

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESSFUL RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES OF HIGH ACHIEVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES AT AN ART- BASED COLLEGE

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
ABSTRACT.....	7
PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION.....	9
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	10
<i>Introduction to the Study.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Definitions.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Purpose of Study.....</i>	<i>13</i>
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
<i>Successes of African-American Males in College: The University Of Ages (2005) Study.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Black Student Participation in Higher Education.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>The Art-Based College: Tuition, Enrollment and Minority Report.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>The Institute for Responsible Citizenship Mentor Program (Washington, D.C.).....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>High School Completion Rates for African-American Males.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Key Findings.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>The Achievement Gap.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Why The Achievement Gap Matters.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>College Completion Rates for African-American Males.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Low High School and College Completion Rates for African-American Males.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Low Income or Unemployment.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Academic Unpreparedness, Finances, Recruitment and Retention.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Inadequate Academic Preparation.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Finances and Financial Aid.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Recruitment and Retention (Issues in Black Higher Education).....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>42</i>
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	44

<i>Rationale for Use of Qualitative Research Method: Focus Group Interview.....</i>	44
<i>Research Design.....</i>	45
<i>Population.....</i>	46
<i>Obtaining Institutional Endorsement.....</i>	48
<i>Obtaining Participant Consent.....</i>	48
<i>Data Collection Procedure.....</i>	49
<i>Interview Methodology.....</i>	49
<i>Data Analysis.....</i>	49
<i>Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations.....</i>	51
<i>Trustworthiness.....</i>	51
<i>Ethical Considerations.....</i>	51
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	53
<i>Researcher's Observations of the Participants.....</i>	53
<i>Participant Demographic Breakdown (Table 1).....</i>	53
<i>The Focus Group: Individual Participant Profiles (Pseudonym Names).....</i>	54
<i>Cleve.....</i>	54
<i>Esteban.....</i>	54
<i>Jesse.....</i>	55
<i>Kerry.....</i>	55
<i>Moses.....</i>	56
<i>Sean.....</i>	56
<i>The Focus Group: Similarities and Differences.....</i>	57
<i>Data Analysis: The Four Themes.....</i>	59
<i>Percentages for Themes that Emerged from Participants Responses (Table 2).....</i>	60
<i>Theme 1: Self Determination.....</i>	60
<i>Theme 2: College-Wide Support System.....</i>	62
<i>Theme 3: Family Support.....</i>	67
<i>Theme 4: High-Achievers.....</i>	69
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	74
<i>Limitations of the Study.....</i>	79
<i>Implications for Future Research.....</i>	80

<i>RECOMMENDATIONS</i>	82
<i>Recommendation 1</i>	82
<i>Recommendation 2</i>	82
<i>Recommendation 3</i>	83
<i>Recommendation 4</i>	84
<i>Recommendation 5</i>	85
<i>REFERENCES</i>	90
<i>APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM</i>	95
<i>APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS: QUESTIONS</i>	97
<i>APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</i>	99

LIST OF TABLES

<i>TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN</i>	53
<i>TABLE 2: THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN</i>	60

Abstract

The intent of this research is to identify and analyze the factors that contribute to successful retention and fulfillment of graduation requirements by high achieving African-American males at an Art-Based College (pseudonym name), as perceived by the students themselves. The overarching research question for this study is as follows: From the perspective of African-American male students at an Art-Based College, what key factors contribute most to their academic success? A total of six participants were purposefully selected to meet these criteria: three African-American males with senior status; three African-American males with junior status; all with a 3.0 GPA or higher.

A qualitative research design was used with a face-to-face focus group interview approach for gaining an 'insiders' point-of-view from the participants (Wellington, 2000). The data were analyzed using an interpretive coding approach to determine primary themes (Gray, 2004).

Data collected during the interview session produced findings that revealed four primary perceptions as to why these African-American males persist to graduate. They are: (1) self-determination to complete degree requirements; (2) use of college-wide support system; (3) family support; and (4) being a high-achiever. The findings are based on the perceptions of these Art-

Based College African-American males who have maintained an overall 3.0 grade point average or higher in their chosen major. The study concludes with recommendations for current and future African-American male students, and makes a request for continued support by this Art-Based College's administration and leadership to consider additional ways for increasing the retention rate for these males and their persistence to graduate.

