graduated from a four-year college

(Patton, 1990).

The focus group activity was a unique opportunity to gather African American males who had completed their degree together to discuss how and why they were able to accomplish this goal. The most positive aspect of this activity was how much fun the participants had and how they interacted together. The conversation was very relaxed, and responses to questions and discussions seemed more genuine and unsolicited than in the personal interview. I was able to stimulate discussion about various factors of these men's academic careers and then just let them proceed to have a conversation. They brought out in each other stories and ideas that were not presented in the individual interviews. This activity was my favorite part of the research project. It was surprising to me how candid the participants were with each other and how well they interacted together. This was a very effective means of data collection. It is worth mentioning that if this study were replicated an online focus group may be a better option due to difficulties in getting several individuals together at one time in the same place, but doing this may diminish some of the social interaction that was gained through a face to face focus group.

Focus Group Questions

1. What challenges did you experience during your academic career in middle school, high school, or college? Why do you feel these challenges caused you problems and how were you able to overcome these problems and set backs.

2. Describe the factors that contributed to your academic success and why you feel they were effective. What factors do you feel were most effective in helping you achieve academic success?

3. Who were key individuals that helped you succeed academically and in what ways did they aid in your success?

4. What were some of the greatest needs you experienced during your academic career and how were some of these needs met?

5. What can educators and parents do to help African American males succeed academically?

6. Tell us a story that you would like to tell a young African American male, of a specific challenge you experienced in an academic setting and how you overcame it.

Question 1 addressed the challenges and barriers that stand in the way of African American males during their educational experiences, (Bandura, 1977; Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004; Kafele, 2009).  Question 2 was designed to bring to light specific factors that caused the participants to excel academically and achieve greater educational success than their same-race peers (Bandura, 1977; Sharkey, 2009; Ogbu, 1986).  Current literature illustrates the important role the individuals in the lives of African American males play in their academic success; this will be addressed in the responses to question 3 and 5 (Bandura, 1977; Carter, 2005; Fordam & Ogbu, 1986; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2008).  Question 4 addressed the well-documented gap that exists between the support systems in place for African American males and their peers (McWhorter, 2001; McWhorter; 2007, Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004).  The final question that was posed to the focus group sought to expose some personal experiences that the participants have been through that will generate a deeper, more personal level of how they achieved academic success and how this success can be replicated by others (Carter, 2005; Kafele, 2009; McWhorter, 2001; McWhorter, 2007).

**Interviews**

I designed a predetermined set of questions, the general direction, and purpose for the

questions. As the participants responded, the interviewer allowed the course of the interview to

change to allow the subject the freedom to express their personal feelings and memories

regarding the experiences that will be described. No significant changes to the interview

questions were made. Any significant changes that would have been made to the interview

questions would have been submitted to IRB (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The structured portion

of the interviews used Kvale's (1996) stages of a qualitative interview investigation as a guide.

Among these are the following:

(a) *Designing*: Plan the design of the study; (b) *Interviewing*: Conduct the

interviews with an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge

sought; (c) *Transcribing*: Prepare the interview material to be analyzed, which usually

includes a transcription from speech to text; (d) *Verifying*: Establish the generalizability,

reliability, and validity of the interview findings. (p. 88)

Kvale (1996) also mentions that a quality interview consists of shorter questions and

longer answers. The interviewer should continuously probe the answers of the subject and

clarify specific meanings (Kvale, 1996). An effective interview was organized prior to the

session to maximize the potential to answer the intended research questions. As the interview

took place, I worked to maintain a focus on the research questions and ensured the questions

were answered through proper and detailed documentation. Interviews allow the researcher to

understand the meaning people have taken from the experience and phenomenon that is being

studied (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were structured around informal interactions that will

be guided by open-ended questions. The goal of these semi-structured interviews was to reveal

the personal feelings and experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon

(Creswell, 2013).  This strategy will "enable the researcher to understand and capture the point

of view of other people without predetermining those points of view" (Patton, 2002, p. 247).

These questions were tied directly to the theoretical framework for this study and grounded in

the literature review on this topic.  An audio recording of the interviews was made on the

researcher's phone along with written notes taken during the interview its self.  The interview

allowed me to generate more in depth personal responses in a more private and secure setting

than the focus group (Kvale, 1996).  Pseudonyms were used to keep the location of the study and

the identity of the participants confidential.   The interviews allowed for some more candid and

emotional stories to come forth that may not have been possible in a focus group setting alone.

While the interaction of the focus group brought forth some great information, the participants

were more willing to share individual struggles and expose themselves more emotionally than

they were in the focus group session.

Interview Questions

*African American Males' Perceptions of Factors that contributed to Their Academic*

*Success*

1. Describe your family background, parents, and siblings. Where did you live
   throughout your childhood?  What was the educational background of your parents or
   guardians?
2. Define academic success.
3. How has the attainment of a 4-year degree affect your life?
4. Describe personal choices you made and strategies you used that have caused you to
   be successful.

5. What role did your parents or guardians play in your academic success?

6. Explain the role that academic figures such as teachers, coaches, counselors and administrators played in your success.

7. Explain the role your social network such as friends, pastors and community figures played in your academic success.

8. How did you feel about the culture and environment of the schools you attended both pre- and post-secondary?  Were your individual needs as an African American male were met by the school you attended.  And also did you feel like you belonged in the school environment in both high school and college.

9. Did you ever feel social pressure not to excel academically?  Did you ever feel excluded or criticized due to your academic success?  Explain these instances and how they made you feel.

10. How did interactions with various people family, friends, and teachers make you feel about your ability to achieve academic success?

11. What was in your opinion the number one factor that assisted you in your academic success?

12. What are some steps a group or an individual took to try and assist and support you in your academic success that you feel were unnecessary?

13. Was there ever a time when an individual made you feel that you were incapable of experiencing academic success?  If so describe this interaction and why you believe it made you feel this way?

14. What advice do you have for other African American males trying to attain a college degree?

15. What advice do you have for teachers, parents, coaches, and other individuals who

are trying to help African American males attain a college degree?

The purpose of questions relating to the influences of individuals in the lives of the

participants in relation to their academic achievement was to uncover factors that these people

contributed to the participants' academic success. Questions 1, 5, and 15 were developed to

uncover the role that members of the participants' family played in their academic success and

what factors they contributed to the participants' academic performance. Documentation

supports that parental influence has been shown to play a major role in academic performance

(Bandura, 1977; Gonzalez-DeHass & Reynolds, 2008; Hussain & Thomas, 2010; Trask-Tate &

Cuningham, 2008). Questions 6, 12, and 15 were asked to reveal the role teachers, coaches, and

school staff personnel played in the academic success of the African American males involved in

the study. The role of these individuals is often vital to the academic success of African

American males (Bandura, 1977; Carter, 2005; Fordam & Ogbu, 1986; Kafele, 2009; Noguera,

2008). Questions 7, 9, 12, and 15 were written to explore the role the participants' friends and

social network outside of home and school contributed to their academic success. The

development of a strong racial identity and support from a student's peers have been shown to

have a positive impact on a person's academic performance (Ogbu, 1986; Carter, 2005). In

contrast, the negative pressure from peers and the view that education is not important or

celebrated often serves as a stumbling block for African American males (Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu,

2004; Kafele, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010).

Questions 8 and 10 served the purpose of addressing how the environment of a school

and how a student is viewed within that school can help or hinder academic performance.

Current literature shows that often African American males feel alienated within the culture of a

school. This alienation often causes the student to regress academically and socially and view all academic endeavors in a negative light (McWhorter, 2001; McWhorter, 2007). It is also a common occurrence for school staff members to develop the view that African American males lack the desire or ability to excel academically. While that belief may not be directly stated it is shown in how African American male students are treated and how the staff of a school interacts with them (Noguera, 2003; Noguera; 2008; Ogbu, 1986).

The personal choices of individuals in regard to education and their views of educational achievement has a huge impact on their academic success or failure. How a person views academic achievement and how important it is to that individual will often determine that amount of time and effort that is directed to excelling academically (Bandura, 1977; Cleveland, 2011; Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 1986; Sharkey, 2009). Questions 2 through 4, 11, 13, address the need to explore what role individual choices and individual views and opinions in regard to academic performance played in the academic success of the participants of this study. Question 14 provided participants a chance to discuss what advice they have for other African American males on how to achieve academic success. This not only aligns with the need to allow the participants to elaborate on the choices both personal and otherwise that they believe contributed to their success, but also to provide a template for other African America males to follow. The lack of positive role models is often a major hindrance to African American males during their educational process (Kafele, 2009; Mcworter, 2001; Vygotsky, 1962).

**Personal Narrative**

The third data collection tool was a reflective personal narrative that was written by all research participants from the initial focus group and interviews. These participants were given the parameters to write a one to two-page narrative describing their academic experience from

senior year in high school, until college graduation.  Participants were instructed to structure this story as having a beginning, middle, and an end (Groenewald, 2004).  Participants were asked to include details on personal struggles and how these struggles were overcome along with personal achievements and what factors and individuals helped make their achievement possible.  The purpose of these narratives was to allow the participants to reflect deeper on their personal experiences without the pressure of an interviewer or focus groups listening to their response.  This method will also allowed the participants more time to think on and elaborate on the factors that helped them experience academic success (Groenwald, 2004).  I provided stimulus questions to help drive the content and direction of this timeline.  The questions for the personal narrative are in Appendix E.  The personal narratives were emailed to me by the participants after the individual interview.  They were kept in a password protected file.  The majority of the participants redly completed the narrative, but I had to email three of the participants more than once to remind them to send their narrative.  Once I did this, they apologized for the delay and sent their narratives.

Personal Narrative Questions

These questions can be used to guide your reflections on your high school experience.  Attempt to address each year of high school separately and consider how your responses to these questions may have changed over the course of attaining your diploma.

1. Describe personal choices you made during college and strategies you used that caused you to be successful in college.  Which one of these factors played the biggest role in your success and why.

2. What was your perception of and attitude toward academic achievement during each year of your high school career? How did this change throughout high school and if so why?

3. Who were the most important influences in your life in regard to your academic achievement during each year of high school and why?

4. What were the attitudes of your peers toward academic achievement in general and specifically toward your pursuit of academic achievement? Did these attitudes ever affect your desire to achieve academic success? Did you individually ever fell criticized or alienated because of your academic success? Give specific examples of both positive and negative experiences regarding this question.

5. What advice would you give an African American male from each stage of your high school career on things they could do to improve their chances of academic success and things they should not do that could hinder their chance for academic achievement.

## Data Analysis

Once the data was transcribed, the first step in the data analysis process was to use horizontalization to assign equal value to each statement that is provided by the participants which represents a statement of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Once these segments of meaning were created themes were identified and then clustered into similar ideas and concepts (Moustakas, 1994). The themes were placed in a table along with the segments of meaning and brief sections of participant responses. The segments and themes were then synthesized into a textural description of the information gathered during the data collection process. The textural description was then examined using imaginative variation and intuition to relate the themes to

the significant experiences described by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative

variation allowed for different perspectives and ideas to be considered during the data analysis

process. This analysis then yielded the structure or the how of the data that will be collected.

The textural and structural description that is created represents the essence and meaning of the

experience. This process took place for each participant and was then synthesized to create one

composite descriptive account that encapsulated the essence of the entire groups experience

(Moustakas, 1994).

## Trustworthiness

This section is important because it examines the worth of the study and the need for the

data it will generate. This section will examine the credibility of the information the study

generates, the dependability and confirmability of the data that is generated, and the

transferability of the results of the study to the individual situations of the people that will read

the study.

### Credibility

To ensure credibility after the interview transcripts were reviewed the participants were

asked to clarify their statements and to elaborate on their responses. Emails were sent to the

participants containing their quotes that were going to be used in the study along with the

inferences that were made by the researcher in regards to their quote. The participants were

instructed to contact the researcher if they disagreed with any of the quotes or representation of

their responses. If they felt the quotes were accurate and portrayed the message they wanted to

convey, they were asked to send an email of confirmation to the researcher. All of the

participants confirmed the quotes were accurate, and none of them asked for any changes to be

made. This member checking accounted for any possible phase or voice inferences that were

overlooked during the initial interview along with accounting for any personal bias that has interfered with my interpretation of the data.  The findings of this study must be reported objectively, and my individual motives and views must not tempt me to alter or present the data in a way that does not provide a clear picture of the findings.  It must be kept in mind as Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) state, "There are no failed studies if they are carried out carefully; even negative results are important to add to existing knowledge" (p. 12).  In the presentation of the data and the discussion of the results, credit has been given to all individuals who contributed to the research process.  This maintains credibility with both the reader and in the professional community (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005).

Triangulation was used to ensure the dependability of my study.  According to Patton (2002) four types of triangulation exist. The first method is data; this requires a researcher to utilize variety of data sources.  This method was used in this study through the use of focus groups, interviews, and personal narratives

**Dependability and Confirmability**

To ensure dependability within the findings of this study, I included my personal opinions of the academic struggle that African American males have faced so that the reader can understand the paradigm I am coming from.  This was implemented in the form of a personal narrative found in Appendix E that will allow me to utilize the concept of *epoche* and bracket my personal bias and opinions from the actual facts that are derived from this study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).  A rich thick synthesis of the responses and the personal reaction of the participants to the questions will be described within the text (Creswell, 2013). I did not just list facts, but reported the participant's responses in vivid detail to provide the reader a clear picture of the experiences of the participants (Denzin, 1984; Wertz; 2005).  Peer review also adds

dependability to the results of the study. An African American staff member from my school read the transcripts of the interviews and investigated my interpretations of the responses (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). The individual that conducted my peer review felt that I had portrayed the participant responses in a fair and culturally sensitive manner. He felt that the information that was gathered would serve as a valuable tool in assisting other African American males in the educational process.

The purpose of conformability is to determine the level that the results and findings of a study can be confirmed by others outside of the study. Confirmability is a procedure for checking and rechecking the results and assumptions generated by a study (Lincon & Guba, 1989). "The researchers should use this method to confirm that the interpretations that are made concerning the data collected is supported by the data and not just 'figments of the inquirers imagination" (Lincon & Guba, 1989, p 243). I employed this method by constantly matching my notes and responses from both the focus groups, interviews, and personal narratives with the themes that were generated and the results I am proposing at the conclusion of the study. As the results are reported I tied these results to current literature that supports them. This also helps confirm the results of this study

**Transferability**

In order for the reader to be able to compare the research situation to their own and gain insight into how they could apply the results to their own life, a rich thick description of the setting and the participants will be provided (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2013) describes transferability as the ability for the study to apply to other population areas. This description will hopefully allow the reader to develop a connection with the study and perceive how the results apply to their individual situation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was received from all participants and school administrators responsible for any locations in which an interview took place or potential participants were gathered. Consent forms provided specifics on what is being studied, why it is being studied, and what was required of the participants if they choose to be involved (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). The data that was gathered during this study was secured in a locked file cabinet and on a dedicated external hard drive. Any information that is kept on a computer will be password protected. To maintain confidentiality, the identities of the participants were protected through the use of pseudonyms (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Pseudonyms were selected for each participant during the initial interview. A list matching participant names will be stored in a locked drawer separate from any participant responses or data that is collected. This will help protect the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to identify the site where the interviews and focus groups will take place. The participants were assigned pseudonyms in the order they are interviewed. As I interacted with the participants in the focus group and individual interviews, I was mindful of the amount of time the participants are committing to this study. I worked to keep the focus group on task in regards to the addressing the purpose of the study and to minimize side conversation that would add to the length of the activity. During the individual interviews I was mindful of minimizing any conversations between myself and the participant that did not pertain to the study. I was also mindful of how participants were reacting to questions and how specific questions emotionally impacted the participants. This aspect was much more prevalent during the focus group. I wanted to ensure that the participants felt respected and that their opinions were valued by all group members. The interviews were organized and focused to maximize the time of the participants and ensure they felt the project

was organized and professional.  The researcher was mindful of any questions that could possible invoke an emotional response form my participants.  The participants were reminded that any issue, question, or topic that makes them uncomfortable should be pointed out and will be removed from the interview (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007).  The interactions of the participants during the focus groups was closely monitored and participants were reminded that any information shared during the group session should remain confidential.  There were no direct conflicts during the groups, the participants maintained a respectful and positive environment (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2011).

The ethical credibility of this study was maintained by my mindfulness of my subjects and focused on their well-being, not on the importance of my study.  Detailed records were kept to ensure that proper credit is given to all that will play a role in this process.

## Summary

The focus of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to determine what factors have contributed to the academic success of African American males who have graduated from a four-year college.  It is hoped that the information gathered in the interviews of these men will lead to a greater understanding of how the participants achieved academic success and how their perceptions of the factors that guided them helped create this success. The participants consisted of African America males from a predominantly rural area in East Tennessee that were referred to me by administrators of their high schools.  Individual interviews, focus groups, and personal narratives were the source of data and were conducted by myself, the questions were derived from information gathered from current literature regarding African American males and their academic success.  Every step was taken to protect the confidentiality of the participants along with ensuring that they are comfortable with the interview process. The participants and

their success are the driving force behind this project.  Once collected, the data was analyzed for

common themes using Moustakas's (1994) data analysis process.  These themes were analyzed

and meanings were made through discourse to deduce the structural essence of the experiences

of the participants.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to determine African American males' perceptions of factors contributing to their academic success at a four-year college. Chapter four presents a description of the participants and the findings of the research study. This research study focused on African American males who attended high school in East Tennessee and graduated from a four-year college. Chapter four will provide a brief description of all of the participants. The goal of this research is to uncover the perceptions of these participants in regards to factors that contributed to their academic success. By analyzing the responses gathered from the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and a personal narrative. In chapter 4, the results of this phenomenological study are presented in themes based on the sequence of the research questions. The major themes that emerged from this study are the following: the importance of a mentor, a willingness to venture outside of one's comfort zone, the importance of faith, and the need to have a specific plan for completing college with an internal motive to both start and finish a degree. After the emergent themes and sub-themes are described and discussed, this chapter will answer the research questions that have guided this study.

## Participants

There were 14 participants in this study. All of the participants identified themselves as African American males who had attended high school in East Tennessee and had graduated from a four-year college. The participants varied in age and came from varying cultural backgrounds and home environments. The parents and siblings of the participants varied in their educational background.

The following is a more complete profile of each of the participants, including information about their backgrounds and experiences while in pursuit of a four-year college degree. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality.