Philosophy of Education

*'Education develops the intellect; and the intellect distinguishes man from other creatures. It is education that enables man to harness nature and utilize her resources for the well-being and improvement of his life. The key for betterment and completeness of modern living is education. But, 'Man cannot live by bread alone.' Man, after all, is also composed of intellect and soul. Therefore, education in general, and **higher education** in particular, must aim to provide, beyond the physical, food for the intellect and soul. That education which ignores man's intrinsic nature, and neglects his intellect and reasoning power cannot be considered true education.'*

-Haile Selassie (Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

For the past ten years, I have worked in a culturally diverse undergraduate and graduate college environment whose principal commitment is to provide a comprehensive educational opportunity in the arts, media, and communications within the context of an enlightened liberal education. Although I am concerned about the growth and retention of all students who make up the entire college population, my particular interest lies in the African-American male student population who attend this Art-Based College and their persistence to graduation in undergraduate programs. With some 4,000 culturally diverse students, this Art-Based College has the greatest concentration of creative minority students in the nation (Research, Evaluation & Planning, *At-A-Glance*: Spring 2010).

Previous studies reveal that African-American males have a particularly difficult struggle in their attempts to achieve equity and inclusion in American society. Structural and psychological obstacles have been consistently placed in their paths to deter their efforts to achieve the inalienable rights of freedom, justice, and equality that the United States has promised as fundamental elements of citizenship. Few measures, whether they originated in the legislative, the judicial, or even the religious arena, provide consistent relief from

the educational and socioeconomic challenges that African-American males have been forced to confront (Gordan, 2002, p. 13). Although there are significant factors that contribute to low retention for African-American college males, there are significant factors that contribute to successful retention, as well.

Definitions

The following are *working-definitions* represented within the review-of-literature:

Academic Integration: the level of effectiveness of institutional services provided to the student. This includes counseling services, mentorship programs, tutoring assistance, academic advising, and leadership/administrative support.

Academic Preparedness: measures how success in college begins long before a student ever enrolls in college and how student performance in higher education is intricately linked to his or her ability to perform effectively academically in college.

Achievement-Gap: a measure of the gap of academic performance between various racial/cultural groups.

African-American: a term used to describe individuals of African descent in the United States.

Financial Support: merit-based or need-based financial support for a college student, whether it is federal, state or institutional aid.

On-Campus Student: a student who attends and participates in a physical classroom located on the campus.

Online Student: academic programs offered via an Online Learning System. Students with a computer and a modem can 'attend school' from anywhere in the world.

Persistence: a number of consecutive courses completed during any given academic period within a student's college enrollment. Used interchangeable with the term '*retention*.'

Retention: continuous enrollment in a college degree program until the point of completion.

Retention Rate: the rate at which students return to college for completion of subsequent coursework from semester-to-semester, or year-to-year. If a student is enrolled in a course at the measured time, he or she is counted as retained.

Social Integration: successful interactions in college activities, with peers, or with faculty.

Purpose of Study

The central purpose of this study was to explore one Art-Based College's experience with low retention rates for African-American male students from a different angle. Rather than focus on the students who do not succeed, I chose to identify and describe significant factors that *positively* affect this particular Art-Based College's African-American male students, thus resulting in them remaining in college until they graduate. The findings from this study hopefully will serve as informative feedback to the Art Based College's leadership and administration, as well as assist future African-American male students at this Art-Based College and other colleges/universities better understand the importance of being an informed and responsible college student, of succeeding-against-the-odds, and for eventually graduating from college.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review reveals certain factors that can hinder retention of African-American males in college, as well as factors that lead to high retention and graduation. Students are falling through the cracks. At risks students come from a variety of backgrounds: first generation, low-income, academically unprepared, and students who are juggling full-time work and family to name a few. Yet something they all have in common is the competing demands on their time, resources, and their need for attention and services. These populations, in particular the African-American college male, need assistance with engaging and finding connections that will help them have a successful experience that leads to retention and eventually graduation.

An analysis of the enrollment and completion patterns of African-American males in colleges and universities requires not only an examination of the specific indices of this cohort, but also an understanding of their involvement in educational engagements in comparison with other groups (Gordon, 2002).

Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or social class, most parents dream of a bright future for their children. For most, the path to this future follows a well-established pattern of guidance. Most parents who are 'caring and concerned' about their offspring's educational and financial future will encourage his or her

child to graduate from high school, complete at least four years of college, and secure a good job.

Black enrollments in higher education have reached an all-time high throughout the nation, particularly for female students. In spite of the odds against success, an equally important statistical measure of the performance of Blacks in higher education is that of how many Black students, particularly African-American males, actually complete college. The U.S. Department of Education reported in 2003 that the African-American retention rate in colleges and universities was 40% and the African-American male retention rate, which tends to be the lowest in the country, was 34% ('Racial Gap,' 2004). In contrast, the White retention rate was 61%. Several factors contributing to the African-American college dropout rate are the problems of economic despair, drugs, crime, and illiteracy that have crossed all social classes, ethnic groups, and genders (Allen, 1992, p. 26). The need to encourage African-American students, as well as other nationalities, to remain in college while dealing with a floundering economy, signals a need to place this issue of retention at the forefront of our educational agenda once again (Wilson, 2000).