**Ahmad**

Ahmad is a 26-year-old, African American male who grew up in East Tennessee. He was raised by a single mom. Ahmad's mother's highest level of education was a high school diploma. His father lived in another state but was present in Ahmad's life. Ahmad's father earned a bachelor's degree. Ahmad had three sisters that lived with him and his mother during high school. Ahmad played football in high school but played no sports in college. While he was in high school, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She battled this disease for several years before passing away while Ahmad was in college. Ahmad went to college in Alabama at a school comprised of approximately five thousand students. It took Ahmad 6 years to finish his bachelor's degree. He is employed in corporate sales at an automotive company in the south. Ahmad credits his mother for much of his success. "My mother showed me how to be strong and how to push myself." He also said, "I knew how important is was to my mom for me to graduate. I was not going to let her down" (Ahmad, Interview, October 29, 2018). Ahmad believes the greatest factor in his academic success were his choices and the fact that he had a goal to finish. While replying to an interview question, Ahmad stated,

> You have to make good choices. Your study habits, who you associate with it all makes a difference. You have to work twice as hard as you play. You also have to set your mind to finish. Start it to finish it. Don't just go to go, go to finish. (Interview, October 29, 2018)

**Bill**

Bill is a 30-year-old, African American male. He was raised in East Tennessee primarily by his father. Bill's father has a high school diploma. His parents separated when he was five years old, and his mother was not active in his life. His dad later remarried but during high school it was only he, his sister, and his dad in the house. Bill has an older brother that had graduated from high school while he was in elementary school. Bill attended college at a school in Tennessee comprised of approximately 12,000 students. Bill's highest completed level of education is a master's degree. He is a business manager at a large corporation in the south. Bill believes his faith, the support he received from his father, and his willingness to face challenges played a big role in the completion of his degree. "My dad's support was big. I had all my basic needs met; food, car, home. My dad took care of all of that so I could focus on school" (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018). In response to an interview question Bill stated, "My belief in God helped me make good choices" (October 31, 2018). Bill stated, in regards to academic success, "I had personal drive and vision. This allowed me to struggle and not give up. That struggle caused me to grow" (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018).

**Chris**

Chris is a 36-year-old, African American male. Chris spent his early childhood in Middle Tennessee but was raised primarily in East Tennessee. He grew up in a home with both parents. Chris's mother has a high school diploma and his dad did not finish high school. Chris has an older brother who finished only high school, and a younger sister who graduated from college. He attended college at a small liberal arts college in Tennessee comprised of approximately 1,500 students. He earned a master's degree. He is a personal trainer for a military special forces group and has lived all over the world. Chris said, "My degree has

changed my whole life.  I have been places and seen things that I would never have been able to

had I not finished school" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018).  He feels the support of his

parents and his faith played a big role in the attainment of his degree. "My parents both made

education a priority.  Even though my dad never finished high school, he always made getting

good grades important and always talked to me about going to college" (Chris, Interview,

November 1, 2018).  Chris also stated in his personal narrative, "My faith in God gave me

support when I struggled" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). Chris also emphasized that

completing a degree requires sacrifice and being uncomfortable in your surroundings.

> There were several times when I was the only black dude in a class, but this is happens
>
> all the time in my career.  You have to be ok with that and learn to deal with discomfort
>
> and push through tough times. (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018)

**Dante**

Dante is a 36-year-old, African American male.  Dante was raised in East Tennessee and

has lived there his entire life.  His parents both lived in the home while Dante was growing up

and are still married.  Dante's father earned a bachelor's degree while his mom completed her

high school diploma.  Dante has an older sister who has a bachelor's degree.  He attended

college at a large university in Tennessee.  Dante completed his master's degree and is currently

a middle school teacher.  "My bachelor's was a big accomplishment, but I feel like my master's

changed my life more.  I made more money and felt more of a sense of accomplishment after it"

(Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018). In regards to what factors lead to his academic success,

Dante said, "Making good grades was an expectation in our house.  There were consequences if

these expectations weren't met" (Interview, November 3, 2018).  During our focus group, Dante

responded to a participant by saying, "To succeed in anything you have to find a person who has

done it before and try to copy what they did and how they did it" (Focus Group, November, 26, 2018).  Dante also said in response to an interview question, "You have to know it is [going to] be hard.  When it gets tough commit to finishing.  Don't be satisfied with anything but finishing" (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018).

**Eric**

Eric is a 31-year-old, African American male.  Eric was born and raised in East Tennessee.  He was raised primarily by his grandparents.  He never lived at home with both of his parents.  He and his mom moved in with his grandparents at an early age. A few years after his mom moved out, leaving him to live solely with his grandparents.  His father was never active in Eric's life.  Eric's mom earned a high school diploma. Eric has some siblings on his father's side who he has never met. He has an older brother who is his mother's child from another relationship.  This brother graduated high school.  Eric attended college at a large university in Tennessee.  He earned a bachelor's degree in only 4 years and worked as a CAD artist for an engineering firm.  He recently left that job and became a police officer.  In regards to his degree, Eric mentioned, "I would recommend to anyone to find some mentors and do an apprenticeship while you in college.  Once I got into the job that fit my degree I wasn't happy and didn't like the day to day work.  If I had known this before I could have changed my degree to fit something more my style." (Interview, November 11, 2018). During our focus group while discussing the biggest factors that lead to the participants' academic success, Eric stated, "I had cousins, uncles, teachers, and coaches all repeating the same message do the right thing.  Make the right choices.  Don't do the things you have seen that will ruin your life.  Getting it from all these different people at all these different angles made a difference" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Eric also said, in relation to earning a degree, "You have to have motivation.  The

reason you are going to school has to be in you. You have to know that your dreams are there and you ain't limited by circumstances" (Interview, November 11, 2018).

**Frank**

Frank is a 39-year-old, African American male. Frank spent a majority of his life in Middle Tennessee but attended high school is east Tennessee. Frank attended a small liberal arts college in Tennessee. Frank played football and ran track in both high school and college. He was raised in a home with both of his parents and his older sister. Franks dad graduated from high school and his mom earned her bachelor's degree. Frank's sister moved out when he was a sophomore in high school to attend college. She graduated with a bachelor's degree. Frank earned a master's degree five years after his bachelors. He was a high school teacher for several years and recently took a job coaching college football. "The people you meet and the connections you make on the way to your degree is more valuable than the degree. The process is just as important as the result" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). When asked about what factors he feels were most pivotal in his academic success Frank stated,

> My parents gave me the confidence that I could succeed in school. A lot of African
> American males don't have this. It's important for other people in their life to fill this
> void. The confidence I had carried me through and gave me the mindset that I was
> finishing college. (Interview, November 6, 2018)

Frank also mentioned in regards to academic success and making the choices which will help you succeed, "Faith and religion were strong in my household. Having this helped me stay out of situations that could have brought me down and took me down a road I didn't need to go" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018).

**Greg**

Greg is a 29-year-old African American male.  Greg grew up and attended high school in East Tennessee.  Greg played football in high school and in college.  He completed his bachelor's degree at a liberal arts school in Tennessee made up of around 1,500 students.  Greg was raised by his grandmother and his mother.  He spent most of his time living at his grandmother's house.  Greg had an older brother and a younger sister.  Greg's father was never a part of his life.  Greg's mother earned a high school diploma. After college, Greg played professional football in Europe for several years.  He is now a small business owner and works internationally.  During a focus group discussion on his college experience, Greg stated, "Man I struggled at the start.  All the classes, and writing, outside work I had to do.  It was hard at first. I just had to keep fighting and working.  As it went I got more comfortable and I started doing better.  I went to college five miles from where I grew up but it was like going to another world. That took some time to adjust" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).  Greg also described this in his personal narrative.

> College made me get out of my comfort zone.  This made me grow as a man.  If you don't struggle and fight you will never grow."  He also wrote, "As a black man you grow up with the odds and the system stacked against you.  Get used to it.  You have the same chance as anyone else but you have to adapt.  Race is just an excuse it shouldn't limit you. (Greg, Interview, November 12 2018)

**Henry**

Henry is a 41-year-old, African American male.  He was born in Jamaica and lived there until he was 5.  He was raised in Miami and moved to East Tennessee in the 9th grade and attended high school there.  Henry lived at home with both of his parents and his grandmother.

Both of henry's parents earned their bachelors degree and his father has his masters degree.

Henry has an older and younger sister, and both earned their master's degree. He attended

college at a small school in Tennessee. Henry completed his Ed.S. and is a high school teacher.

In response to an interview question about how his degree changed his life Henry said, "College

is like a refining school. It expands your mind and opens you up to new things. Your basic

needs are met but it's hard. You struggle, but you are protected somewhat" (Interview,

November 13, 2018). He felt the college environment allowed him to grow just as much as

earning the degree. Henry stated, "My high school was like 90% Minority, then I go to college,

and its 10% minority. I had to adapt" (Interview, November 13, 2018). Henry felt the biggest

factors in his success were his parents and the example they set by earning their degrees and his

self motivation. Henry wrote in his personal narrative, "Both my folks having degrees was big.

That showed me I could do it and that was the norm. A lot of my friends didn't get that at home"

(Henry, Narrative, November 15, 2018). In response to an interview question, Henry said, "I was

and still am a self motivated person. I want to excel in whatever I do. I'm still searching on how

I can get better. College wasn't just about the piece of paper. I went to get better as a person.

My inner drive still carries me. (Henry, Interview, November 13, 2018).

**Ian**

Ian is a 26-year-old, African American male. He was raised in East Tennessee his entire

life. He was raised at home with both of his parents and two older brothers. Both of his parents

earned their bachelors degrees along with his middle brother. Ian attended school at a large

University in Tennessee where he completed his bachelor's degree. Ian is currently employed

as a builder. Ian lived at home with his parents his first year of college and has a very strong

bond with his parents and his brothers. Ian made a statement in our focus group in regards to

earning his degree. He stated, "Man, my mom and dad had my back the whole time in school. I always knew they believed in me and had confidence in me. The way they treated me made me a confident person in everything" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Ian also said in an interview response,

> You gotta be tough if you are gonna finish school. You gotta know at some point it's gonna get hard, and you better be ready for that. My mental toughness was big because there were times in school where I was struggling… As a black man, don't expect things to always go your way and people to always treat you like they should. You just gotta know it's gonna be like that sometimes but that shouldn't change how you are and what you do. (Ian, Interview, November 17, 2018)

**James**

James is a 40-year-old, African American male. He was raised by both of his parents. James has an older brother and older sister who both graduated high school. He has one younger sister with an associate's degree. James played football and ran track in high school. He played football for one year in college but stopped playing but stayed to finish his degree. He went to school in Tennessee comprised of approximately 8,000 students. He received his a bachelor's degree and works in sales and public relations for a large industrial company in Tennessee. James said "The degree gave me a chance to have a life and a job that most of the people around me could not get. It made me different from the rest of my boys" (James, Interview, November 17, 2018). James believes the faith his grandmother instilled in him and his determination to earn his degree were the reasons for his success.

My grandmother taught me to believe in God and to lean on him.  That gave me strength when I was weak and wanted to give up."  He also said, "I set my mind that when I started college I was gonna finish.  I just had in my heart what a degree could do for my life. (James, Interview, November 17, 2018)

**Kevin**

Kevin is a 36-year-old, African American male.  He was raised by his mother and stepfather, but during high school he lived primarily with one of his friends.  His dad was present but never active in his life.  He has an uncle who is dean of admission at a college in Tennessee who he said was a big influence in his success.  He said his friend's family acted like a second family to him and treated him like he was their kid.  Kevin lived in East Tennessee his entire life and attended school in the same system from kindergarten to graduation.  His mother and father completed their high school diploma.  He attended college in Tennessee comprised of approximately 7,500 students.  Kevin ran track in both high school and college.  Kevin completed his bachelor's degree and is a photo tech engineer for Apple in California.  Kevin stated in his interview, "Sports taught me discipline and structure.  When you train for a race, you are always focused on the end result and it gets had at times.  This helped teach me how I had to be in school" (Kevin, Interview, November 19, 2018).  During a discussion with two participants in a focus group Kevin said, "Man, I could always deal with a lot of different people.  I can talk to anybody.  I had to get used to being around and hanging out with people that wasn't like me.  That allowed me to achieve in areas that a lot of my friend didn't" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

**Larry**

Larry is a 25-year-old, African American male. He was born in Georgia and lived there until he was 8. He moved to East Tennessee with his family and spent the rest of his childhood there. Larry was raised in a home with both his mother and his father. Larry's mother completed her high school diploma and his father finished a bachelor's degree. Larry's father completed his degree when Larry was in middle school. Larry was raised with his older brother. His older brother struggled in school and gave very little effort to his educational pursuits. This made Larry want to focus on academics and succeed in areas he saw his older brother fail. Larry played basketball in high school, but played no sports in college. Larry earned his bachelor's degree from a large University in Tennessee and is currently in a master's program at a large university in Georgia. Larry was a physical therapist but is going back to school in hopes he can work with a collegiate strength and conditioning program.

**Mark**

Mark is a 25-year-old, African American male. He was born in east Tennessee and has lived there his entire life. He attended school in the same school system throughout his educational career. He was raised by his mom. Mark's mother has a bachelor's degree. His father was never present in his life. Mark's grandfather played an active role in his life and filled the void left by his father. Mark has a younger half brother from his mom's current husband who is more like a child to him than a brother. His mother was remarried when he was a sophomore in high school and Mark has a strong relationship with his stepfather. Mark attended and graduated from a large University in Tennessee. He earned his bachelor's degree and is working on a master's degree while he works full time. Mark is currently working as a case manager for a child and protective services company. He stated, "My degree was big but I had to

get more if I was gonna get the jobs I wanted.  It seems like everyone has a bachelors and it's the master's [degree] that puts you ahead of the completion when it comes to applying for a job… a good job anyway" (Mark, Interview, November 23, 2018).  When discussing why he felt he was successful academically Mark stated, "My mom was it.  She had her degree, she worked long days, had to work weekends.  She showed me how it was done and would jump my ass the minute I let up or slacked in school.  We even lived outside of the neighborhood that most black people in our area lived in.  She wanted to keep me isolated from the dudes that could bring me down" (Mark, Interview, November 23, 2018).

**Nate**

Nate is a 26-year-old, African American male.  He was born and raised in East Tennessee.  He was raised solely by his mother.  His father has never been a part of Nate's life.  He has a younger sister who lived with him and his mother.  Nate's mother graduated high school and worked full time while raising him and his sister.  Nate went to a university in Tennessee comprise of around 10,000 students.  Nate played football in both high school and college.  He said in his interview that had he not gotten a scholarship paying for college would have been a big challenge.  Nate earned his bachelor's degree and currently works in sales.  He has plans to go back to school and earn his M.B.A.  Nate said,

>A degree has helped me get a job, but it's not the job I want.  I would like to make more money and have a better working situation.  I feel like getting another degree is the only way that's gonna happen. (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018)

Nate feels parental influence and his ability to deal with adversity and respond to challenges is the reason he has a degree. He said,

My mom always made me put school first.  Once when I was in high school I had an 'F'
in English, and my mom called my coach, and I wasn't allowed to practice till I had the
'F' up.  This made me lose my spot on defense because I missed practice.  Never had
another F again. (Nate, Narrative, November 28, 2018)

## Results

This study focused on one central research question which asked, what factors do African
American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success in attaining a four-
year college degree?   Along with the central question three sub-questions also guided the
process. The data collected was analyzed, coded, and developed into content which directly
answers the central research question and the three sub-questions presented in this study.  The
research questions address the participant's experiences throughout their educational process and
their perceptions of the factors which helped them achieve academic success.  The research
questions also address factors that may have hindered the academic success of the participants,
and how the environment of the schools they attended helped or hindered their academic
progress.  The data that was collected was analyzed to identify major themes that would emerge
from the research.   The analysis took place by coding the data to identify open codes, participant
word choices, and overall themes.  Participant words were pivotal in finding true, detailed
answers to each research question.  The frequency of participants' word and phrase lead to codes
which were synthesized into emergent themes.  A table outlining the theme development process
can be found in appendix H.  Theme one illustrated the importance of a mentor in the educational
pursuits of the participants.  Theme two showed the importance of having a willing**ness** to
venture outside of their comfort zone and the importance of the choices the participants made.
Theme three describes the role faith played in the academic success of the men in this study.

The fourth and final theme uncovered how important it is for an African- American male to have a process and purpose for their academic pursuits.  The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data are described and explained below.  Also, how these themes answered the central research question and the three sub-questions is explained.

**Theme Development**

Through transcription, review, and synthesis, major themes were developed based on repetition within specific wording, answers to interview questions, discussions and response during the focus group activity, and responses to reflective journal prompts.  These themes were identified to answer the research questions presented in this study.  Ideas and perspectives were discovered that I had not anticipated.  Each code, and major theme became more prominent by the number of times they appeared within the data sets.  A breakdown of each code and characteristics of the code are presented in the theme development table in appendix H.

**Theme One: A Mentor**

The first theme provides an answer for the central research question: What factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success in attaining a 4-year college degree?  It also provides an answer for sub-question one and sub-question two.

1. What factors do African American males, who have attained a 4-year college degree, believe have contributed to their academic success?

2. What factors do African American male college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress, and how were they able to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree?

During the data collection process the participants identified several factors that contributed to their academic success along with various factors that hindered their performance. Within this theme two main sub-themes presented themselves the first was the importance of a family member as a mentor throughout the participant's educational process. The second was the effect a mentor from the academic setting had on these individuals in helping them attain their degree. These themes also illustrated how a lack of mentorship and support from one of these two groups can drastically hinder an African American males chances of obtaining a degree. In order for many African American males to experience academic success, they need the support and mentorship from people in their lives. This support is most effective when it comes from a family member (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Patton, 2014), or from a person directly involved in the educational process like a teacher or a coach (Palmer et al., 2014; Rhoden, 2017).