Successes of African-American Males in College

The University of Ages Study

(Pseudonym Name)

The University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness

Department conducted research to identify and compare factors of persistence and attrition among racial and ethnic groups of the University of Ages students (Shelton, 2008, pg. 26). This study was significant as it identified specific factors involving persistence to graduation of the institution's Black and Hispanic students. The report's only source is the University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness Department.

At least three of the factors identified in the study directly matched what the literature has identified as leading retention factors among African-American students, namely financial support, academic integration, and social integration (Astin, 1993; Kunjufu, 1997; Pascarella, 1980; and Tinto, 1987). The University of Ages study involved a cohort of students who started undergraduate and graduate degree programs from June 1 through November 30, 2002 (University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2005). Student records and demographics, as well as items from other surveys were examined as potential correlates of retention and attrition within racial and ethnic student groups. Several measures demonstrated broad influence at the undergraduate level, the graduate, or both. For the purpose of this literature review, I focus on the factors relating to undergraduate African-American male students.

University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness (Shelton, 2008, pg. 26) examined a discrete group of students (i.e., cohort) over time and compared total number of students at an initial point of entry into the institution

with subsequent totals at defined intervals and a closing point at which the data were recorded (in this particular research, December 9, 2004). As stated earlier, the study examined the baseline cohort, which consisted of all students admitted to the University who started undergraduate and graduate degree programs from June 1 through November 30, 2002. This information was matched with the initial online development of two student surveys comprising a number of potential correlations of student persistence. Of all cohort members who completed an average of six student surveys over the 2-year period, while averaging nine completed university courses, there was a 67% response rate (Shelton, 2008, pg. 28). Students' race and ethnicity was self-reported on the Registration Survey; 78% of all cohort members percent was identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander, Black or African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or White. The research examined retention among the three major racial/ethnic groups at the University of Ages: Black, Latino, and White. Black, Latino, and White students accounted for 94% of all cohort members identified by race or ethnicity, or 19%, 12%, and 63%, respectively.

The attendance and program records of the selected student cohort were compiled in December 2004 to determine those students who had not completed their programs, but continued to attend class (active students/persisters), those students who had not completed their programs or attended class in the previous six months or longer (inactive students/nonpersisters), and those students who completed their programs.

All cohort members identified by race or ethnicity, including the nonserious students, were accounted for in the dependent variable. Nonserious students were those who completed fewer than three courses and did not attend classes beyond 120 days of starting their programs. Logistic regression was the method chosen to analyze the effects of independent variables on a dichotomous dependent variable. University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness (2005) found three general patterns of retention and graduation among racial/ethnic groupings of the undergraduate University of Ages students:

1. White students had lower attrition rates and higher graduation rates than Black or Latino students.
2. Black students had lower graduation rates and higher attrition rates than White or Latino students.
3. The attrition and graduation rates of Latino students generally fell between those of Black and White students.

Of the measures examined as potential correlates of persistence among University of Ages racial and ethnic groups, only a few demonstrated broad influence at the undergraduate level or both (Shelton, 2008, pg. 30). A higher program GPA was a more significant predictor of increased persistence for graduate students than for undergraduates and for minority students than for White students. Program GPA was a gauge of students' academic performance indicating how well they were meeting their Program requirements.

The use of federal financial aid (i.e., government grants or loans) to finance educational costs were the strongest predictor of persistence for African-

American and White students. Increased persistence associated with federal financial aid use was much more likely for on-ground students than for online students.

Completion of the Introductory Course Sequence increased the odds of undergraduate student persistence when race and ethnicity were accounted for. African-American students who completed the Introductory Course Sequence were, on average, more than twice as likely to persist as were those not required to complete the Introductory Course Sequence. Completion of the Introductory Course Sequence is a measure of student preparedness for current college requirements.

The number of college transfer credits an undergraduate student brought to his or her program was one of the strongest predictors that the student would persist in and complete the program. For African-American and Latino students, each additional accepted credit increased the probability of persisting by 3%; for White students, each additional credit increased the probability by 2%.

The study found that expanding students' use of federal financial aid seemed to offer the best means for persistence to graduation of the African-American and Hispanic students at The University of Ages. Approximately 40% of the cohort evaluated in this research used federal financial aid in the preceding two years to support their costs at this university. If students among the remaining 60% did not obtain the financial aid they needed, the findings indicated

their chances of persisting in and completing their programs improved once they received that aid (Shelton, 2008, pg. 31).

Program GPA, federal financial aid, completion of the Introductory Course Sequence, and acceptance of transfer college credit were the greatest influences on persistence to graduation of the Black and Hispanic student (University of Ages Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2005). This study and similar factors pointed out in the literature offer insight regarding the influences that lead to higher persistence to graduation rates of African-American male students. This University of Ages study is important because it may shed light on methodology used to investigate the perceptions of African-American male students who attend this university and who are nearing the completion of their program of study.