### Sub-theme: Mentorship from a Family Member or Guardian

The first sub-theme that emerged from the data was the importance of an African American male being mentored and supported from a family member or guardian. The importance of family support in the educational lives of African American males is well documented in current literature (Jeynes, 2014; St. Mary et al., 2018). All 14 of the participants mentioned frequently in response to research question and writing prompts and throughout the focus group discussions the impact that a family member had on their academic success. They talked about a relative influencing them to put forth effort in school. They gave examples of how a lack of academic performance was met with consequences from both immediate guardians and other family members. They described the example that was set by family members in regard to working hard at anything you do and the importance of an education. They also

discussed immediate family members teaching them to take pride in their academic performance. In our interview, Dante stated, "Mentoring is more important in the African American community than others. There are plenty of examples of what not to do. Kids need examples like them of what they can do" (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018). Many of the participants gave examples of the influence a family member had on their view of education and school, Eric claimed "My uncle guided me; he kept me focused on doing something with my life. My grandparents helped me [financially] when I struggled. That relieved a big stress in my life. Knowing I was gonna have money to pay tuition, bills, rent... that was big." (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). Larry wrote in his personal narrative, "My parents always pushed me to do well. My brothers never really took academics seriously, so when I excelled, it was kind of my thing in our house. I was the smart kid" (Larry, Narrative, November 21, 2018). Frank stated in an interview, "At my house doing things right was the standard. Average was not accepted. My parents did so much with me when I was a kid that I was way ahead of my friends" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). Seven participants mentioned consequences being tied to a lack of academic performance and the influence this had on their success. During the focus group Dante stated, "Growing up there were consequences for my actions. If I failed a test or had a bad grade my parents punished me. I developed good study habits because I didn't have a choice not to" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). In his personal narrative, Henry described several interactions between himself and his father regarding his education he described,

> I made a D in my freshman year of college and my dad blew up. He was so disappointed in me. This drove me to improve how I studied and approached class. I never made below a C after that. (Henry, Interview, November 13, 2018)

Eight participants described the importance of the mentorship they received from a family member. There was also an expectation level and a standard set by their family members that was equally important. When that standard was not meet the family members of the participants voiced their disapproval and let the participant know they were not performing to the best of their abilities. This supports the belief that accountability from parents and guardians has a positive impact on educational performance (William & Bryan, 2017). During a discussion in the focus group, participant Greg stated, "You gotta find a mentor not just a friend. A mentor will tell you the things you don't wanna hear. A friend will be okay with whatever. Only the mentor helps your grow" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

Eleven of the participants described how a family member had set an example for them in regard to hard work and academic performance. This also supports the current literature (Jeynes, 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014). In his personal interview, participant Ahmad said with much emotion, "My mom was my 'why.' She had cancer all through while I was in high school, and she still went to work, and she still took care of us and loved us. I wanted to finish for her. She set the example, and I followed it" (Interview, October 29, 2018). It was obvious by the look on Ahmad's face and the tone of his voice how his mother had handled that disease had set an example that would carry him through his struggles in life as well as school. In the focus group discussion, participant Kevin said, "My uncle cleared a path for me. He set an example for my life. I saw how he lived, knew he went to college and had a great job. That gave me somebody I could look up to and wanted to be like" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

During his personal interview Nate stated, "My mom was the number one reason I got a degree. She went to work every day and worked her ass off while raising me and my sister. She showed me how to work and persevere. Her example made me a hard worker. It was hard to

feel sorry for myself and slack seeing how hard she worked to raise us. (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018). Ian, whose parents both have a college degrees, stated during the focus group, "My parents were the biggest influence. I feel like my parents were a constant reminder of what a person could be and have if you have an education" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

Nine of the men who participated in this study mentioned a family member teaching them to take pride in how they perform in the classroom. This notion is backed by literature that illustrates how family members can help African American males succeed in school by making education a priority and showing them it is important (Jeynes, 2014). Bill made the statement,

My brother never went to college, but he would call me every week and brag on me and tell me how proud he was of me. He would send me money and gift cards. He was a big boost to me. He made me proud of what I was doing. (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

During our personal interview Chris said to me, "My success in school brought out a side of my parents I had never seen. Just a special kind of pride" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). I could tell by the way he made that statement how much pride he took in having earned his degree and how much it meant to him that his parents recognized and acknowledged his accomplishment. James said to the other participants during the focus group, "My parents were always so proud of me because of how I did in school. They gave me the mindset that I could get attention and be recognized for grades and school, not just for sports or from girls" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

**Sub-theme: Mentorship from a Figure Within the Academic Setting**

The second sub-theme that emerged from the importance of a mentor in the academic success of an African American males was the importance of a teacher, coach, or a figure in the school or academic setting that mentored and guided the academic carriers of the participants. All of the participants mentioned a person outside of the home in the academic setting that positively influenced their academic success. While describing these individual the participants used terms like, they wouldn't allow me to take shortcuts, they showed me I belonged there, and he helped me grow.

Six of the participants talked about a teacher or coach that would not allow them to take short cuts or give less than their best effort. This coincided with the literature that says a person within the academic setting can have a direct impact on the performance of an African American student by setting high standards for them (Kafele, 2009; Palmer et al., 2014) One of my participants, Frank, replied to an interview question by saying, "I had a coach that was an extension of my dad. He taught me how to act and dress in a social setting. How to always look and act my best. He taught me professionalism" (November 6, 2018). Participant Chris stated, "I had Teachers in college that would not let me take a shortcut" (Interview, November 1, 2018). He felt that these individuals help mold him into a detail oriented person and this contributed to his success. In his personal narrative, Eric wrote about the influence of his coaches on his academic performance. Eric wrote,

> My high school football coaches had a 30 min study hall before every practice. That showed us that school was important. Them giving their time was them making a point that your books come first. A lot of people say that but they believed it. (Narrative, November 12, 2018)

Seven of the study participants believed that the school environment played a role in their success. They made statements that illustrated an individual in the school making them feel like they belonged in the academic environment and that they could flourish in the school setting. "I had a teacher that showed me I belonged in college and I was just as smart as anyone else" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). Because of this teacher, Chris felt like he belonged in the college environment even through culturally the college he attended was different from the high school he attended and the neighborhood he grew up in. One participant, Eric, stated in the focus group, "I had teachers in elementary school that bragged on me and called me smart. I never forgot that" (November 26, 2018). This feeling that he was smart and could succeed at an early age was in Eric's opinion a factor in his academic success. In that same focus group session Mark described the impact a teacher had on his educational experience.

Man Mr. Jones was a big role model. Here was this black dude that was a math teacher, but a cool ass dude at the same time. Being able to go in and talk to him, and him looking like me and coming from a background like I did that made me feel like school was right for me. I knew if he belonged in college I did too. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

Eight of my participants mentioned a figure in a school they attended that guided them and helping them grow academically. This coincides with current literature that documents how an educator or coach can guide an African American male to academic success (Kafele, 2009; Rhoden, 2017). In his personal narrative, Dante described a guidance counselor that guided and pushed him. Dante wrote, "I had a guidance counselor that showed me she cared about me and my education. She helped me grow as a person. She cared so much for me I always felt pressure not to let her down" (Narrative, November 4, 2018). One participant during our personal

interview stated, "I had a coach in high school that guided me and pushed me at the same time. He made me think about the things I did and the choices I made. He talked to me bout not just being good at one thing, and making sure that what I did in the classroom was more important than what I did on the field. Coming from a coach that meant a lot" (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018).

When responding to an interview question in regards to the factors that did or could have hindered him in school Eric replied, "Not having a father is a big deal. Most of my friends whose dad wasn't around didn't make it. Some of my coaches and teacher along with my uncle helped fill this gap" (Interview, November 11, 2018). In response to my prompting him on how a teacher can effectively fill this gap Eric said, "You have to ease your way into a kid's life and build their trust. Get to know them away from sports and school. Humanize them. You may help them in ways you never knew" (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). The way Eric talked about the lack of his father's involvement in his life and how he described other individuals like teachers and his uncle filling that void that illustrates how important the contributions that teachers and coaches make in the lives of these men.

**Theme Two: A Willingness to Venture Outside of their Comfort Zone (Choices)**

The second major theme reveals some answers to sub-questions one and three.

1. Why do the African American males participating in this study feel that some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?

2. How does the school environment of high school and a 4-year college affect an African American male student's ability to attain a college degree?

All 14 of the participants mentioned a situation or described a time when they struggled either personally or culturally during their educational experience. Along with this, they

revealed the feeling that what helped make them successful was their ability to endure these situations and become comfortable in an environment that was foreign to them. Current literature describes the importance of the school environment to the success of African American males, but the responses of the participants in this study show how an individual responds to a specific environment may be more pivotal to their success (Walker-Bowen, 2007). This is a direct example of sociocultural theory at work. Sociocultural theory is the idea that as a person interacts with their environment and faces problems and obstacles, they learn by solving these problems. Sociocultural theory places more emphasis on the role of a person's social interactions and individual choices in the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1962). This directly describes the belief of the participants that their ability to function outside of a environment they were used to and to choose to continue to interact with that environment in spite of their fear and discomfort helped lead to their success.

The concept that the interaction with people and environments that are foreign to you equips a person with necessary skills needed to advance their place in life ties directly with the concept of social capital. Lareau (2003) describes in her work how students from middle class families function at a higher level academically than students from lower class families due to their ability to navigate the school culture. She argues that the home environment the middle class students were raised in gave them a set of skills and knowledge that allowed them to more experience a greater level of academic success than their peers from lower class families. The responses from the participants address research sub-questions one and three in the fact that their willingness to venture outside of their comfort zone was a determining factor in their academic success. It also addresses sub-question three in revealing that school environment is not as important as how the individual reacts to that environment. It places even more emphasis on the

need to equip African American males with the abilities to function in cultures and environment where they may feel out of place.

Theme two also helps answer sub-question two. It became obvious when examining the participant data that a lack of ability to navigate an environment that is foreign can lead to academic struggles. Within this theme, three sub-themes emerged. Participants described making choices to venture outside of what they felt was comfortable or normal in relations to, academics, friends/socially, and a personal level of comfort in taking risks. In a personal narrative Ahmad wrote, "I had a coach in high school that always talked about life is about the choices you make. You have to make the choice to do the hard stuff and keep going when you want to quit" (November 29, 2018).

### Sub-theme: Academics

Current literature has extensively covered the notion that many African American males choose to not strive for success and excellence academically due to social and cultural influences (Givens et al., 2016). Much of this literature outlines the idea that academic success is not viewed as cool or socially acceptable for African American males (Haywood, & Sewell, 2016). The concept that emerged from the data collected from my participants places an emphasis not necessarily on the cultural acceptance of academic success, and rather, on an individual's choices in regards to what they want to accomplish and how they view academic success. Six of my participants made a statement concerning the importance of an African American male not being ashamed by their academic achievements and making the choice to push themselves in school. During a personal interview Chris stated, "Don't be ashamed to struggle and ask for help" (November 1, 2018). Chris felt that many of his friend did not ask for help or push themselves because they were ashamed and afraid to look how he described, "weak and dumb." Chris also

stated, "There is a lack of diversity in college, but hey there is a lack of diversity in the

workforce, you know what I mean? As a black man you better get used to dealing with it" (Chris,

Interview, November 1, 2018). Another participant, Henry made the statement, "You have to be

able to navigate through school and that stuff. For some guys, this is different from the life they

are used to" (Henry, Interview, November 13, 2018). In his personal narrative, Dante wrote,

> Stats my junior year [in college] was a turning point. I was the only African American in
>
> the class. I didn't feel like I could do it. I had to work my ass off for every test I passed.
>
> Once I fought through this and finished, I was stronger and knew I could do it. (Dante,
>
> Interview, November 3, 2018)

Dante felt like making the choice to stay in that class and push through to finish was the

turning point in his academic success. During our focus group activity, Mark stated, "Man, in

school you just gotta make up your mind to go. Even though you don't want to and it ain't where

you want to be you gotta make the choice and just do it" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

The participants in the focus group echoed participant Mark's belief that it is more about a

personal choices and what they do than the factors that may hinder them. When asked about

what advice he would give an African American male pursuing their degree participant Ian

stated, "Advice I would give an African American male is don't expect things to be equal. Go to

class everyday with a hard working mentality, and don't be rebellious when things do not go

your way" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)" In the end, many of my participants felt that you

have to ignore the voices and ignore the environment and focus on what you want to achieve. In

his personal narrative Larry described this with great detail.

> There were times when students of different races would be surprised that I made better
>
> grades than them. The black kid could not have made the best grade on this test, pure

luck. Other times students just expected me to excel in sports and when I would not

attend a social gathering because I wanted to study I would get called a 'nerd,' and then

hear comments like 'black people can't even be nerds... this is the first ever black nerd.

(Larry, Narrative, November 21, 2018)

**Sub-theme: Friends/Social**

Thirteen of my fourteen participants referenced and described situations where, within

their group of friends, they had to make difficult choices and go counter to what everyone else

was doing. Current literature documents the need of African American males to be accepted by

their peers (Kafele 2009). Also well documented is the idea that academic achievement within

an African American male's social network is often viewed as a negative. Many times, African

American males have to make the choice to disregard the opinions of their peers and do things

differently from the people they interact with on a daily basis (Ogbu, 2008; Webb, 2016). Larry

responded to an interview question about advice that he would give African American males on

succeeding academically.

> In college, I would say make friends that are good influences because your parents ain't
>
> there to hold your hand. No one is. Everything you do is your choice, so time to make
>
> some good ones. If you pick friends that stay up until 3 am, drink, smoke, and skip class,
>
> you will probably fall in line. But if you pick friends that know how to have fun and can
>
> still go to the library and computer lab four times a week, then you might have hope to be
>
> successful. (Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018)

This statement not only illustrates how an African American males can be successful but

also how making poor choices in regards to social groups and whom you associate with/allow to

influence you will hinder a your success. When asked how his life changed going from high

school to college Eric replied, "I had to cut off certain friends that were living a different life" (Interview, November 11, 2018). Bill echoed this sentiment by stating, "When your friends are going to hang out and party, you got to stay back and study and go to bed… that part is hard. Sometimes you have to separate yourself from people and cut people off" (Interview, October 31, 2018). It was obvious from multiple participant response the effect the choices they made on who they associated with directly impacted their academic success.

  **Sub-theme: Personal Level of Comfort in Risk-Taking**

  Eight of my participants talked about or documented the importance of taking risks and choosing to be comfortable with taking a chance and not being in control. It is frequently discussed in current literature that many African American males are reluctant to risk stepping outside of the cultural and social norms they are used to (Haywood, & Sewell, 2016; Webb, 2016). The participants in this study feel that making the choice to risk losing comfort and control was integral in their academic success. One participant, James, during a conversation about leaving home and going away to school stated, "You got to be ready to take that step... that leap. You gonna be scared, you gonna feel out a place, know what I'm saying? But you gotta do it. Nobody gonna do it for you" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). During our interview session Frank said, "It was the process of getting the degree that changed my life, not the degree itself. I grew as a person from the work I did to graduate. At times in college, I felt like the odd ball... like I didn't fit in. I had to grow and get comfortable with being uncomfortable" (Interview, November 6, 2018). Frank felt that the process of going to school, taking chances, and extending himself changed him as a person, but he was the one that had to make the choice to do this even though it made him uncomfortable and stressed. Bill said, "You have to do the hard stuff; there is no way around it. There is no guarantee you will succeed" (Bill, Interview,

October 31, 2018).  Henry responded to an interview question about how having a degree

changed his life,

>School gives you the chance to struggle but in a place where your basic needs are met.
>You can fail, but still survive.  You struggle but you know, you are protected.  I had
>friends who would never leave home.  They wouldn't leave a situation where they felt
>comfortable.  Their fear of the unknown limited their lives. (Henry, Interview, November
>13, 2018)

Chris echoed this sentiment about how a degree changed his life and how important it

could be in the lives of other African American males by claiming, "Whatever the cost... get

away from home and what you're use to.  This is the only way you grow as a man" (Chris,

Interview, November 1, 2018). Chris spoke very passionately about the reluctance of many

African American males to venture outside of the world they know.  He feels the fear of failure

and the unknown causes them to refuse to step out of their comfort zone, and he believes that

choosing to take the risk this sent his life on a different trajectory.

**Theme Three: Faith**

The third significant theme provides a response to the central research question: What

factors do African American males perceive as contributing to their academic success in

attaining a four-year college degree? It also provides answers to sub question one and two. Sub-

question one:

1. What factors do African American males, who have attained a 4-year college
   degree, believe have contributed to their academic success?

2. What factors do African American male college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress, and how were they able to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree?

By illustrating that faith and guidance from God helped the participants in this study make better choice in regards to their life and that individuals that are not believers and do not base their decisions on the will and guidance of God have a greater chance of making a choice that will hinder their prospects of success in the academic world. Two sub-themes emerged within this major theme. The first sub-theme was the fact that the participant's faith in God gave them a reason to persevere and fight through the challenges of earning their degree. Nine of the participants talked about faith giving them support throughout the educational process. The reason why the participants made the choices to venture outside of their comfort zone that were described within theme two can be explained by their personal faith in God. Participants made statements about three attributes of their faith: they believe they were on earth for a reason, God was the thing kept them strong, and God's commandments helped them make better choices. Their faith gave them a reason to persevere. The second sub-theme is the support that faith provided them. Eleven of the participants talked about their faith in God and how this faith made them feel that they were not alone and had something to lean on. They gave examples of how their faith led them to surround themselves with like minded people that would help support them in their pursuit of a degree and a better life.

The effect faith had on the academic success ties directly with the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962). The sociocultural theory illustrates how a person can perceive and adopt a specific mindset to how they see the world and how they live their life. It is obvious that their exposure to faith and the teachings of Christianity has given the participants of the study the

belief and mindset that they are not alone and they have a purpose in life. Their faith provided the support, or as it is called in the educational world the "scaffolding," they needed to build a self-concept and mindset that would increase the probability that they would make good choices and persevere to reach their goals (Kalina & Powell, 2009.) The data collected from the participants, in regards to the effect faith had on their academic achievement, also directly supports the documentation in current literature of studies that have shown how religion and interaction with religious figures has a positive impact in the academic lives of African American males. Religion creates a heightened sense of commitment and dedication in the life of an African American male (Jordan & Wilson, 2015).

**Sub-theme: Reason for Persevering**

Nine of my study participants made references to their faith in God and how this faith gave them a reason to believe they could persevere and endure the struggles that went along with earning their degree. This mindset ties directly with research that discusses the importance church participation and religious figures carry in relation to the success of African American males in academics and daily life. Studies have proven that religion and interaction with religious figures has a positive impact on the academic success of African American males (Jordan & Wilson 2015). Participant Chris made the statement, "Every person is on earth for a reason. I felt God could use me as an example of what other people could be" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). Chris felt that, at times when he was struggling as a students and questioning his abilities, his faith in God gave him the reason why he could succeed. Many times people only need validation, positively or negatively, of a belief they have about themselves. Chris's statement shows that God validated his belief that he could succeed and that his success was bigger than himself. The concept of faith came up in our focus group.

Participant Greg stated, "Following God and basing my life on his word and his commandments helped me make choices that helped me be successful. Not using drugs, not drinking... I didn't do these things because of my faith. A lot of my friends did them, and it caused them to fail" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Greg perceived that lifestyle choices he made were a major factor in him earning a college degree. He also felt that many of his friends, the ones that did not earn a degree, were hindered by the lifestyle choices they made. Greg felt that he made good choices because of his faith. This directly supports how a religious background and a belief in God can help academic performance. During this same discussion participant Bill said,

> The fact that I am a Christian caused me to surround myself with like minded people. Friends who also made good choices guys that didn't smoke [Marijuana] and party all the time. Being around these guys helped me make better choices. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

> Bill, like Greg, perceived that his Christian faith lead him to surround himself with people who made good lifestyle choice and this fact contributed to his success in school. This directly relates to the aspect of sociocultural theory which argues a person acquires knowledge and traits through interaction with certain individuals and environment (Vygotsky, 1962). During a personal interview, I was discussing with Ahmad some of the personal issues he encountered while going to school and why he perceived that he chose to finish his education in spite of all the challenges he faced while many individuals like him would not persist. He told me, "God was the thing that kept me strong and kept me going. Through my mom's sickness and all the trouble I had finishing school. [God] was the thing that keep me believing in the idea that I could make it" (Ahmad, Interview, October 29, 2018).

Ahmad's mom battled cancer throughout his high school and college career and passed away before he finished his degree.  It took him six years to finish school, and he considered quitting many times.  Ahmad attributes his perseverance to his Faith.  Along these same lines, in a personal narrative, James wrote,

> My Grandmother taught me to believe in God. She took me to church and built that foundation.  When things got tough I knew I had something bigger than me backing me up.  That belief that she showed me, and God gave me, kept me believing in myself. (James, Narrative, November 30, 2018)

Once again, James like Ahmad, Bill, and Greg, attributed his faith and his relationship with God to source of his motivation to persevere.  As discussed with theme, two all of these participants talked about times when things got hard and they had to choose to endure and stay committed to graduating.  Not one participant gave me any indication that school and getting their degree was an easy process.  They may have talked about excelling in a certain area, but they all mentioned times and situations where they faced challenges in the academic setting.  For nine of the men that participated in this study, faith was a key factor in them making to choice to commit and finish and not give in when things got tough.  This is reason enough to see how a person's faith can impact their entire life as well as their academic performance.

**Sub-theme: Emotional Support; Not Being Alone**

Eleven of the participants in this study described how their faith and their belief in God gave them emotional support throughout their educational journey.  They also described how their belief in God gave them the confidence that they were not alone in their pursuit of a degree. Even gifted African American students have a challenge in achieving a healthy racial identity. Striving to earn a degree can cause a great deal of social and emotional stress in the lives of these

men due to the perceived separation from African American culture and a feeling that they are alone and isolated. (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). The notion that a person's faith in God can give them a feeling of support and help buffer that feeling of being alone illustrates another way faith can contribute to academic success.

In our interview session, Eric asserted, "There is no doubt that without my faith I would not have made it. It gave me something to lean on and a reason to believe in myself" (Interview, November 11, 2018). We were discussing contributions that had been made to his pursuit of his degree outside of his family and the educational setting, and Eric was adamant that his faith was a major contributor to his success. After Eric said this, I mentioned to him that current literature says that religion and involvement in church and association with church figures has a direct impact on educational performance (Jordan & Wilson, 2015). I asked Eric if he agreed with this statement, and he said, "Absolutely, God has changed my life for the better in a bunch of ways, but most definitely he helped me make it through school" (Interview, November 11, 2018). Eric was not alone in his perception that guidance from God helped him succeed academically.

> Faith kept me going when things got hard. My pastor used to give me money for books
> that I had read. He made me believe that doing good in school was part of me being a
> Christian and being a good person. (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018)

It is interesting to see in some of these responses the effect that religious figures had on the mindset of these men. By equipping them with faith and a belief in God, they also made them stronger not just in their spiritual life but in all areas of their existence. Other participants also hold the belief that God was a system of support during their quest for a degree. In his personal narrative, Henry wrote, "My faith helped me through some tough times. I knew I wasn't alone in my struggles" (Henry, Narrative, November 15, 2018). Henry's feeling of not

being alone, and having the support you need to succeed, was shared by Frank. During our interview session, Frank claimed that it was faith that gave him strength.

>Along with the support of my parents my Christian faith gave me strength. Man, sometimes you feel like it's just you in the fight. Jesus, in my heart, gave me that feeling that I was not alone, and I didn't have to do it all myself. That's big for any kid, if they feel like they have no help, and it's all on them they just give up. (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018)

This statement by Frank is powerful, because when educators look for ways to assist African American males through the educational process, educators often only consider family members and people within the educational system as a means of support. We think of ways these individuals can provide support for African American males and give them the strength and support they need to succeed. These responses illustrate that researchers may have been missing a key factor that could help African American males experience success in the classroom. The feeling from these participants that their faith gave them support and confidence while they pursued their degrees shows that the role faith can play as a support system to young African American males needs to be further examined. When considering mentors and role models for African American males, it may be worth considering that a person with a strong faith and belief in God may have a greater impact on the success of these young men.

In summary, the perception of these participants that their Christian faith was a factor in their educational success ties directly with literature that shows the positive effect religion and the influence religious figures can have on the academic success of an African American male (Jordan & Wilson, 2015). This perception also meshes perfectly with sociocultural theory that

argues a person develops their own mindset and worldview in relation to their surroundings and the people they associate with.  Their statements show that by people mentoring and leading them to a belief in God, the participants formed a mindset of personal strength and power, and a belief that through God they had the ability and the support they needed to reach their goal.

**Theme Four: Process and Purpose**

Theme four provides data that answers sub question one and sub question three.

1. Why do the African American males participating in this study feel that some Individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?

2. How does the school environment of high school and a 4-year college affect an African American male student's ability to attain a college degree?

Theme four focuses mainly on the collegiate aspect of the participants' educational career.  As significant themes began to emerge from the data, I noticed that all fourteen of my participants were making statements about their reasons and motivations for attending college. They all had a motivating factors and a reason they intended to finish college.  Only one of them, Ahmad, made the statement, "When I went to school, I really didn't know what I wanted to do or what I wanted to be, at first I just took some classes and went with it" (Interview, October 29, 2018).  Even in this example, as will be illustrated in this section, Ahmad did not have a specific plan but he most certainly had a motivating factor that would not allow him to accept anything but earning a degree.  Current literature gives many examples of the role teachers' play in supporting African American males in their academic pursuits (Palmer et al, 2014).  Also well-documented is the role self-concept and racial identity play in African American males attending and graduating from college (Tyler et al., 2016; Webb, 2016).  What seems to be missing, as discussed in multiple instances by the participants, is the need to map out a path for African

American males.  It may be more important than the educational community has realized to show these young men a path by which they can accomplish their goal.  They should not only be equipped with direct educational support and a strong sense of self, but also assistance in discovering their motivational reasoning behind completing higher education and becoming successful.  One of my favorite quotes from a book called *Man's Search for Meaning* says, "He who knows the why for his existence will be able to bear almost any how" (Frankl, 1984).  The participants in this study perceive that a strong why and detailed plan were pivotal in their educational success.  Within this major theme, two sub-themes emerged.  The first is the notion that, when a person starts college, they need to have the end result in mind.  Eleven of my participants made statements and wrote illustrations that they had specific plan of how they were going to finish school and what they wanted to do with their degree.  They believe that, when African American males go to college, they need to know what they want to achieve by earning a degree and how they are going to achieve it.  Statements like, "declare what you want," "I made a vow," "have a plan," "have a reason," "why you are going," illustrate the perception that having a plan and reason for why they were going to school was a major factor in the success of the participants.  The second sub-theme that emerged was the idea that an intrinsic motivation and desire to finish was a strong contributor to the success of the participants.  All fourteen of my participants described some type of intrinsic motivation to succeed and complete their degree.  They made statements such as, "expectations for myself," "I was going to finish for my mom," "first in my family," and "personal pressure to finish."  This illustrates the need to not only provide direct support to African American males in the educational setting but to empower them with a personal drive to succeed.  This notion relates directly with the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977).  The importance of self-efficacy and the concept that an individual has

direct control of their future and the outcome of events meshes perfectly with the perception of these participants. Their personal motivation and intrinsic drive for earning a degree was an important factor in their academic success.

**Sub-theme: Start With the End in Mind**

According to Strayhorn (2010), the support that is provided by people in the school environment is a direct factor in the success or failure of African American males. William & Portman (2014) documents the effect parental interaction and involvement has on the academic success of African American males. The aspect of support that is not a widely document and discussed in the need for both educators and parents to not only provide emotional support and direct assistance in activates like studying and completing project but to help African American males develop and plan and a course of action on how they will complete their degree, what degree they plan to earn, and what job they will get by earning this degree. The data collected from these participants supports the notion that a clear vision of what life will be like after earning a degree and an organized plan of how the degree will be completed directly impacts the likelihood of completing that degree.

Multiple participants express the belief that having a plan on how and when a degree would be complete helped them achieve success. During our focus group, participant Bill responded to a prompt by saying, "Have a plan and ask for help making that plan. Have a major; don't just take classes. A lot of my boys did that, and they never finished" (November 26, 2018). Dante responded to Bill's statements,

> Yeah, that's exactly right, I changed majors twice, but I always had a major and
> something I was working to. You got guys who just go and take classes and stay

undeclared for over a year; they never finish.  Have a path laid out; even if it changes, you are getting somewhere. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

Dante also stated, in our personal interview, "I always planned on getting my master's [degree]; that was the end goal.  The bachelor's [degree] was just a step along the way" (November 3, 2018). During an interview session Larry stated, After these [general courses] were completed I could focus all of my time on the topics that would interest me and also be relevant to my career.  Having a specific career I wanted to purse and work in after college helped me stay focused." (Interview, November 20, 2018).

Attending a small college in a rural area is completely different from going to [a] big state university. Deciding to put myself in a place with limited distractions had a significant role in my eventual academic success at that school, and now, success in graduate school.  I went there with the end result in mind not just to have a good time. Knowing what I wanted, and why I was going, was important to my success. (Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018)

All of these individuals felt that having a direction and an end goal they were working toward helped lead to their success in school.  Along those same lines, their shared the belief that a lack of a plan or a goal would be detrimental in the completion of their degree.  While this conversation was occurring in the focus group, I asked if they felt that not having a desired degree and a plan of action would hinder an African American male, and Ian responded.

For sure. If you just go to school to just go or to play ball or something like that, you are never going to finish.  You will party, and chase some girls, and have some fun, but you ain't gonna get nowhere. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

Greg chimed in along with Ian, saying,

A bunch of the guys [he] graduated with went to college. They went to Town College

and City College and a bunch of schools like that but never had a reason for going. They

just went because they thought that was the thing to do, and none of them graduated. It

gets too hard with bills and going to class and all the things that come at you. Without a

plan, they just quit. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

Several other participants agree with Greg and Ian that when a person does not have a

plan, or a desired outcome, when they begin their degree, it is unlikely that they will finish their

educational career with a degree. The sentiment shared by the participants emphasizes the need

for anyone involved in the educational process of an African American male to, as early as

possible, instill in them a reason for going to college and establish a plan on how they will

complete the degree. Factors, such as how long the process will take, and how much time and

money will be involved, are all factors that need to be laid out to African American males before

they start school so they will anticipate the challenges and sacrifices needed to plan on how to

deal with them. In line with this idea is the need that many participants mentioned the need for a

personal vision and intrinsic motivation to complete a degree.

**Sub-theme: Intrinsic Motivation**

The need for intrinsic motivation equally compares the factors related to finishing a

degree. All fourteen participants wrote or voiced opinions that their inner drive and vision to

succeed helped them succeed academically. This goes hand in hand with Bandura's (1977)

concept of self-efficacy found within his social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy is a person's

beliefs or perception of their ability to attain goals and complete specific tasks and objectives. A

person with a strong sense of self-efficacy believes they are more likely to succeed than fail

when facing a challenge.  Self-efficacy could be the most accurate predictor of success among all

motivational thoughts.  When an individual believes they have the ability to accomplish a goal,

and a vision for what that accomplishment looks like, the likelihood of accomplishing the goal is

drastically increased.  During a personal interview, participant Nate and I were discussing

personal drive and why he felt he was able to stay motivated and finish his degree.

> My mom gave me that inner drive.  The way I saw her work and the way she stayed on
>
> me, that gave me a vision of what my degree could get me.  That inner drive was the
>
> thing that kept me going when a lot of others gave up. (Nate, Interview, November 23,
>
> 2018)

> Greg wrote in his narrative, "I got a scholarship from a community group while I was in

college.  That money put a lot of pressure on me to finish and do well.  I felt like, if these people

were going to give me money and believe in me, I had to finish" (Greg, Narrative, November 18,

2018).

> I included a quote earlier from Eric describing how his Grandparents had given him

financial assistance during college.  After he said this, I asked him if receiving money from them

helped motivate him to succeed.

> It sure did.  It wasn't like they were just loaded or anything.  I knew it was a sacrifice for
>
> them to give me money.  If they were gonna do that for me, there was no way in hell I
>
> was gonna quit and have that be for nothing. (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018)

> The responses of these participants demonstrate that the initial support that a person gives

to an African American male while they are pursuing a degree does not end there.  Factors like

financial assistance, a motivating conversation, or help to finish a project or study for a test

continue to motivate the student long after the support is received.  Possibly just as important as

the act of supporting and helping African American males during their academic career is the mindset and intrinsic drive that they develop as a result of this assistance. It seems that current literature does not mention this enough and neglects to discuss how helping a person can lead to them having a greater emotional and motivational capacity to help themselves later in life.

Along with the intrinsic motivation that is developed from direct assistance and outside influence, sometimes the drive comes completely from within. At some point, a person develops a personal drive and mindset that they are going to complete what they have started. Participant Ahmad claimed, "My personal pressure on myself to succeed blocked out all the other things and people that could have stopped me along the way" (Ahmad, Interview, October 10, 2017). I also asked Ian about what motivated him and kept him driven to complete his degree.

> I always knew that as an African American male working toward a college degree that things aren't equal but things have never been equal for African Americans. But I also knew I was only going through a fraction of what my ancestors went through. This put in perspective that it's just school it could be a lot harder. That gave me purpose as I went. (Ian, Interview, November 17, 2018)

Bill stated, "I saw how hard my dad had to work and I did not want that same life. I always knew I was at least getting a bachelors. I saw college as a way to a better life" (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Ahmad gave examples repetitively throughout his interview, personal narrative, and our focus group activity how seeing his mother sacrifice and go to work while battling cancer gave him the inner drive he needed to succeed. Ahmad wrote that his intrinsic motivation came to be because of the influence of his mother.

> My god-mom told me to be known for something besides sports. She said too many black men only think about sports and how they can be known that way. She told me to

be known for something else, so I wanted to be known for what I did in school. Getting

my degree was going to be my way of getting that attention. (Narrative, October 29,

2018)

This quest for a personal identity that could be cultivated by educational achievement

gave Ahmad even more internal drive to succeed. Along these same lines, participant Bill said,

"In college I got a lot of wisecracks about how I worked at school and that I was a nerd. You

have to have a vision and ignore the distractions" (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018). Participant

Henry stated, "You have to know that your success is possible beyond athletics and

entertainment. That is all some African American males hear. They need to know that their

academic success is critical to their future" (Henry, Interview, November 13, 2018). Greg

described some of his motivation for academic success by saying, "I started becoming known as

the dude that made good grades and worked hard at school. That just became part of who I was

and how people knew me, and I wanted to keep that going" (Greg, Interview, November 12,

2018). All of these participants felt that their personal vision of achieving academically as an

African American male helped them have the interval drive to persevere and success.

"Visualize higher Things, my coaches, teachers, and family helped me create a goal and a

vision for my life" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). Frank put the idea in these words.

I had high expectations for myself. I was never conflicted on if I was going to get a

degree" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). Mark said, "I saw this picture online that

said 'greatness starts with a vision.' I remembered that. That just kind of described how

I needed to approach things, and if I wanted to be great in school, I needed a vision for

my life during and after school. It cause me to make for myself some goals and

achievements that I wanted for me. (Mark, Interview, November 23, 2018)

The statements made by the participants about their perception that their inner drive and vision being a major contributor to them completing their degree illustrated the need for educators and parents to equip African American males with that drive and vision. More than just giving them a plan for graduation, showing them a potential career path, or assisting then with various needs along the way. The most important thing a person may be able to do for an African American male in regards to their education is assist them in developing a vision and intrinsic motive for why they should complete their degree. This may carry them further and support them more than any external motivation or assistance could. I will end this section by repeating a section of Chris's quote as a call to all African American males seeking educational success, "Visualize Higher Things" (Interview, November 1, 2018).

### Research Question Responses

The central research question of this study sought to uncover how African American males, that had earned a degree from a four-year college, perceived certain methods that contributed to their academic success. As the data was analyzed, four major themes emerged that provided some answers to the central research question. The responses of the participants revealed that they perceived mentoring, the ability to venture outside of a person comfort zone, faith, and starting college with a purpose and a process as being determining factors in their educational achievement. Several participants made references to these factors and how they assisted them in completing their degree. This section will provide answers to each of the three sub questions that guided this study.

**Sub-Question One**

Sub-question one of this study was designed to answer this question: Why do African American males feel that some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others?  This question was addressed by all of the major themes due to the perception of the participants that the themes were factors in their academic success.  Current literature shows several examples of various factors that increase the academic performance of African American males and why these factors are effective (Givens et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009;  Tyler et al., 2016). ).  The themes that were generated and the participant beliefs as to why these factors helped them succeed academically directly correlate with the current literature on this subject.