Black Student Participation in Higher Education

In addition to overall Black student participation in higher education, one of the most actively discussed, and sometimes vigorously debated issues since the late 1980's is the declining social, economic, and educational status of young African-American males in our society (Garibaldi, 1992, p. 4). According to Garibaldi, the negative indicators that describe a substantial share of this group's depressing condition 'last-place-ranking' on many measures of educational performance and attainment of college degrees have become so commonplace they have caused many to view the majority of these young men's futures as hopeless and impossible to salvage.

Relative to retention and persistence rates of minorities in higher education, Pascarella (1885), Tinto (1987), Astin (1993), and Kunjufu (1997) found that the creation of a solid learning and social community on campus, and the encouragement of student development programs and activities are key factors that improve persistence rates of minority students (Shelton, 2008). The educational experiences of young African-American men differ in many ways from those of young men of other racial and ethnic groups; and yet are similar in other respects (Henry Kaiser Family Foundation Fact Sheet, 2006). Many African-American boys are provided with less-than-adequate academic preparation due to poor school environments and discriminatory practices such as being tracked into behavior disorder classes in inordinately high proportion to their numbers in the school population. Compounding this broad lack of attention to their academic success, many African-American young men fail to consider academic achievement a worthwhile goal. In fact, obtaining a college education is often considered not worth the effort or not 'cool' among their peers (Jaschik, 2006, p.1). As a result, these males neglect to strive for academic success from an early age. That alone has a devastating cumulative effect.

Nearly 20 years ago, on average, African-American students who attended predominately non-Black colleges and universities did not perform as well academically as their Asian, Hispanic, and White counterparts (Allen, 1992). Today's scholars, both African-American and Caucasian, still address the plight of the African-American college student who attends a predominately White

college or university. Gordon (2002) says scholars find that the overall academic performance for African-American students at predominately White institutions, similar to the overall demographics at this particular Art-Based College, is still the same 20 years later. Whether this phenomenon results from adjustment problems or other difficulties continues to be debated. In 2008, there were 4.5 million African-American men between the ages of 15 and 29 living in the United States. Of this group, fewer than 8% of young African-American men had graduated from college compared to 17% of Caucasian males and 35% of Asian males (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

Many colleges and universities across the United States are concerned about the issue of African-American student retention and are working to enhance retention rates through a variety of interventions and specific strategies. Kunjufu (1997) attributed higher persistence to graduation rates among African-American students to the retention programs established by an institution.

Additionally, increased graduation rates of African-American college students can be attributed to colleges that provide a nurturing environment where students are academically integrated. Students who study together are able to share assigned course loads, be better prepared for graduation, and contribute to intellectual classroom discussion and participation (Shelton, 2008, pg. 20). Kunjufu (1997) contended that cooperative learning could be the key to the African-American males' persistence rate.

Institutions that provide orientation and mentorship programs have also been successful at retaining African-American students ('Racial Gap,' 2004). Providing a good example of an institution who has taken action relative to offering retention programs to their African-American male students would be Arizona State University (ASU). ASU created a program of African-American males to address their low retention and graduation rates (Shelton, 2008, pg. 12). The program was established in 2004 and coordinated by ASU's Multicultural Student Center. The university's goal is to conduct summer transition programs and establish academic collaborations, scholarship programs, and cultural workshops for African-American male students.

Actually, when educators discuss their greatest diversity challenges these days, many focus on the recruitment and retention of African-American male students (Jaschik, 2006). Faculty and student relationships are key attributes to a higher persistence rate among African-American males. Equally important is the presence of African-American faculty on campus. African-American male students look for role models they can admire and look to for guidance (Shelton, 2008, pg. 20).

Information compiled in 2005 by the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* reported that of the 16,611,700 United States college students enrolled in 2004, 43.4% were men and 56.6% were women. The *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* divided these data into six racial or ethnic categories, with the male/female percentages as follows: American Indian, 39.6% men/60.4%

women; Asian, 49.9% men/53.1% women; Black, 35.8% men/64.2% women; Hispanic, 42.1% men/57.9% women; White, 44.0% men/56.0% women; and Foreign, 55.3% men/44.7% women. It is quite evident in these enrollment figures that only five years ago, African-American men in 2004 not only attended college in a proportion lower than their percentage in the U.S. African-American population, but they also still represented the most skewed male/female ratio of any racial/ethnic group (Cuyjet, 2006). Consequently, at many college campuses, two-thirds of Black students were female, and the lack of African-American men raised all sorts of troubling questions, especially questions surrounding retention and graduation rates.