 Nate made the statement, "I listened to my mom and followed her example because of how we were together.  She would spend time with me, take me to ball games, and buy me nice clothes.  We had a bond" (Interview, November 23, 2018).  When I replied by asking if he thought this was why he followed her example Nate said, "Yea, if she had not been like she was I might not have looked at her the way I do and listened to the things she had to say" (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018).  This relationship can also be seen between Bill and his brother.

> He spent time with me, called me when I was away.   Even when I was a little kid and he was runnin with his boys he still would include me and make me feel special.  We had a special friendship.  That made me listen to him when he gave me advice about school and life. (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018)

In accordance with current research the participants of this study argued that venturing out of their comfort zone was a formidable challenge.  The fact that it was hard is the reason that most of their peers chose not to take this step.  By choosing to stay in a lifestyle and environment in which they felt comfortable, they were preventing themselves from having the opportunity to

succeed in school. The participants felt that the difficulty of taking this risk and experiencing the feeling of alienation is why theme two is such a strong factor in the academic success of African American males. Bill mentioned during a conversation in our focus group the difficulty of venturing outside of his comfort zone. He stated, "Man that's hard. Being around people and um being in places where you don't fit and don't feel comfortable, it's hard." (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). I asked Bill and the other participants if they believed their willingness to make this choice influenced their success and they all shook their heads

When posed with the question of why they believed their faith was a factor in their success, the participants had similar beliefs as to why this was the case. Many believed that faith was the reason why they made good choices and were willing to sacrifice individual wants and needs. They felt their faith in God helped them make lifestyle choices that would benefit their educational. This also addresses the question of why faith is a factor in the academic success of African American males. Greg believes his faith lead him to making good choices and that these choices lead to his success. Bill also made a similar statement when he said, "We all need a reason to make good choices and not just do all the fun and easy stuff. For me most times Jesus was that reason" (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018). When I asked Chris why he believed his faith played a role in his achievement in school he replied, "We all hurt and need support. People are not always there; Jesus is. He is there to lift you up and make you believe when no one else is" (Chris, Interview, November, 2018).

During the interview process the participants gave statements that illustrated why they felt having a plan and a purpose helped them succeed. In regards to why having a plan is so pivotal Kevin said, "There are too many distractions if you don't have a plan. There is too much a kid can get into. The plan helps guide your decisions and what you do" (Interview, November

19, 2018).  Eric said in our focus group, "A major gives you that light at the end of the tunnel"

(Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Several participant responses present the notion that a plan

is so important due to what can happen if you don't have one.  Participant responses defend the

notion that a plan and a desired degree can give an African American males the guidance and

motive that is often need to complete a degree.

Along with the need for a graduation plan participant's said that intrinsic motivation was a

major factor because success or failure ultimately comes down to a personal choice.  Larry

responded to an interview question by saying, "eventually it comes down to you making the choice

to work or not work, go to class, or don't go to class, study don't study.  In the end it's on you"

(Interview, November 20, 2018

**Sub-Question Two**

The intention of sub-question two was to discover factors that could hinder African

American males in the pursuit of a degree from a four-year college.  All of the major themes that

emerged detailing factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males

also help answer this question on factors that could hinder this success.  Within all of the major

themes, Mentoring, venturing outside of your comfort zone, faith, purpose and process, all of the

participants gave examples of individuals that failed academically due to a lack of one of these

specific factors in their life.  When discussing the importance of his uncle as a mentor in his

academic career Eric stated, "Not having a father is a big deal.  Most of my friend's who's dad

wasn't around didn't make it" (Interview, November 11, 2018).  Theme two answers this

question by participants giving example of African American males who failed to venture

outside of the social and cultural norms they were accustomed to.  As I discussed in the earlier

section Henry said, "I had friends who would never leave home.  They wouldn't leave a situation

where they felt comfortable. Their fear of the unknown limited their lives" (Henry, Interview, November 13, 2018). When discussing theme three and the strength and support they received as a result of their faith several participants also described peers who did not have this source of strength and guidance in their lives. This is encapsulated in an earlier quote from Greg,

> Following God and basing my life on his word and his commandments helped me make choices that helped me be successful. Not using drugs, not drinking, I didn't do these things because of my faith. A lot of my friends did them and it caused them to fail. (Greg, Interview, November 12, 2018)

Finally many participants felt the lack of a plan and a purpose would be a great hindrance on the academic success of an African American male. "Have a plan and ask for help making that plan. Have a major, don't just take classes. A lot of my boys did that and they never finished [college]" (Bill, Interview, October 31, 2018). All of these results combine to provide an answer to sub-question two and generate some valuable information that can be used to prevent African American males from experiencing some of these factors that could hinder their success.

**Sub-Question Three**

The goal of sub-question three was to discover how the environment of a high school or college could affect the academic progress of African American males. Theme three provide a very strong answer to this question. The perception that was possessed by all of the participants was the importance of African American males venturing out of their comfort zone and learning to function in a foreign environment gives an unexpected answer to sub-question three. This theme illustrates that the environment of a school is not as important as how the individual reacts to that environment. The participants in this study were mixed on how the environment of both

their high school and college meet their needs as an African American male.   Some said the

environment and culture was strong and helped them succeed, while other felt that culturally

their schools failed to address the needs of African American males.  No emergent theme

revealed itself in regards to the specific type of school environment that was needed for African

American males to succeed.  The theme that was clearly evident early in the data collection

process was the need for African American males to venture outside of a world and lifestyle they

were comfortable in if they wanted to achieve academic success.  Participant Chris said,

> There is a lack of diversity in college, but hey there is a lack of diversity in the
>
> workforce.  As a black man you better get used to dealing with it, whatever the cost get
>
> away from home and what you are used to.  This is the only way you can grow as a man.
>
> (Interview, November, 2018)

## Summary

African American males that have graduated from a four-year college perceive several

factors that contributed to their academic success.  Within these factors four major themes

emerged.  The first was the importance of a mentor in guiding and supporting these men through

their academic pursuits.  Several responses throughout this study referred to the importance of

the support or guidance the participant received from a family member or someone in the

educational setting.  The men involved in this study perceived that this support helped them deal

with the various challenges that arose while seeking their degree.  The second theme revealed the

perception of several participants of the need for African American males to venture outside of

their comfort zone and into a cultural and social setting that may be foreign to them.  The

participants of this study felt this was a factor in their academic success.  They also perceived

that a lack of willingness to take this step and face this challenge is a major hindrance in the academic pursuits of many African American males.

Another major theme that emerged from the data was the effect faith had in the participant's completion of a degree. Many statement and discussions documented in this study illustrated the perceived importance of faith for these individuals and how this faith both empowered them to success and equipped them with the feeling that they were supported and strengthened through the difficult times within their educational pursuits. Faith, similar to the direct assistance given by a mentor provided another system of support for the participants. Also revealed in this theme was the role faith played in making good choices. Several participants perceive that their faith in God and their Christian beliefs lead them to making lifestyle choices that increased the likelihood that they would persist in school and complete their degree.

The final theme that was revealed in this study was the important of process and purpose. Many participants perceived that having a plan and a course of action for how and when they would complete their degree helped focus and guide them through this process. Several of the men in this study mentioned that not having a plan of what specific degree a person wanted to earn and how they were going to accomplish this goal could be detrimental to the academic success of an African American male. They gave examples of how they plan kept them focused while several of their peers started to college without this plan and specific goal and never finished. This theme also revealed every participant in this study possess an intrinsic motive to complete their degree and a why or specific reason for accomplishing this goal. This theme revealed the importance of not only direct assistance for African American males, but the importance of empowering them with a mindset and a motive to succeed. If equipped with the

right motive and mindset toward academic success the person will find a way to overcome

challenges and persevere through hard times to accomplish their goal and earn a degree.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to understand and reveal the perceptions of African American males that earned a degree from a four year college toward the factors that lead to their academic success. This study sought to reveal factors that lead to the academic success of the participants, along with factors that impeded their academic progress. It was also the intention of the study to uncover how the participants perceived these factors, and how these factors could be applied to the academic pursuits of other African American males.

The data collected from the individual interviews, focus group, and personal narratives provided the information that was used to answer the four guiding questions. The goal of the research questions was to retrieve from African American males that had experienced academic success their perceptions of the factors that lead to this success. The individual interviews, focus group activity were transcribed and combined with the personal narratives provided by the participants. This data set was then analyzed using Moustakas (1994) horizontalization method. Once this had taken place the organized sets of data were then coded into significant themes. All the four major themes that emerged during this process are described in detail in this chapter and the individual experiences and personal accounts of the participants are described and discussed.

The findings of the four research questions are briefly summarized in Chapter Five. Along with this summary Chapter Five focuses on, the implications, limitations, delimitations of the study, and the recommendations for future research.

**Summary of Findings**

This study was based on four research questions. Four main themes emerged from the data, with multiple sub-themes emerging within the major themes. The central research question was, what factors African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success. All four of the major themes helped to provide an answer to this question.

The first major theme that helped answer the central research question was the importance of a mentor in supporting and guiding academic success. All fourteen of my participants mentioned one or more individuals that assisted them in their success. The majority of the responses described either first a family member that aided in their academic progress. This ranged everywhere from their mother's and father, to uncles and cousins. Some of these we examples of specific acts and instances where these family members provide financial or emotional assistance to the participants. Other situations described lasting examples that were set by family members in regards to academic success. Teachers and people within the school environment were also mentioned by all study participants as having a direct impact on their academic achievement.

Theme two provided additional information that would help answer the central research question. This theme describes the perception of the participants that African American males must be willing to venture outside of their cultural and social norms in order to achieve academic success. Six of the participants gave examples of academic scenarios in which they felt out of place or uncomfortable. They believed that their ability to adapt and function in these situations were critical to their success. Thirteen participants described instances where socially they were faced with the notion that they didn't belong or were not capable of functioning in a particular environment. They perceived that acquiring new traits and learning to assimilate to a foreign

cultural environments helped chart a course for their success. Eight of the participants also discussed the need for African American males that are pursuing a degree to be willing to take risks and attempt things socially and academically that they may initially believe they are incapable of completing. It is this willingness to take a risk and place themselves in an uncomfortable situating and environment that many of the participants felt separated them from their peers.

The third major theme that provided answers to the central research question was the notion that the participant's faith in God helped lead them to success. Eleven of the participants believe that their faith had a positive effect on their schooling. Nine of them felt that God gave them a system of support and a reason for believing that they could persevere and overcome challenges. They also felt that their Christian faith helped them to make better choices socially, and that this helped contribute to their academic success. Eleven of the participants documented the emotional support that their Christian faith provided them during the struggles that they faced while obtaining their degree. Their faith gave them the feeling that they were not alone in their struggles, and God was there to comfort and support them when they faced challenges. All of these response illustrate the importance faith can play in the academic success of African American males.

The last major theme that emerged from the data that answers the central research question is the need for African American males to have a plan and specific desired outcome before they begin their degree. This plan and goal must also be driven by an intrinsic motivation to succeed and complete that degree. All fourteen participants made some reference to this theme. Thirteen of them stated or wrote that having a plan and a defined degree there were working to accomplish was critical to their success. All fourteen of the participants described an

internal drive or motivation they had to complete their degree. Some described this motivation as being received from the example of or interaction with an individual their life, while some spoke of a mindset that pushed them to accomplish a goal and be the best they could be in life. All of the participants stated their perception intrinsic motivation positively impacting their educational success.

For the central research question, all of the participants mentioned their perception of the effect mentoring, a willingness to venture outside of their comfort zone, and process and purpose had on the academic success. Nine of the fourteen made reference to their perception of faith as playing a role in their accomplishments. The overwhelming majority of the research participants referenced their perception of these factors which provides a detailed and well supported answer to the central research question. The positive effect that this perception had on the participants of this study shows the importance these factors can have in the academic pursuits of other African American males.

Sub-question one asked, why do the African American males participating in this study feel that some individual factors influenced their academic success more than others? Several of the men in this study believed that mentoring was a factor in their academic success due to individuals becoming directly involved in their lives and investing time and energy to get to know them as a person. The mentors that affected these participants most humanized them and became involved in their lives outside the academic setting. Whether the mentor was a family member or someone from the educational setting the support they provided was more effective when the mentor spent time with the participant one on one and developed more of an individual bond with the participant.

A majority of the participants felt that the reason stepping outside of their comfort zone played such a role in the academic success of African American males is due to the challenge this action represents. Almost all of the participants when referencing the need for an African American males to be willing to face this fear and challenge also talked about how hard it was to make the choice to place themselves in this situation and that because it was so hard many of their peers chose to not take this risk. Understanding how difficult it can be for an African American male to function in a foreign environment can help parents and educators support these young men and provide them with the skills they need to take this step. The participants in the study felt sub-theme three played a role in their educational success due to the importance of faith in making good decisions and feeling like they were supported during struggles and times of weakness. They shared the belief that God could help guide their choices and actions along with provide them with support when they felt alone or had a dismal outlook on their chances for success.

Lastly, all the men in this study believed that a plan of action and internal motive to complete the plan was pivotal in the educational aspirations of an African American male. They perceived these factors to be so important because of the distractions that can hinder a person without a plan. They felt a plan helped guide them through the educational process. The participants also felt that an intrinsic motive to finish their degree and better their place in life was so important because at various times things will get hard and a person will be faced with the choice to persevere or quit. When these situations arise, the person with the strong internal motive for why they want the degree will be much more likely to experience success.

The third research question, sub-question two asked: what factors do African American male college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress, and how were they able

to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree? The answer to this question can be found in all four of the major themes that emerged from the research data. These factors that that can lead to academic success for and African American male also reveal how an absence of these factors diminish the probability of success for these individuals. The first concept of the importance of a mentor shows that an African American male that does not have a mentor to guide and support them may be less likely to achieve academic success. The second theme showing the need for African American males to venture outside of their comfort zones also creates the argument that individuals who are unwilling to do this may struggle to achieve success in the academic environment?

Theme three revealed the role faith can play in the academic success of an African American male. As much as faith can create a system of support for African American males, and a catalyst for good decision-making, the absence of any time of faith or moral guidance could lead to equally poor decision-making. Not having a moral and religious guide to help make decisions can cause African American students to make choices that will be counterproductive in both school and life.

The final theme emphasizes the need for a plan and an internal drive and purpose. The feelings of the participants that these aspects are needed in the lives of African American males shows that not having a plan and not having an intrinsic motive to finish what they start could hinder the academic progress of an African American male. This theme shows that without a detailed plan to graduate college and an interval motive and drive to complete this plan over time an African American male can lose interest and become frustrated with the academic process. This frustration leads to that individual giving up and not completing their degree. The participants gave countless examples within these themes of friends and relatives that didn't

incorporate these factors into their lives or their academic pursuits. They said, because of this, they never excelled academically. These real life illustrations of what can happen if specific strategies are not employed. The data reveal that a lack of a mentor, an unwillingness to venture outside of their comfort zone, a lack of a religious or moral reference point, and an absence of an intrinsic motive can decrease the probability that an African American male will earn a four year degree.

The final research question, sub-question three asked: how does the school environment of high school and a 4-year college affect an African American male student's ability to attain a college degree? The answer that the data of this study provided to this question was both informative and unique. One hundred percent of the participants in this study perceived that their willingness to venture outside of their comfort zone was a determining factor in their academic success. They felt being willing to navigate and interact socially and academically in environments that were foreign to them caused them to grow as people. The participants felt this willingness to grow was a factor that separated them from many of their peer that would not face environments and situations that made them uncomfortable. This answer was unique when compared to much of the current literature describing the specific types of environments and cultural needs that must be meet for African American males in the academic setting. This theme reveals that an individual attitude toward the environment and how effectively they can navigate and adjust to a foreign environment is more important than altering the environment itself. Only a few of the participants mentioned the environment of their high school or college as being a hindrance to their progress. Several of them talked about feeling out of place or uncomfortable in the schools they attended, but none of them allowed this feeling of discomfort and alienation to hinder their success. In lieu of this information, the answer to question two is less about the

effect of the environment but about how the individual is able to function within an environment and what skills are necessary to allow this to occur.

The fourth major theme revealed in this study were factors in the academic success of the participants. These themes illustrate that mentors in both the family and academic setting becoming involved in the lives of African American males can have a positive impact on their academic performance. By providing academic, financial, and emotional support, mentors can fill the voids that often exist in the lives of African American males. These mentors can also set example that African American males can follow in regards to academic excellence. It is critical in the academic lives of African American males for family members and educators to take the initiative and assume these mentorship roles and assist these young men in success.

It is also imperative to equip these young men with the willingness and social mobility to venture outside of their comfort zone and to be willing to live and function in setting that they are not accustomed to. This must be done by equipping them with the social skills necessary to navigate a foreign environment and also through giving them the confidence that they can be successful and showing them they belong in the educational world. The themes also show that faith can be a strong ally in the academic pursuits of African American males. Faith and a worldview that is based on religious and moral principles can provide another form of guidance and support for African American males. This faith can act as the mentor when the mentor is not there. Faith can give them the support they need to the challenging social setting, and a strong moral compass can guide them to decisions that will benefit their lives. The final factor raveled the need to have a plan when starting college and to have a specific degree that a person is working for. This plan will help prevent wasted time, money, and energy. The more progress and success an African American male sees early in his collegiate experience, the more likely he will

be to finish. Along with this plan, it must be accompanied by an intrinsic motive to succeed. Instilling a why and a reason for finish school will have a direct impact on the academic lives of African American males and will drastically increase their possibility of success.

## Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to revel factors that helped lead to the academic success of African American males. Through individual interviews, focus groups, and personal narratives, the data collected in this study provided insight into the lived experiences of African American males that graduated from a four year college. The four components that lie within the major themes of this study are (a) The need for a mentor, (b) the willingness to venture outside of your comfort zone, (c) faith, And (d) a plan to graduate and a drive to make this plan happen. These themes will add to the research documenting factors that can assist African American males in attaining academic success. This study has theoretical, and empirical implications.

**Theoretical**

The findings of this study support two existing theories regarding how humans acquire and develop knowledge and skills. Themes two and three are a direct example of sociocultural theory at work. Sociocultural theory is the idea that as a person and their personality is shaped by their interactions with their environment. Sociocultural theory places an emphasis on the role of a person's social interactions and individual choices in the acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1962). This theory lines up directly with theme two which describes the belief of the participants that their ability to function outside of an environment they were used has helped lead to their academic success. This can be seen in several participant statements. "There is a lack of diversity in college, but hey there is a lack of diversity in the workforce, you know what I mean? As a

black man you better get used to dealing with it" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). "Stats my junior year (In College) was a turning point. I was the only African American in the class" (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018). "I had to cut off certain friends that were living a different life" (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). "At times in college I felt like the odd ball, like I didn't fit in. I had to grow and get comfortable with being uncomfortable" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). In current literature, Lareau (2003) describes in her work how students from middle class families achieve greater academic success than students from lower class families due to their ability to function within the culture. She believes the home environment the middle class students were raised in gave them a set of skills and knowledge that allowed them function at a higher level academically than their peers from lower class families.