The Art-Based College

(Pseudonym Name)

Tuition, Undergraduate Enrollment, and Minority Enrollment Report

Data from the *Comparative Study: Tuition, Undergraduate Enrollment, and Minority Enrollment Report* (Fall 1999) stated this Art-Based College enrolled some 45% of the total African American undergraduate students attending private colleges with significant arts and media enrollment nationally. Between 1999 and 2008, there was a 41% increase in enrollment at this Art-Based College, reaching 12,464 in Fall 2008. In Fall 1999, there were 8,346 undergraduates enrolled at this Art-Based College; that number reached 11, 858 in Fall 2008. The rate of year-to-year growth in the undergraduate population generally stayed between 1% and 6% with an average increase of 4%. More recently, in 2008, the increase in undergraduate enrollment was 4.3%, down from

a 10 year high increase of 6.1% in undergraduate enrollment in 2006 (Fall 2008 Fact Book, p. 1).

The Institute for Responsible Citizenship Mentor Program

Washington, D.C.

An important aspect of Black student participation in higher education not only involves getting admitted to a fully accredited institution and striving for academic excellence in the classroom, but it can also involve securing worthwhile community-based mentorship and/or internship opportunities. Dixon (1999) states that friends, relatives, close acquaintances, and community leaders who express support during an African-American male student's college career also help encourage the student's persistence. Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) reported that the social structure that would encourage White students who drop out of college to return to school is the polar opposite from the African-American males' social structure. However, there are opportunities for social mentoring and support within both racial structures.

A fundamental difference between the act of mentoring and advising is more than just advising; mentoring is both a personal and professional relationship. Mentoring a college student can support and encourage the student to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be.

One such professional organization that supports mentoring African-American college males is *The Institute for Responsible Citizenship Mentor Program* (<http://www.i4rc.org/>). The Institute was founded by Mr. William Keyes who spent more than two decades working on Capitol Hill at the White House and in public policy consulting. As Executive Director of the Summer Institute Program at Georgetown University, Keyes witnessed firsthand the impact that such a Program could have on young people. However, he found that very few African-American males took advantage of such opportunities. In some instances, students did not attend because they did not have mentors who explained the benefits of such Programs. In other instances, students could not attend because their families lacked the financial resources to make their participation possible. The Institute addresses these problems by providing an intensive Program specifically designed for African-American male college students. Because of the generosity of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals, America's best and brightest African-American males are able to benefit from the Institute at no cost to themselves or their families. Keyes incorporated the Institute on April 13, 2001 and received the determination of tax-exempt status in December 2001. Keyes opened the doors of *The Institute for Responsible Citizenship Mentor Program* in Washington, D.C. on January 2, 2003.

The Institute for Responsible Citizenship Mentor Program is a one month mentorship program that prepares high-achieving African-American men for successful careers in business, law, government, public service, education,

journalism, the sciences, medicine, ministry, and the arts. The primary goal of the Program is to help talented African-American college males achieve career success and train young leaders to become men of great character who will make significant contributions to their communities, their country, and the world. The Program requires a commitment for two summers. Housing is paid for by the Institute and students work at paid internships based on their career interest. Participants are chosen from any fully accredited college or university in the United States and must be a college sophomore to apply. The Institute does not have a grade point average (GPA) requirement. However, the median GPA for the most recent participants is 3.65 on a 4.0 scale. An applicants' GPA is not the only criterion that is evaluated during the admissions process. College campus involvement, awards earned, athletics, and volunteer work are also important factors to consider for acceptance in the Program. Participants are exposed to congressmen, Supreme Court justices, doctors, business executives, educators, and other influential leaders. Participants also attend rigorous academic seminars, roundtable discussions, and seminars on leadership development. In addition to high-level internships around Washington, D.C., participants are involved in activities that promote collaboration, teamwork, and strong bonds among themselves.

High School Completion Rates for African-American Males

The numbers of African-American males who are eligible to enroll in colleges and universities is, obviously, tied to the numbers of high school

graduates, since the high school diploma is almost universally considered a prerequisite to entering a postsecondary institution (Gordon, 2002). Other than the high school diploma, prospective college students can submit proof of having completed a state approved Home-Schooled curriculum, or proof of acceptable General Education Development Diploma (GED) test scores.

The Schott Foundation for Public Education's *50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (Jackson, 2008) reported that in 2006/2007 a staggering 56% of African-American males in the United States, particularly in the Southern region, did not receive diplomas or graduate on schedule. Jackson (2008) noted that to improve high school graduation rates of Black males, they should remain academically and socially engaged in the classroom. But on the road to graduation, many Black males face inequities in performance assessment and discipline in the classroom. The Schott Foundation for Public Education (2008) also states that African-American males are 5.6 times more likely to be classified as mentally retarded (usually a score below 70-75 on the IQ test) than enrolled into gifted /talented Programs (Jackson, 2008). African-American males are also suspended or expelled from schools at a little over twice the rate than their White peers.

Facts compiled by the Henry Kaiser Family Foundation (2006) report that young African-American males (74%) are more likely than Hispanics (60.9%) and American Indians (67.2%) to graduate from high school, but are less likely to graduate than Whites (85.5%) and Asians (89.9%). Recent data used to

calculate public high school graduation rates for the nation, each state, and the 100 largest school districts in the United States provide the following key findings as they relate to African-Americans, Caucasians, Asians, and Hispanics (Greene, *Civic Report*, 2006):

Key Findings

- The overall national public high school graduation rate used in this report for the class of 2005 was 70%.
- There is a wide disparity in the public high school graduation rates of White and minority students.
- Nationally, the graduation rate for White students was 78%, compared with 72% for Asian students, 55% for African-American students, and 53% for Hispanic students.
- Female students graduate high school at a higher rate than male students. Nationally, 72% of female students graduated, compared with 65% of male students.
- The gender-gap in graduation rates is particularly large for minority students. Nationally, about 5 percentage points fewer White male students and 3 percentage points fewer Asian male students graduate than their respective female students. While 59% of African-American females graduated, only 48% of African-American males earned a diploma (a difference of 11 percentage points). Furthermore, the graduation rate was 58% for Hispanic females, compared with 49% for Hispanic males (a difference of 9 percentage points).

Despite the federal government's attempt to ensure 'quality education for all' through the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (Public Law 107-110), disparities still exist within the United States with regard to student achievement, high school graduation rates, and access to high-quality educational opportunities. However, some of the data indicates that the racial performance gap was reduced. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* is a controversial United States federal law (Act-of-Congress) that reauthorized a number of federal programs aiming to improve the performance of U.S. primary and secondary schools by increasing the standards of accountability for states, school districts

and schools, as well as providing parents more flexibility in choosing which school their children will attend. Additionally, it promoted an increased focus on reading and re-authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

To complicate matters further, 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, education in some regions of the United States is again becoming increasingly segregated ('Racial Gap,' 2004). With many Caucasian, affluent and middle-income high school students choosing to attend private schools and academies (especially in areas with high concentration of African-Americans), many public schools are unable to meet the educational needs and provide the quality of education or adequate preparation for continuing education of *all* students in order for them to be competitive within the higher education arena and the workforce.

The Achievement Gap:

When researchers, reformers, and educators examine how students perform in public schools, they consistently find two factors that significantly impact achievement: economic circumstances and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The results of their research reveal the dramatic impact these two factors have on student achievement (Education Equality Project, 2008).

For example:

- By 4th grade, Black and Latino students are on average nearly three years behind their White and Asian counterparts.

- Barely half of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school, with African-American students graduating at 51%, Latinos at 55%, and their White counterparts at 76%.
- In Dallas, students who had three consecutive years of effective teachers improved their math test scores by 21 points, students with three years of ineffective teachers fell 30 points behind.
- Only 9% of students in Tier 1 (146 most selective) colleges were from the bottom half of the income distribution.
- 70% of people in the top 10% income bracket have at least a bachelor's degree.

The huge difference in academic performance between students from different economic circumstances and racial/ethnic backgrounds is called the ***achievement gap***.

Why the Achievement Gap Matters:

Poor academic performance has a direct and serious impact on a student's adult life. Without completing high school graduation requirements or the equivalent, the chances of a student getting accepted to a regionally accredited college or university is rare to impossible. Those who are 'drop-outs' are more likely to become and stay jobless, will enjoy dramatically lower lifetime earnings, and are far more likely to be unemployed and incarcerated (Education Equality Project, 2008). The achievement gap is not some irrelevant statistic, it is proof that our public education system is consistently failing our children and drastically reducing their chances to compete and succeed as adults.

College Completion Rates for African-American Males

As with secondary education preparation, disparities exist between races in preparation for education beyond high school. *Education Sector*, an independent think-tank that analyzes education policy, suggested that over half

of Black higher education students do not graduate within six years of enrollment. Also, Black students have about 20 percentage points lower overall graduation rates than their White peers (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2009). Unfortunately, due in large part to the effects of socioeconomic status on educational attainment, many low-income, first generation, or African-American students who are the first in their family to attend college do not receive college degrees.

In 2007, there were 4.5 million African-American males between the ages of 15 and 29 living in the United States, which is about 14% of all males in this age group. Representative of this group, fewer than 8% of young African-American males actually graduated from college compared to 17% of Whites and 35% of Asians. Fewer than 45% of Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic male high school graduates between the age of 16 and 24 were enrolled in college compared to 68% of young Asian high school graduates (Henry Kaiser Family Foundation Fact Sheet, 2008).

Nationwide, the African-American student college graduation rate remains at a dismally low 42% (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2009). But the rate has improved by three percentage points over the past two years. More encouraging is the fact that over the past seven years, the Black student graduation rate has improved at almost all of the nation's highest-ranked universities. For many years, Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts), traditionally one of the nation's strongest supporters of affirmative action, has

produced the highest African-American student graduation rate (95%) of any college or university in the nation.