All of the evidence in this study supports the theory that a person can grow and be shaped by their interaction with their environment. This illustrates that if African American males can have enough exposure to the educational environment and be willing to deal with the discomfort this brings they can learn to function in this environment. This is Vygotsky's (1962) theory playing out in real life.

Along with theme two, theme three also supports the sociocultural theory. The effect faith had on the academic success of the participants ties directly with the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962). The sociocultural theory illustrates how people can perceive and adopt a specific mindset to how they see the world and how they live their life. The data show the participants exposure to faith and the teachings of Christianity equipped them with the belief and mindset that they are supported and they have a purpose in life. Current literature shows the importance of support and guidance in the academic success of African American males. The

participants' faith provided the support they needed to build a self concept and mindset that world increase their potential for academic success (Kalina & Powell, 2009.). Several participant responses also illustrated the strength of the sociocultural theory. "Following God and basing my life on his word and his commandments helped me make choices that helped me be successful" (Greg, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). "The fact that I am a Christian caused me to surround myself with like minded people. Friends who also made good choices guys that didn't smoke (Marijuana) and party all the time" (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Bill and Greg both believe their Christian faith led them to surround themselves with people who made good lifestyle choices and this choice contributed to their success in school. This belief supports the aspect of sociocultural theory that proposes a person acquires knowledge and traits through interaction with people and environment (Vygotsky, 1962).

The second theory that is supported by the data gathered in this study is Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory. This theory focuses on a person's past experiences and how these experiences influence future choices and behavior. The social cognitive theory is directly supported by theme four. Theme four illustrates the need for an African American male to have a plan and to have an internal drive to succeed and see the plan through. Theme four exposes the need to not only provide direct support to African American males in the educational setting but to empower them with a personal drive to succeed. This notion relates directly with the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Current literature shows the role self-concept and racial identity play in African American males attending and graduating from college (Tyler et al., 2016; Webb, 2016). The importance of self-efficacy and the concept that an individual has direct control of their future and the outcome of events and situation meshes perfectly with the perception of these participants that their personal motivation and intrinsic drive for earning a

degree was an important factor in their academic success. Various statements were made that support social cognitive theory. "I went there with the end result in mind not just to have a good time. Knowing what I wanted and why I was going was important to my success" (Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018). In our focus group Greg stated, "It gets too hard with bills and going to class and all the things that come at you, without a plan they just quit" (November 26, 2018). Many of the statements made by the participants also directly support Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy found within his social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy is a person's beliefs or perception of their ability to attain goals and complete specific tasks and objectives. This idea of self-efficacy and its effect on the academic success of the participant can be found throughout the data collected. "That inner drive was the thing that kept me going when a lot of others gave up" (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018). "I got a scholarship from a community group while I was in college. That money put a lot of pressure on me to finish and do well" (Greg, Narrative, November 18, 2018). "My personal pressure on myself to succeed blocked out all the other things and people that could have stopped me along the way" (Ahmad, Interview, October 10, 2017). Bill made the statement, "You have to have a vision and ignore the distractions" (Interview, October 31, 2018). All of the quotes support the concept of self-efficacy and the notion that an individual's belief that they are in control of their future and their actions will determine their plays a major role in them experiencing success. This notion illustrates the importance of equipping African American males with the belief that their future is not preordained and that they can alter their circumstances and achieve success in spite of any challenges they may face.

**Empirical**

I will cover the four themes identified in the data collected during the study related to the empirical research found in the review of the literature. Those themes are (a) a mentor, (b) a willingness to venture outside of their comfort zone (Choices), (c) faith, and (d) process and purpose. Each of these themes provided a rich and thick description based on the empirical literature.

**A Mentor**

Current literature asserts the need for a mentor or role model in the lives of African American males. Theses mentors provide a support system and set an example for African American males in their lives. The need for a mentor becomes even greater in the academic setting. Research has shown that a mentor or role model can increase the probability of an African American male's academic success. Current literature also declares the detrimental effect not having a mentor can have on an African American males academic pursuits. Mentorship usually comes from two sources either a person's family or a person in the academic setting. Mentors are most effective when they are a family member (Jeynes, 2014; Williams & Patton, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013). The participants of this study have illustrated that with the data that was collected. "Mentoring is more important in the African American community than others. There are plenty of examples of what not to do. Kids need examples like them of what they can do" (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018). "My Uncle guided me, he kept me focused on doing something with my life. My grandparents' helped me (Financially) when I struggled" (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). My parents did so much with me when I was a kid that I was way ahead of my friends" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). "If I failed a test or had a bad grade my parents punished me. I developed good study habits because I didn't have

a choice not to" (Dante, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). All of these statements provide empirical evidence that a mentor from the family of an African American male cane greatly improve that personas chances for academic success. Mentoring is also effective when it comes from a teacher or a person directly involved in the educational process (Palmer et al., 2014; Rhoden, 2017). Data collected within this study upholds this argument. "I had a coach that was an extension of my dad. He taught me professionalism" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018). "I had Teachers in college that would not let me take a shortcut" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). "I had teachers in elementary school that bragged on me and called me smart. I never forgot that" (Eric, November 26, 2018). "Man, Mr. Jones was a big role model. Here was this black dude that was a math teacher. I knew if he belonged in college, I did too" (Mark, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). The results of this study defiantly provide empirical evidence of the positive effect a mentor can have in the lives of African American males.

**A Willingness to Venture Outside of Your Comfort Zone**

Being willing to enter a social and academic environment that is foreign is a key to an African American males experiencing academic success. The study participants illustrated several times how this took form in their educational journey. "Don't be ashamed to struggle and ask for help" (November 1, 2018). "Man in school you just got to make up your mind to go. Even though you don't want to and it ain't where you want to be you gotta make the choice and just do it" (Mark, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Ian said, "Don't expect things to be equal" (Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Larry provide another example of the social alienation that some African American males can face, "When I would not attend a social gathering because I wanted to study I would get called a nerd and then hear comments like black people can't even be nerds this is the first ever black nerd" (Narrative, November 21, 2018). A statement from Bill

summarizes this idea, "When your friend are going to hang out and party you got to stay back and study and go to bed, that part is hard. Sometimes you have to separate yourself from people and cut people off" (Interview, October 31, 2018). This data bring to light an aspect of environment that has often been neglected in current literature. The importance of the school environment to the success of African American males has been well documented, but the responses of the participants in this study show how an individual responds to a specific environment may be more pivotal to their success (Walker-Bowen, 2007). There is much evidence that shows many African American males are reluctant to apply themselves in the academic world to a cultural and social fear that they will not succeed and do not fit in (Givens et al., 2016). This study reveals that empowering young African American males with a willingness to take this risk is essential in their success.

**Faith**

Faith and a belief in God can be a powerful ally when attempting a challenge that seems too big or too difficult for a person to complete by him/herself. This is also the cause for African American males working toward a college degree. In order for an African American male that struggles in school to complete his degree, he needs a system of support (Kalina & Powell, 2009.). Faith can often be part of this support system. Faith can also lead to a greater sense of commitment and a desire to preserver in the lives of African American males (Jordan & Wilson 2015). Faith is often overlooked as a factor in academic success. Everyone spends time talking about external factors that can affect the success of a student, but the internal beliefs and mindset of the students is often overlooked. The participants of this study uncovered the notion that a faith in God can be a factor in achieving academic goals.

Chris's faith gave him a sense of purpose in life. "Every person is on earth for a reason. I felt God could use me as an example of what other people could be" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). The role faith played in Greg's success can clearly be seen in this statement:

Following God and basing my life on his word and his commandments helped me make choices that helped me be successful. Not using drugs, not drinking, I didn't do these things because of my faith. A lot of my friends did them and it caused them to fail. (Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

The support that faith in God can provide is also supported by Ahmad's statement,

God was the thing that kept me strong and kept me going. Through my mom's sickness and all the trouble I had finishing school. He (God) was the thing that keep me believing in the idea that I could make it. (Ahmad, Interview, October 29, 2018)

A feeling of support is significant within African American males attempting to earn a four-year degree, "When things got tough I knew I had something bigger than me backing me up. That belief that she showed me and God gave me kept me believing in myself" (James, Narrative, November 30, 2018). Forming a healthy racial identity can be challenging for even a gifted African American student. Identifying with a social group that is very different from them can leave many African American males feeling alone and lost (Haywood, & Sewell, 2016). Faith can also be a system of support and belonging when these feelings arise. In our interview session Eric asserted, "There is no doubt that without my faith I would not have made it. It gave me something to lean on and a reason to believe in myself" (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). "He (my pastor) made me believe that doing good in school was part of me being a Christian and being a good person." (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018). Eric and Dante's

quote meshes perfectly with how effective assertion and involvement with church and religious figures can be in helping African American males excel in school (Jordan & Wilson, 2015).

**Process and Purpose**

Studies were found that supported the idea that African American males need to have a plan of how and when they were going to earn their degree. Also found was the importance of an internal motive and drive to see this plan through to completion. The support that an African American male receives from the academic community is essential to their academic success. When people in the school setting help African American males develop a plan of how they will attain their academic goal, the likelihood of these men being successful grows exponentially (Palmer et al, 2014; Strayhorn, 2010). Also important in this plan is the self-concept and racial identity of the African American male. An African American male needs a strong sense of self and the belief that they are in control of their own success. Equipping these men with this mindset could be one of the biggest factors in them reaching their full academic potential (Tyler et al, 2016; Webb, 2016).

The participants in this study directly supported the notion that having a plan of graduation was essential to completing a degree. "There are too many distractions if you don't have a plan. There is too much a kid can get into. The plan helps guide your decisions and what you do" (Kevin, Interview, November 19, 2018). "A major gives you that light at the end of the tunnel" (Eric, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Several participants all agreed that a plan of action directly contributed to their completion of a degree. "Have a plan and ask for help making that plan. Have a major, don't just take classes. A lot of my boys did that and they never finished" (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). It is easy to find information discussing the need to support African American males in the educational environment. This study showed that

part of providing that support is putting a plan in place so that the African American male can be proactive about completing their degree.

> I changed majors twice, but I always had a major and something I was working to. You got guys who just go and take classes and stay undeclared for over a year, they never finish. Have a path laid out, even if it changes you are getting somewhere. (Dante, Focus Group, November 26, 2018)

The need for a plan is also evident when Ian stated,

> "It gets too hard with bills and going to class and all the things that come at you, without a plan they just quit" (Ian, Focus Group, November 26, 2018).

An essential part of an academic plan is having a specific career that will be obtained through the execution of the plan. Having a real tangible goal at the end ensures execution of the plan. Larry illustrates this by saying,

> "Having a specific career I wanted to purse and work in after college helped me stay focused. I went there (college) with the end result in mind not just to have a good time. Knowing what I wanted and why I was going was important to my success" (Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018).

> Also voiced in this study was the need for African American males to have a strong self-concept and a strong racial identity. The participants felt an internal drive and an intrinsic motive to succeed was a major contributor to their achievement in school. Regardless of where this inner drive originated it played a role in the success of the participants of this study. "My mom gave me that inner drive. That inner drive was the thing that kept me going when a lot of others gave up" (Nate, Interview, November 23, 2018). "I got a scholarship from a community group while I was in college. That money put a lot of pressure on me to finish and do well. I felt like if these

people were going to give me money and believe in me I had to finish" (Greg, Narrative, November 18, 2018). For many of the participants, their drive to succeed came from somewhere within themselves. "My personal pressure on myself to succeed blocked out all the other things and people that could have stopped me along the way" (Ahmad, Interview, October 10, 2017). I was only going through a fraction of what my ancestors went through. This put in perspective that it's just school it could be a lot harder. That gave me purpose as I went" (Ian, Interview, November 17, 2018). "I was at least getting a bachelors. I saw college as a way to a better life" (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). A personal identity within the educational process also motivated some of the participants. "I wanted to be known for what I did in school. Getting my degree was going to be my way of getting that attention. (Narrative, October 29, 2018). Bill said, in relation to this idea, "In college I got a lot of wise cracks about how I worked at school and that I was a nerd. You have to have a vision and ignore the distractions" (Interview, October 31, 2018). This concept of a personal identity providing the inner drive can be seen in Greg's statement, "I started becoming known as the dude that made good grades and worked hard at school. That just became part of who I was and how people knew me and I wanted to keep that going" (Interview, November 12, 2018). The empirical evidence of the importance of intrinsic motivation is clearly seen in this study it can be best summarized in this statement, "I had high expectations for myself. I was never conflicted on if I was going to get a degree" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018).

## Implications

This study was designed to reveal factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males. Implications surfaced from the data collected during this study. This

section will provide the empirical, theoretical and practical implications that emerged from this study.

**Empirical**

Current literature has well documented the struggles that African American males face in the educational arena, but few have actually examined specific individuals and how these factors directly impacted their educational success. This study has achieved that task and has revealed numerous factors that both contributed to and hindered the academic success of African American males. The themes identified in this study seek to document the factors that affect African American males academic achievement and provide a model for African American males as they seek educational success.

Mentoring from parents and family members plays a vital role in the academic success or failure of an African American male. Every participant involved in this study described how a specific family member had aided in their academic success. From providing moral support to financial assistance it was easy to see the importance of family involvement in the educational process in the participants of this study (Eric Interview, November 11, 2018; Larry, Narrative, November 21, 2018). Many participants spoke of situations where they felt they would not have continued to pursue their degree if they did not have the support of a parent or family member. Participants also described a standard that was set by a family member that forced them to perform at a high level. They spoke of, "the standard" (Larry, Narrative, November 21, 2018), and "consequences for my actions" (Dante, Focus Group, November 26, 2018)"Only a mentor helps you grow" (Greg, Focus Group, November 26, 2018) speaks directly to the idea of the need for direct involvement of family members in the academic success of African American males. Who the family member was seemed irrelevant. These individuals spanned from mothers

and fathers to uncles and cousins (Ahmad, Interview, October 29, 2018; Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018). Not all of these individuals were a positive example. Many were examples of how not to attain educational success and used their failures to motivate the participants (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). How the mentor was related to the individual or the type of mentorship that was received was not important. The importance was that a person from within the individual's family got involved in the educational process and showed that getting an education was important to them and that the young man as an individual mattered in their lives. These results directly illustrate the importance of family involvement in the educational process (Jeynes, 2014; Williams et al., 2017; St. Mary et al., 2018).

The second factor that contributes to the academic success of African American males is the importance of mentorship from a figure within the academic community. Whether this person is a teacher, coach, counselor, or someone else directly linked to the academic world their involvement was critical in the academic success of the participants of this study. The men involved in this study described teachers or coaches that were, "An extension of my dad" (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018), and teachers who, "Bragged on me and called me smart" (Eric, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Examples were given of teachers who, "Would not let me take a shortcut" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). A teacher who, "Showed me I belonged" was described as being critical to the success of one of the men involved in this study (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018). These descriptions directly coincide with literature that details the importance of the involvement of academic figures in the lives of African American males (Palmer et al.,; Rhoden, 2017). The data also matches up with current research that supports the need for a strong school environment that addresses the needs of African American males (Strayhorn, 2010).

A strong self-concept and a willingness on the part of the individual to take risks and push themselves is another factor that improves the academic performance of African American males. Studies have shown the importance of African American males having a strong concept of self and a willingness to take on risks in the academic setting and handle failure (Givens et al., 2016; Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Literature has also illustrated the need for African American males to disregard the opinions of their peers and ignore cultural serotypes that deemphasize the importance of academic achievement (Webb, 2016). This study's findings advance these ideas. The participants described the role, "Making the choice to do the hard stuff" played in their success (Ahmad, Narrative, November 29, 2018). They advised other African American males by saying, "Don't be ashamed to struggle" (Chris, Interview, November 1, 2018), and to have a "Hard working mentality" (Ian, Focus Group, November 26, 2018). Working through adversity and making the choice to preserver were also factors that participants felt lead to their academic success (Dante, Interview, November 3, 2018; Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018). Faith in God was also described as a source of developing a strong self-concept and making the choice to persevere through struggles (Frank, Interview, November 6, 2018; James, Narrative, November 30, 2018). This notion furthers the argument in recent literature that religion and faith create a greater sense of commitment and dedication in African American males (Jordan & Wilson, 2015).

The need to have a purpose for earning a college degree and also having a plan to achieve this goal emerged as a final contributing factor to the academic success of African American males. The men involved in this study forwarded the idea that African American males need to have a plan for the type of degree they are going to get and what they are going to do with this degree. Having a specific career in mind helped them take the necessary steps to completing their

degree (Larry, Interview, November 20, 2018). The study also revealed that African American

males need to have a specific path to how they will earn their degree and to avoid aimlessly

taking classes but have a specified length of time as to what classes they will take and when they

will take them (Bill, Focus Group, November 26, 2018; Dante, Focus Group, November 26,

2018). This data links directly with literature that exhibits the positive effects a plan and a

specific course of action can have on academic success. Also important within this plan is a

motive for making this plan a reality. The data revealed that financial support and the sacrifice

that people made to assist in their degree helped motivate the participants to see their plan

through (Eric, Interview, November 11, 2018; Greg, Narrative, November 18, 2018). Another

contributor to this motivation was the struggles that their ancestors had faced in regards to being

allowed to seek academic achievement. Many participants felt these past experiences caused

them to execute the plan they had in place (Ian, Interview, November 17, 2018). Lastly the

examples that the parents of the men in this study set helped give the participants a reason to

preserver and follow through with their plan (Bill, Focus group, November 26, 2018). This data

provide evidence to the argument in recent literature of the need for African American males to

have a motive and a specific reason for pursuing and attaining a degree (William & Portman,

2014).