Economically, African-American students (both male and female) who earn a four-year college degree have incomes that are substantially higher than Blacks who have only some college experience, but have not earned a degree (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2009). Overall, bachelor degree holders earn about 62% more in annual earnings than workers with high school diplomas alone.

Consequences of Low High School and College Completion Rates for African-American Males

Low Income or Unemployment:

Survival of the higher education community is imperative for reducing the rate of high unemployment and low income. Lack of obtaining a college degree can have a negative impact on employment and income rates for African-American males in the United States, especially low-income African-American youth who are vulnerable to lower employment and earnings despite comparable levels of high school education and lower risk-taking behaviors (McDaniel & Kuehn, 2009). Today, in 2009, high rates of unemployment and relatively low levels of college retention and graduation rates still raise concerns for African-American families and the nation's economy. Considering the condition of today's economy, most people without college degrees will continue to be unemployed or if employed, will be compensated on a low salary or pay scale.

Malveaux (2004) says one reason for high joblessness in the United States is the 'education gap' between African-Americans and other nationalities. The 'education gap' needs to be addressed, and there needs to be vigorous attempts to enroll and retain more African-Americans in higher education. Each month, when unemployment rate data are released, the news for African-Americans is bleak. No matter what the overall unemployment rate, the Black unemployment rate is higher. Indeed, it is usually at least twice the Caucasian rate. In August 2009, for example, the White unemployment rate was 8.9% percent, the Black unemployment rate was 15.1%, Hispanic was 13.0%, and Asian was 7.5% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The relevant statistic is the 'employment population ratio,' a figure that measures what percentage of the total population in a certain age group has employment. The overall unemployment rate for 'male teenagers' was 37.0% in August 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

Academic Unpreparedness, Finances, & Recruitment and Retention

Academic Unpreparedness (Inadequate Academic Preparation):

Success in college begins long before students ever enroll. The seeds for success, especially academic success, are most effectively planted at home. The presence of books in the home and parents who read and discuss ideas and current affairs almost always influence children to read and to care about things of the mind. Too many African-American homes are headed by parents, single or otherwise, who lack interest in the long-term efficacy of education, and who do not insist that their children learn. In fact, a student's performance in the higher

education arena is intricately linked to his or her ability to develop the skills necessary to compete and meet the demands of college before they arrive (Wilson, 2007).

A poor secondary school academic background and a low class-rank in high school are precursors to predicting low retention rates for African-American males even before they enter college (Brown, 2007). National studies of educational progress and state-mandated assessment programs in the late elementary, middle school and high school years strongly confirm what experienced school administrators and teachers have long suspected. Namely, the achievement test scores of African-Americans consistently fall below those of their Euro-American peers. African-Americans score significantly lower than Euro-Americans on test of vocabulary, reading, mathematics, science, and writing and are disproportionately represented among the lowest achievers in those areas. A lack of African-American males excelling in elementary and middle school means that as a group, they will not be exposed to and have the opportunity to see if they can master a demanding curriculum in high school which is a *sine qua non* (essential condition: prerequisite) for admission to selective and some non-selective undergraduate institutions (Gordon, 2002).

Inadequate academic preparation is also a major barrier to initial college enrollment for African-Americans and will require students to complete what is called a *Bridge Program*. This particular Program is considered to be an

academic jumpstart where student's performance abilities are assessed before they are actually admitted to attend the college.

Contributing also to differences in enrollment, retention, and graduation of African-American males and females is the fact that 15% of young Black males (ages 18-24) are high school dropouts, compared to 11% of young Black females. This particular topic will be addressed in more detail later in the content of this research. Better access to college preparatory and advanced placement classes tends to help African-American students at the high school level. Since 'achievement gaps' appear even before kindergarten, early childhood education is important. Furthermore, the preparation necessary to complete more challenging high school curricula should begin at the middle and elementary school levels. At the college level, remedial courses are needed to help disadvantaged students get up to speed (Gordon, 2002).

Finances and Financial Aid:

There is a correlation between student persistence to graduation and receiving financial support (Dixon, 1999). Receiving financial support becomes critical for African-American male students. Astin (1997) reported that an African-American student is more likely than his or her White counterpart to report financial problems while in college. Consequently, lack of funding and access to finances needed to pay college tuition costs can hinder enrollment, retention, and graduation for African-American males. Brown (2007) believes knowing something about a student's culture and family life is important for

understanding what factors contribute to low retention rates. This takes into consideration family wealth and the availability of financial aid. According to a study by Sallie Mae, the largest nonprofit provider of federal and private education loan funds in this country, 69% of African-Americans who enrolled in college, but did not finish, said that they left college because of high student loan debt as opposed to 43% of White students who cited the same reason (Code Amber News Service, Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007).