**Theoretical**

Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural theory states that a person acquires knowledge through

social interaction and personal choices. This theory fits perfectly with the data gathered in this

study. The men involved in this study along with current literature insist on the need for an

African American males to be willing to venture outside of their comfort zone both socially and

personally (Givens et al., 2016; Kafele, 2009). This concept is a direct illustration of African

American males acquiring an ability to succeed through interaction with peers, family members, and people in the educational setting. Also shown is these men making a choice that will allow them to acquire the knowledge and the skills necessary to succeed academically. This is a direct illustration of the theory Vygotsky (1962) proposed. The concept of faith leading to greater commitment and dedication in the academic setting also proves the validity of Vygotsky's (1962) ideas (Jordan & Wilson, 2015).

The social cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and argues that an individual has direct control of their future, success, and failures (Bandura, 1977). This theory also proves that a person's self-efficacy can be directly influenced by personal interactions. Social cognitive theory is supported by the ideas presented in this study. The need for African American males to have a plan as to how they will complete a college degree, and a motive to see this plan through to completion is a prime example of a person taking control of their own future and allowing the people around them to mold them in a positive way (Palmer et al., 2014; Webb, 2016). The social cognitive theory is also evident in the parental interactions and support that the men in this study received while pursuing their degree (Williams, & Portman, 2014). This support allowed the participants to take control of their education and to make choices that lead to their success. These choices were influenced by the support they received from both parents and educators (Rhoden, 2017; William & Portman, 2014).

**Practical**

Several practical implications emerged from the data gathered during this study. A mentor greatly improves the chances of an African American male experiencing educational success. It must be the goal of both parents and educators to provide this mentorship to these young men. Parents and educators must also encourage African American males to be willing to

take risks and understand that failure is a part of improvement. The people involved in the educational lives of African American males can provide support while these young men while they take a risk and choose to step outside of a world in which they feel comfortable. Instilling and developing faith in the heart sand minds of African American males will also lead to greater achievement in all areas of their lives. Individuals that have relationships with young African American males can help build a foundation of faith that could support these young men the rest of their lives. Lastly educators and parents alike must help African American males develop a plan for how they will complete a college degree and instill in them a motive and intrinsic drive that will cause them to follow the plan through to completion. Instilling an intrinsic motive and desire may be the greatest form of assistance a person can provide to an African American male in the world of education. No one can prepare these young men for every obstacle and adversity they will face. But if educators and parents equip them with a desire and motive to complete their degree they will find a way on their own to battle through adversity. It is the job of the people in their lives to instill a driving force that will energize and support them as they preserve toward their goal.

## Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations were established to clarify the boundaries of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Transcendental phenomenology was the best research method for this study due to the ability it gave me to gain a subjective view of the phenomenon being studied. Transcendental phenomenology allowed me to bracket the data gathered from the participants apart from other influences and situations, and apart from my own personal biases and beliefs. This bracketing allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants. (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). The use of transcendental phenomenology required thick, descriptive data and

non-random purposeful sampling of a specific population of co-researchers (Patton, 2002). The

delimitations included parts of the study related to location and participant selection. The

participant selection was limited to African American males who attended high school in East

Tennessee. Confining the study to this location was done to narrow down the factors that the

participants encountered during the educational process and to provide data that could directly

benefit other African American males in this area. Only males who had earned a four year degree

were recruited as potential participants for this study. The purpose for these requirements was to

focus the data that would be gathered in order to provide a more detailed and specific set of

results.

Limitations were situations the researcher had less control over, and that had the

possibility to weaken the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Establishing boundaries required

acknowledging of limitations as part of the research process to reduce or minimize the impact on

the study. Using only male participants creates a lack of transferability to female African

American students. The choice of location for the study excluded factors that could affect the

academic success or failure of African American males in urban areas. Lastly this study only

collected data from academically successful African American males. There are two sides to

every issue. The choice to exclude African American males who either dropped out or never

attend college creates a void of data on factors that lead to their academic struggle and failure.

## Recommendation for Future Research

This study addressed the gap that exists cornering academically successful African

American males and the factors that contributed to their success, but there is still much more that

needs to be examined. There is a need to interact with and gather data from African American

males that did not go to college or did not finish high school. This information in contrast to the

data gathered during this study could shed light on why some African American males succeed academically while others struggle. Future research could also inquire into the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American females and how these differ from and are similar to the factors revealed in this study. This information could help parents and educators tailor interventions to fit the specific needs of the two genders.

Future studies should also consider gathering input from educators that have experienced success in educating African American students and what factors they felt were most beneficial to these individuals. Along with this researchers could include data from high schools and colleges that have a higher than average rate of African American males earning a degree. This could be valuable to a school system and individual educators that have a large African-American population or have a group of African-American students that have experienced academic struggles. Lastly, a separate study could investigate the parents and family members of African American students both male and female that have graduated from a four year college. These individuals could provide a different perspective than the African American student and could reveal factors that were overlooked by the student. This is a subject that demands further research to address the academic struggles that many African American students face and provide them the support they require to succeed.

**Summary**

This study explored the factors that contributed to the academic success of African American males that graduated from a four-year college. 12 African American males who attended high school in East Tennessee participated in the data collection portions of this study. Individual interviews, a focus group activity, and personal narratives were the tools used to collect data. The data was analyzed using open coding with four main themes emerging. The fist

was the effectiveness of a mentor in improving the likelihood of educational success in the participant. The second theme identified the need on the part of the individual to take risks and step outside of their comfort zone. The third emphasized the role faith played in supporting and empowering the men involved in this study, and the fourth theme highlighted how essential it was for the young man to have a plan of how they were going to earn their degree, and have an intrinsic drive to see the plan through to completion.

The data collected along with the literature review highlighted the effect that people involved in the lives of African American males have on their prospect of academic achievement. Whether this person is a parent, family member, or educator they can be vital in the success or failure of the young man. By providing financial emotional, and spiritual support these mentors can directly aid an African American male that is experiencing struggles and adversity in the academic world. Both the data from the study along with current literature prove that African American males can succeed academically at the same level or above any of their peers. They may only require some basic support, mentor ship, and acquisition of skills that will help them overcome the challenges that any student can face when earning a higher degree. Ensuring that these factors are provided to as many African American males will not only help improve our society as a whole, but will alter the course of the lives of individual African American males and their families.

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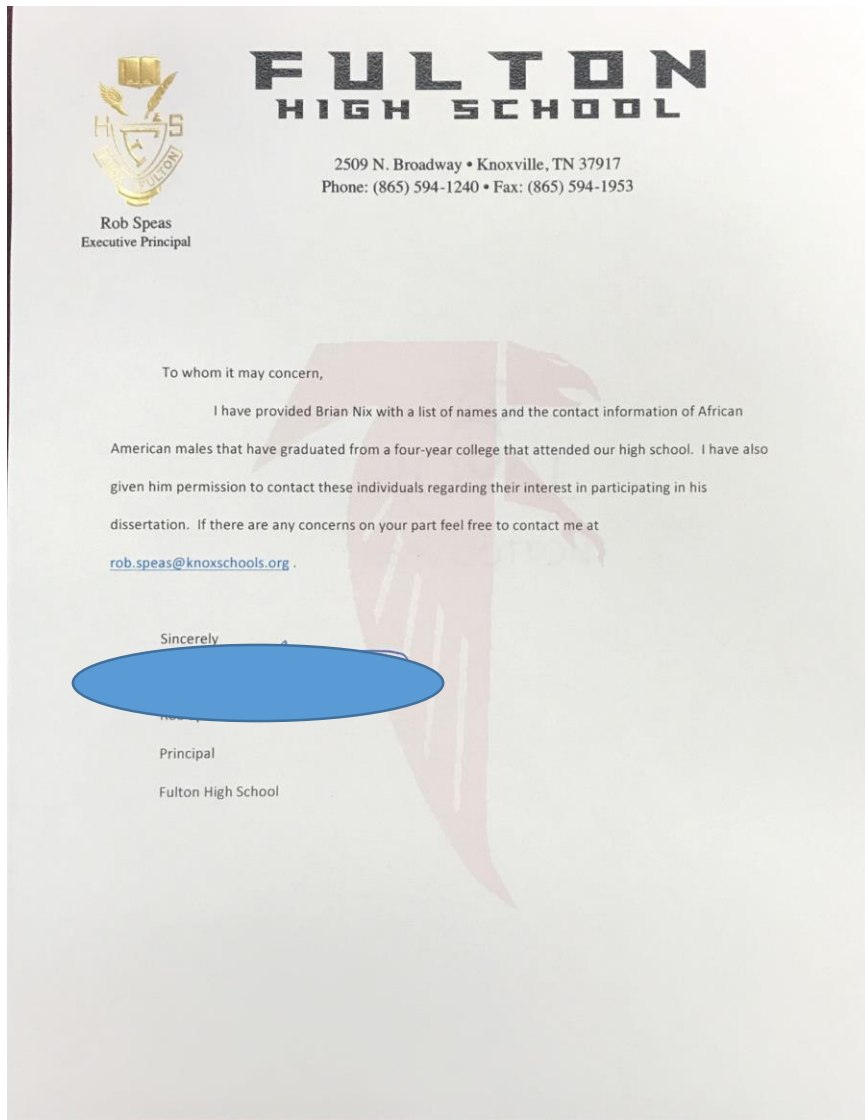    com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1926455544?accountid=12085

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Permission to Conduct Research

**FULTON HIGH SCHOOL**

2509 N. Broadway • Knoxville, TN 37917
Phone: (865) 594-1240 • Fax: (865) 594-1953

Rob Speas
Executive Principal

To whom it may concern,

I have provided Brian Nix with a list of names and the contact information of African American males that have graduated from a four-year college that attended our high school. I have also given him permission to contact these individuals regarding their interest in participating in his dissertation. If there are any concerns on your part feel free to contact me at rob.speas@knoxschools.org .

Sincerely

Principal

Fulton High School

# ALCOA HIGH SCHOOL

1205 Lodge Street
Alcoa, Tennessee 37701
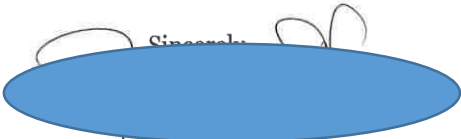Telephone 865-982-4631
Fax 865-380-2240

February 14, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

Please accept this letter giving Brian Nix permission to access the names and contact information of previous Alcoa students that have graduated and obtained a four year college degree.

If you should have any questions or concerns regarding this permission, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Stone
Principal
Alcoa High School
865-982-4631
rstone@alcoaschools.net

"Achieving High Standards"

# Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

Dear Brian Nix,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to this approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*
**The Graduate School**

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Letter**

[Insert Date]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree in education. The purpose of my research is to uncover the perceptions that African American males who have graduated from a four-year college have toward education and the factors that helped them experience academic success. It is my goal to explore what factors played a greater role in your academic success and what role the education environment you were exposed to played in your educational experience. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

To be eligible for this study you must be over the age of 18 and have graduated with a degree from a four-year college. If you are willing to participate you will be asked to be involved in one or more of the following activities. First an 1 hour focus group activity, a 1-2 hour personal interview that will be done either and preferably in person or over the phone at your convenience, or asked to complete a narrative timeline describing your academic career. Following the focus group or interview you will be asked to review your responses to the questions to insure accuracy and to allow you to clarify or expand on any responses. This process should also take 1-2 hours. Your participation will be completely confidential and no personal, identifying information will be required. Your name will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate contact me via phone at 865-207-7387 or via email at bnix@liberty.edu. I will then send you a consent form for you to fill out and email back to me. This consent for contains additional information about my research and will inquire on a few more pieces of personal information that will help structure your involvement in this study. Once this form has been completed I will set up an interview time that will accommodate your schedule and arrange a location that is easily accessible for you.

It is my hope that this research will help other African American males understand what contributed to your academic success and utilize these factors to attain academic achievement themselves. It is also my hope that information gathered in this study can help educators and parents understand how they can help African American males attain success in their academic pursuits. Thank you for your time and willingness and I feel very confident that your efforts in helping this project will pay dividends in the future of a young man's education.

Sincerely,

Brian Nix
Teacher/Coach
Alcoa High School
Graduate Student
Liberty University

**Appendix D: Informed Consent Form**

# CONSENT FORM

A Transcendental Phenomenological study that examines African American male student's

perceptions of factors that contribute to academic success at a four-year college.

Brian Nix
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study about how African American males perceive factors that contributed to their ability to graduate from a four-year college. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an African American male that obtained a degree from a four-year college and attended high school and college in the rural southern region in which the study is being conducted. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Brian Nix, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to uncover the perceptions that African American males that have graduated from a four year academic institution have toward education and the factors that helped them experience academic success.  It is my goal to explore what factors played a greater role in your academics success and what role the education environment you were exposed to played in your educational experience.  It is my hope that this research will help other African American males see the factors that have contributed to your academic success and utilize these factors to attain academic achievement themselves.  I also hope that information gathered in this study from your personal experience can help educators and parent's beer understand how they can help African American males attain success in their academic pursuits.  The questions that this study hopes to answer are what factors do African American male students perceive as contributing to their academic success in attaining a 4-year college degree?  What factors do African American males, who have attained a 4-year college degree, believe have contributed to their academic success?  What factors do African American males college graduates believe interfered with their academic progress and how were they able to overcome these obstacles in pursuit of their 4-year degree?  How does the school environment of a 4-year college affect an African American male students' ability to attain a college degree?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a personal interview that will last 1 to 2 hours.  An audio recording of this interview will be n=made along with notes that will be taken by myself.
2. Participate in a focus group session in which guiding questions will be asked to direct the conversation of the participants.  This activity should take 1-2 hours. An audio recording of this interview will be made along with notes that will be taken by myself

3.  Complete a personal narrative describing your educational experience as a whole in story form.  Guiding questions will be provided to help direct this activity.  This activity should take 1 hour.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are that you may be forced to deal with negative emotions or memories regarding your educational experience.  It is also possible that you could feel offended or prejudiced by some of the interview questions.  The risks in this study are minimal.  I have taken every step possible through pee review to ensure that my questions will minimize the likely hood of this occurring.  My questions must also be approved by Liberty Universities Review board which will also help ensue that this will be a positive experience for all involved

**Benefits:**  The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are Your participation in this study will hopefully create a sense of pride in your own accomplishments and help you as a participant remember positive situations and events that helped you graduate from a four-year college.  Hopefully the study will also help you remember individuals that helped you along the way.  Benefits to society include the hope that your involvement in this study will help African American males in the future that start college continue in their programs and obtain their degree.   It is also hoped that the knowledge gained from this study will help parents and educators of African American males better assist these individuals in completing a four-year degree.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.  Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.  Your name will not be used within any of the identifying data—interview, transcript or within the actual paper.  All identifying information will be secured.  You will be assigned a pseudonym upon arriving for your initial interview and this name will be used to identify you throughout the study.  Personal interviews will be done in a privet setting in which response will only be heard by myself.  All personal interviews and focus group sessions will be recorded and transcribed.  Only the researcher will have access to this information.  Data will be stored on a password locked computer and after three years all of the data pertaining to this study will be deleted or destroyed.  I cannot assure you that discussions and responses that occur during the focus group will not be shared outside of the research setting but I will encourage participants at the end of the focus group to refrain from repeating anything that was shared during our session to anyone outside of the study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**  If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you

choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Brian Nix. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 865-207-7387 or bnix@alcoaschools.net. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Amy McLemore at ajmclemore@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant                                                                             Date

_____

Signature of Investigator

**Appendix E: Interview Questions**

1.      Describe your family background, parents, and siblings. Where did you live throughout your childhood?  What was the educational background of your parents or guardians?

2.      Define academic success.

3.      How has the attainment of a 4-year degree affect your life?

4.      Describe personal choices you made and strategies you used that have caused you to be successful.

5.      What role did your parents or guardians play in your academic success?

6.      Explain the role that academic figures such as teachers, coaches, counselors and administrators played in your success.

7.      Explain the role your social network such as friends, pastors and community figures played in your academic success.

8.      How did you feel about the culture and environment of the schools you attended both pre- and post-secondary?  Were your individual needs as an African American male were met by the school you attended.  And also did you feel like you belonged in the school environment in both high school and college.

9.      Did you ever feel social pressure not to excel academically?  Did you ever feel excluded or criticized due to your academic success?  Explain these instances and how they made you feel.

10.      How did interactions with various people family, friends, and teachers make you feel about your ability to achieve academic success?

11.      What was in your opinion the number one factor that assisted you in your academic success.

12.	What are some steps a group or an individual took to try and assist and support you in your academic success that you feel were unnecessary?

13.	Was there ever a time when an individual made you feel that you were incapable of experiencing academic success?  If so describe this interaction and why you believe it made you feel this way?

14.	What advice do you have for other African American males trying to attain a college degree?

15.	What advice do you have for teachers, parents, coaches, and other individuals who are trying to help African American males attain a college degree?

**Appendix F: Focus Group**

1. What challenges did you experience during your academic career in middle school, high school, or college? Why do you feel these challenges caused you problems and how were you able to overcome these problems and set backs.

2. Describe the factors that contributed to your academic success and why you feel they were effective. What factors do you feel were most effective in helping you achieve academic success.

3. Who were key individuals that helped you succeed academically and in what ways did they aid in your success?

4. What were some of the greatest needs you experienced during your academic career and how were some of these needs met?

5. What can educators and parents do to help African American males succeed academically?

6. Tell us a story that you would like to tell a young African American male, of a specific challenge you experienced in an academic setting and how you overcame it.

**Appendix G: Personal Narrative**

Personal Narrative Questions

Use these questions to guide your reflections on your high school experience. Address each year of high school separately and consider how your responses to these questions may have changed over the course of attaining your diploma.

1.      Describe personal choices you made during college and strategies you used that caused you to be successful in college.  Which one of these factors played the biggest role in your success and why.

2.      What was your perception of and attitude toward academic achievement during each year of your high school career?  How did this change throughout high school and if so why?

3.      Who were the most important influences in your life in regard to your academic achievement during each year of high school and why?

4.      What were the attitudes of your peers toward academic achievement in general and specifically toward your pursuit of academic achievement?  Did these attitudes ever affect your desire to achieve academic success? Did you individually ever fell criticized or alienated because of your academic success?  Give specific examples of both positive and negative experiences regarding this question.

5.      What advice would you give an African American male from each stage of your high school career on things they could do to improve their chances of academic success and things they should not do that could hinder their chance for academic achievement.

**Appendix H: Theme Development Chart**

**Theme Development**

| Main Themes | sub-themes | Participants Words |
|---|---|---|
| A Mentor | Family member<br><br>Coach or Teacher | Responsible<br><br>She caused me to stay focused<br><br>He taught me to take pride in school<br><br>They wouldn't allow me to take any shortcuts<br><br>I belonged there<br>They set a standard<br><br>He helped me grow<br><br>Consequences for actions<br><br>She set an example<br><br>Guided me<br><br>Influence |

| A Willingness to venture outside of their comfort zone (Choices) | Academics<br><br>Friends/socially<br><br>Personal Level of comfort in taking risks | Struggle<br><br>Don't be ashamed<br><br>The only way to grow<br><br>Navigate the academic setting<br><br>Their fear of the unknown limited them<br>Adapt<br><br>Navigate different cultures<br><br>Do the hard stuff<br><br>Don't expect things to be equal<br><br>Be mindful |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Faith | Reason for persevering<br><br>Emotional Support, not Being alone | On earth for a reason<br><br>God could use me as an example<br><br>I wasn't alone<br><br>His commandments helped me make better choices<br><br>Being a Christina caused me to surround myself with like minded people<br><br>God was the thing that kept me strong |

| | | Something to lean on |
|---|---|---|
| Process and Purpose | Start with the end in mind<br><br>Intrinsic Motivation | Visualize higher things<br><br>Expectations for myself<br><br>Graduating was not just a possibility but an expectation<br><br>Declare what you want<br><br>I made a vow<br><br>First in my family to go to college<br><br>Gave me a reason<br><br>Have a vision<br><br>Have a plan<br><br>Personal pressure on myself to succeed<br><br>Give you a purpose |

**Appendix I: Reflexive Journal**

## Proposal Defense

It is great to finally be at this point. I have worked for over three years on this manuscript to get to the point that I can finally conduct this study and complete this journey. I am excited about the process and what I will learn from my participants and how I will grow as a person. I have put a lot of time into this presentation and hope I receive some feedback that will add to the quality of my study

## Initial IRB Submission

After I passed my proposal defense, I began immediately working on preparing my study for IRB approval. I had two co-workers check my approval documents to ensure that all major areas were covered and to see if anything else had not been included. I am anticipating some revisions but am trying to minimize the number of times I have to submit the document so that I can hopefully begin data collection before we get to far into football season. This has been a little stressful because of all the specific details the proposal template asks for. On some of the questions it was hard to identify specifically what they wanted described. I anticipate that if I have any revisions it will be in these areas.
.

## IRB Approval

Today I received IRB approval, and I could not be more thankful and excited. I have all of my participants lined up for my pilot study and have the two principals that are providing me with a list of potential study participants ready so that I can begin to move forward with data collection. I am going to conduct the pilot study while I am waiting for responses from potential participants. Once I have the pilot completed and have made any adjustments or changes I will begin scheduling interviews and organizing the focus group.

## Pilot Study

The pilot study went much more efficiently than I had anticipated. I had not talked to any of my colleges that had conducted a pilot during their dissertation so I was a little apprehensive but it was a positive experience. All of my participants provided feedback regarding how I was recruiting participants and in regards to my interview questions and prompts. Some minor changes were made to the questions that gave them greater clarity and hopefully will yield more in depth responses. Interviewing these individuals was valuable

practice and will definitely make me more efficient when I interview my first participant. Now that my questions are finalized and I have practiced the interview process I will schedule my first interview

## Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment had its difficulties. My first two participant responded very quickly and expressed their willingness to participate in the study. After that it was a few days until I received feedback from any other potential participants. The next three response said that due to other obligations and time issues they declined to participate in the study. This was a little frustrating and worried me that I may receive more no's but a few days later I received another yes from a participant. It took a little over two weeks to receive feedback from all of the potential participants. After the first week I sent a second email to the potential participants I had not received a reply from to confirm that they had received the first correspondence. I am happy that fourteen agreed to participate in the study. If saturation is not met I will go back the principles that provided me the initial list and request more names of potential participants.

## Interview 1

I was very excited about this first interview. I was a little anxious as to how the questioning would go and how receptive the participants would be to my questions and how open they would be with me. I prayed that I would ask questions that would get strong responses and I prayed that it would be a positive experience for both myself and the participant. It could not have been a better first interview. Ahmad was energetic and smiled almost the entire time. He was very animated and got emotional about a lot of the questions. He is the type of person that you like in two seconds. I will have to maintain my bias and not latch on to every response he makes. His story about his mother brought tears to my eyes. He said he was sorry that it was a downer and I told him I wasn't sad I was just impressed and moved by how he handled the loss of his mom. He is a strong kid that didn't go the typical route to graduation. I only hope all the interview are like this.

## Interview 2

Bill was very different from Ahmad. The fact that he has been in the workforce a few year and is older is evident in how he talks and handles himself. This interview was much more matter of fact and bossiness like. The interview with Ahmad was like talking to a friend where as Bill was very measured and direct with his response. I wonder if this comes from him being in a leadership role within his business. I talked many times about being the only African American male in his work environment. I wonder if this has made him more guarded and caused him to take more of a professional attitude when dealing with white males. He gave me great information and was very pleasant to be around but it was not the same bond as with Ahmad. I can see now how a researcher can become attached to

certain participants and put more weight into their responses and be more influenced by them.

## Interview 3

The interview with Chris was a great experience for me.  Much like Bill Chris was more reserved and professional than Ahmad.  He smiled a lot and had a great attitude, but there was none of the personal interaction that went on with Ahmad.  Chris just had great stories.  His path in life and the things he had accomplished was extremely unique and interesting.  I love to travel so hearing Chris's stories about living and traveling all over the world and how his degree had opened these doors for him was extremely interesting and informative.  Chris lived such a different life that Ahmad and Bill and was so different in what he did for a living.  It was a blessing to have him in the study because he provided such a unique perspective.

## Interview 4

The interview with Dante was a struggle at first.  He gave very short answers and didn't seemed as involved in the interview as the other participants.  About half way through the interview I got him to tell a few personal stories about his education and about how his family had influenced him.  When He started talking about his dad how influential his dad was I saw a light turn on.  He described a time when he had failed a class and his dad was so disappointed.  This brought emotion into the interview and engaged him.  This taught me a lesson that in the remainder of my interviews I will solicit a personal story early on to develop an emotional bond between myself, the participant and the content of the study.  I did not receive as much candid information form Dante, but a few of his personal stories revealed some facts about African American males and how they respond to an environment that was foreign to them  This has already shown as an emergent theme and one that I had not anticipated for this study.

## Interview 5

My fifth interview was with Eric.  Eric was just a super nice young man.  Eric was unique to the first four participants in that he was not working in the job his degree had prepared him for.  Eric had a very cautious tone to all of his answers.  The other participants were very positive about their college experience and what their degree had done for their lives.  Eric on the other had voiced concern that his degree could have been handled differently and he could have used his time more effectively.  Eric talked about the importance of doing an internship and researching a career before putting a lot of time and effort into pursuing a degree that you might not use.  In all honesty I pictured coming into this study and all the participants painting this beautiful picture of how the educational process was a great experience and how their degree had changed their lives.  Eric was the first participant whose responses were contrary to that notion.  I am now more aware of the

possibility of these feeling and am anxious to see the feelings of the rest of my participants toward their degree.

## Interview 6

Interviewing Frank was like talking to an old friend.  He wasn't jovial and energetic like Ahmad but there was definitely a bond there.  He had a very calming effect to his voice.  Almost like a person that could be on radio.  Frank was much more socially aware of issues that African American males faced and his responses were much more reflective of the struggles African American males had faced in the past.  His responses showed the pride he took in the success he had achieved as an African American man while also voicing frustration with African-American males that did not take advantage of the opportunities they had.  It was interesting because Frank spoke a lot about the racial divide in the United States and how African American males needed to understand things were not going to be fair while being very open and authentic with me.  It was also great to hear all of his family stories and the bond he has with his Family.  Frank lived in an area where he was surrounded by all his immediate family.  It feels like this family bond makes Frank the kind of person to open up to people and let them in.  Frank definitely treated me like family.

## Interview 7

Greg's interview was much shorter than the others.  Greg gave more direct answers and I had to probe him to get details regarding his educational experience.  He was very positive and smiled a lot but was just not as candid with his responses.  Greg did provide a unique perspective to the study due to his occupation.   Greg has traveled the world and owns his own business.  The perspectives he provided regarding being his own boss and not just being an employee as an African American males gave this interview value.

## Interview 8

This was a great interview and I got a lot of information from Henry.  He is a super intelligent guy and has a different way of looking at life.  He was very adamant about the fact that many African American males use race and social standing as a crutch and an excuse and that this is not acceptable to him.  He gave very detailed responses to my questions. The one thing I can see as I proceed through the interview process is that I am looking for similar answers that I have already received from other participants.  I am paying close attention to guard against this and perform every interview like it is the only one.  I am also working to avoid complacency and boredom in regards to probing the participants for rich and thick responses.  I have a lot of great data so far in the study but I want to make sure that I continue to seek out different perspectives and descriptions than I have received in past interviews.  Henry helped this due to how in depth his responses were.

## Interview 9

Ian's interview was a relaxing experience. Ian is a much laid back person and talks with a lot of slang. He almost has a sleepy look to him. He smiles and slaps my hand a lot if he says something funny. He is very passionate about his immediate family and the role his parents and brothers played in his life and education. Ian's relaxing attitude made me more relaxed and lead to some great dialog. This is what I hope the focus group will bring to the study and I hope Ian will be a catalyst in this. The interviews are going very smooth now and I am so much better and the questioning process and eliciting stronger responses from the participant. As I memo and take notes during the interview I can see the themes beginning to emerge. Every time a participant makes a response that is similar to the responses of another participants I think to myself, that is exactly like Bill or Ahmad said. This did not happen with the first four or five interviews. I am becoming more emerged in the data. It is also interesting how much I think about the interviews when I am not working on the study and dwell on the response. I have been having dreams about the interviews and my feelings on the responses of the participants. These men hit so close to home in what I do for a living and I see this process making me better equipped to understand the African American males that I work with on a daily basis. I have to work to keep my emotions out of the process.

## Interview 10

Interviewing James was very similar to Ahmad. James smiled the whole time. He laughed and made jokes constantly. He quite possibly has the strongest handshake of any individual I have ever meet. He laughs with his whole body and brings a ton of energy to the room. I did not receive a ton useful information from James but his interview was one of the longest. I had to work to keep him focused on the question and the interview topic. He wanted to talk sports a lot and was the first interview that really went off course several times. Had he not had such a great attitude and been so friendly this would have been very frustrating. When we were done he hugged me and thanked me for doing this kind of study. Like I said earlier I left the interview feeling great but as I transcribe and think about the responses I didn't get a lot of important data from James. This interview taught me the lesson that just because I am having a good time doesn't mean I am getting the job done. I am an emotional person and tend to like people first thing. I have to guard against this limiting my ability to elicit strong responses and fulfill my job as a researcher.

## Interview 11

Kevin's interview was very sterile. There were not as many personal stories as the other interviews. Kevin seemed very geared toward me and did not smile very much. He did not seem to enjoy the interview process. I tried my strategy that worked Dante by asking Kevin more questions about his family and personal experiences but he was very reluctant to share any candid or emotional information. He answer the questions completely and was

very respectful. There was just not that same level of connection with Kevin. This was a very short interview and looking back on it I think our lack of report lead me to not probing his response more. I gathered some good information from Kevin but I needed to have some more casual conversation with his to make him feel more comfortable with the process. This was definitely a learning experience for me and will make me better at conducting interviews in the future.

## Interview 12

The interview with Larry was one of the best. Larry was just a pleasant young man to be around. He was so passionate about what education had done for him and how it was continuing to change his life. Larry was also unique in this study in the fact that he had not pursued a job yet and was continuing his graduate education. He had a very fresh outlook on life and the possibilities of success for African American males. While he talked about the struggles and prejudices he faced he was very positive about the prospects of African American males within the educational world. Larry reinforced the notion that was started by several other participants of the need for a plan and motive to earn your degree. I have seen this theme emerging as I have conducted the interviews and Larry was adamant about how having a plan was a key factor in his success. It will be interesting to see how this concept emerges during the coding process and if my assumptions about its frequency are true.

## Interview 13

I learned a lot form the interview with Mark. Mark called me sir a lot and made me feel old. I think our age difference made him answer a lot of the questions like I was a teacher and he was a student. I joked with him and told him he was not being graded on his answers. He seemed anxious at first, but I handled his apprehension better than I did with Kevin. I took a little more time to ask Mark more about himself and his family. To talk about some personal interests he had. This time and questions had no relation to the study but I think it lead to a more relaxed environment and allowed me to elicit a more candid response from Mark. He was very appreciative at the end and told me he looked forward to the focus group and to see what some other men had to say about some of these issues. This made me remember that Bill said something very similar as we left his interview. It didn't strike me as being important then so I decided not to journal about it, but now it seems pretty cool that some of these guys are excited about the group activity.

## Interview 14

Nate was a pleasure to be around. Nate is a presence within himself. I am a tall person and Nate was an inch taller than me with super long dreadlocks. He has a huge smile and like Mark called me a sir a lot. Nate was very passionate about his mother and the influence she had in his success. When he described what she had done for him and the sacrifices she had made I became emotional. I felt the same bond and affection for Nate that

I did for Ahmad. He gave me some great information regarding how a mentor can guide the educational pursuits of an African American male. He went back to the influence of his mom and how her example put positive pressure on him to succeed. He seemed to enjoy the interview and was at ease through the entire process. This is my final interview and it was a great one. I also think part of the reason this interview went so smooth was the skills I have acquired through this process. I have learned to pay close attention to the needs of the participants and let their thoughts and actions guide the data more that my own personal agenda. I also learned that the interview doesn't have to consist of all directed questioning. I learned the more comfortable a person is and the more of a relationship they feel with the interviewer the more they will open up and share rich and deep experiences.

## Focus Group

Putting this group together was a challenge. Finding a time that fit everyone's schedule and getting everyone together at one place was stressful and challenged my organizational and logistical skills. After much work and effort only twelve participants agreed to be a part of the focus group. Tonight only eight of those twelve showed up. Two let me know they had scheduling conflicts. I will work on touching base with the other two to find out why they did not make it. Maybe knowing why they didn't show up could help me down the road in knowing how to organize an activity like this. In the end eight participants was a perfect number. If all twelve had shown up I think it would have been to many people and been very hard to direct. With just eight the conversations were great and all participants were able to be involved in the conversation. I noticed early that a few participants were making more comments and dominating the conversation. Bill, Dante, and Eric were very active at first. When I noticed this I started to direct questions to the participants that were not as active. I would say if a discussion was taking place, "So James what were some factors that hindered your academic performance. I would also say, Mark what do you think about Dante's comment?"

## Review of Personal Narrative

Getting all of the reflective journals from my participants was one of the most challenging aspects of my study. It surprised me how easy scheduling the interviews was and the fact that I had zero no shows. We had to reschedule one interview but it was done days ahead of time. Getting the participants to complete and send back the reflective journals was a challenge. I had to send several emails requesting these documents. It made me feel imposing because these people were doing me a favor and helping me out and I hated to be demanding on them. That is challenging in an email. When you talk directly to a person facial expressions and tone of voice can show that you are patient and understand that the participants are taking their personal time to complete the activity. This is hard to do in an email. I had to carefully chose my wording and continually express my gratitude for their time and effort in my study. Once I had all the documents and started coding them I felt like it was a worthwhile activity. I got some stories and information that I did not get in the interviews and focus group. The fact that the participants were by themselves and not feeling the pressure of a personal interview or the reaction of their peers may have lead to

them sharing more of a personal story.  And   journal were pretty vague and seemed rushed but the majority of them were very helpful in the data collection process.

## Member Checking

Member checking was a time consuming process but was very helpful in allowing the participants to clarify what they had to say.  It was a challenge to set up a time with some of the participants to talk and discuss some of their responses and how I would be utilizing them in my study. All of the participants were very helpful and were in agreement with the way I was depicting their thoughts and quoting their words.  None of the participants asked me to change any of the quotes or to delete any of the information.  Three participants specifically added to their quotes and said that after the interview they thought of some things they wish they would have told me.  I didn't expect to get the amount of quality data during member checking that I received.  This process not only clarified my data but added to it.

## Coding, Synthesizing Code, and Developing Themes

I had stressed about the coding process more than any other aspect of my study.  I didn't feel like I full grasped how it occurred.  As I began my interviews I started to see the major themes emerge.  As I went through the coding process I became very comfortable and really feel like I acquired a new skill.  This process was tedious and very time consuming but not nearly as stressful as I had envisioned.  As I transcribed the interviews I could see the themes emerging as I typed.  When I went back and started identifying specific terms and their frequency of occurrence it was easy for me to categorize and organize them.  Coming up with titles for the themes that encapsulated all of the ideas they would cover was a challenge.  I just kept trying to get back to the root or the essence of what the participants were saying.  It was a little challenging tying all of the data from the three sources together but as the process went on it became easier and more organized.  I worked very hard to keep my focus only on what the participants said and what information could be gathered from these words.  I realized that I went into the coding process wanting the data to say certain things and I had to be mindful not to just see what I wanted to see.  I let the frequency of a code and the emphasis each participant placed on that code drive the theme development.  In the end I felt like the four these that were generated were completely backed by the data collected and provide a great addition to the existing literature on African American academic achievement.

**Appendix J: Audit Trail Log**

| Date | Task |
|---|---|
| 5/9/2018 | Proposal approved |
| 7/13/2018 | Proposal defense |
| 10/18/2018 | IRB approval received |
| 10/20/2018-10/24/2018 | Pilot study conducted and changes made. |
| 10/21/2018 | List of potential participants received and participant recruitment letters sent out. |
| 10/23/18 | Received first reply from a participant interested in being a part of the study |
| 10/29/2018 | First interview completed (Ahmad) |
| 11/8/2018 | Feedback from final potential participants received |
| 11/23/2018 | Final interview completed (Nate) |
| 11/26/2018 | Focus group completed |
| 11/28/2018 | Final transcription of interviews and focus group completed |
| 11/30/2018 | Final personal narrative received |
| 10/29/2018-12/2/2018 | Member checks for accuracy completed |
| 12/7/2018 | Coding completed, chapter four started |
| 12/12/2018 | First draft chapter 4 completed |
| 1/17/2019 | First draft chapter 5 completed |