Under most circumstances, a college education requires huge amounts of money. Not only are there very large outlays for tuition, books, and travel, but even more important, going to college takes a student out of the workforce for four or more years. Depending on the cost of tuition, room and board, the total bite into family income and wealth per academic year can amount to roughly \$160,000 or more per student. This Art-Based College is a private four year institution with a one year (full-time course load) tuition sticker price of \$19,140. In addition to the Art-Based College tuition cost, one academic year (two semesters) of on-campus housing can cost anywhere from \$9,360 to \$13,780 depending on the size and location of the residential unit. This price tag for a fully accredited private college education is a 'perceived' barrier and can cause a high debt load for the student upon graduation. High rates and ever increasing college costs tend to produce much greater hardships for many African-American families (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009).

Having 'deep financial pockets' and generous access to funds enable some schools to provide greater financial aid than others. This is a major factor in student graduation rates. Well-funded universities such as Princeton University (New Jersey), which has one of the nation's largest endowment per student and probably the nation's most generous financial aid program for low-income students, will undoubtedly claim an advantage in African-American student retention and, subsequently, in producing high graduation rates. Clearly, the availability of a high level of financial aid shields low income African-American students from financial pressures that may force minority students to leave college to fulfill family obligations and financial responsibilities (Code Amber News Service, Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2007).

Recruitment and Retention (Issues in Black Higher Education):

While numerous books exist about minority retention, few publications specifically address the poor retention rate of African-American males in college. Attaining and maintaining high retention rates is a concern for most colleges and universities around the United States. Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its mission. An interview with the Director of Academic Advising-Student Affairs at this Art-Based College revealed that the three most common causes for low retention rates at this particular institution today are (1) the economy; (2) the war; and (3) minimal college curriculum advising (Friedman Interview, 2009).

Currently, this Art-Based College has an overall 51% retention of Black Non-Hispanic male and female students from freshman to sophomore year. From this overall percentage, African-American males make up 49% and African-American females make up 52%. This Art-Based College has an overall 29% retention of Black Non-Hispanic male and female students from junior to senior year. From this overall percentage, African-American males make up 29% and African-American females make up 30% (Research, Planning and Evaluation, Fall 2009 Fact Book). A high rate of attrition (the opposite of retention) is not only a fiscal problem for schools, but a symbolic failure of an institution to achieve its purpose (Cuyjet, 1997).

Snipe (2007) believes the recruitment and retention of minority students remains one of higher education's most pressing issues. He feels the development and successful implementation of diversity programs for African-American students at both Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) is critical for a Black student's success and for increasing retention rates until they graduate.

Retention most often is measured in terms of graduation rates. However, this formula may cloud the real picture given that not all students enter with graduation as their end goal. Astin (1997) contends that students who are not seeking a degree and leave school before graduation should not be counted as drop-outs. This probably amounts to a small percentage of students.

Retention and graduation rates are of great importance for institutional planners who assist parents and families with the 'college-planning-processes' for their students. By identifying upfront what could possibly be the most productive and appropriate college environment, both the parent and student is guaranteed a better possibility for experiencing a successful college encounter. Astin (1997) believes that when an institution has an overall graduation rate of 75%, but only 15% of its African-American students graduate, the success of the majority masks problems in specific populations. This is one reason that at the elementary and high school level, *No Child Left Behind* requires schools to break down their statistics into relevant groups. The push before the 2008 Presidential election was for colleges to have to do this as well. But the effort was stonewalled and defeated.

Astin (1997) pointed out that from the perspective of a single institution; there are two extremes of student retention. *Normal progression*, typical of a *stayer* or *retained student*, occurs when a student enrolls each semester until graduation, studies full-time, and graduates in about four years. A *drop-out* or *leaver* is a student who enters college, but leaves before graduating and never returns to that or any other school. Between these two extremes are *transfers*, students who begin studies at one institution and then transfer to another. *Stop-outs* (students who re-enroll after quitting college) usually will take a year off along the way to do something interesting. From the student's perspective, transferring is normal progress. From the perspective of the institution, where the student first enrolled, the student has dropped out (Astin, 1997).

While it is easy to identify a *stayer*, a student who has left college could return at any time. Students often quit school due to a financial shortfall or a family crisis and return a year later. Many adult students might start school, drop out to work or to raise a family, and return years or even decades later. Someone defined as a drop-out could become redefined as a stop-out at any time. Other students become *slowdowns*, going from full-time attendance to taking just a few courses. Some studies show that the average student attends three to five colleges before graduating.

Astin (1997) believes when defining and recognizing 'retention,' an important distinction must be made between *non-degree seeking students* who enroll in college level courses for personal reasons, and *degree seeking students* who enroll intending to graduate, but do not do so. For instance, a *non-degree seeking student* might enter a college with the intention of taking three accounting courses to upgrade his or her status at work. When this is done, neither the institution nor the student fails, yet the institution would likely count the student as a drop-out.

Institutions that enroll large numbers of part-time students have to be very careful in understanding whether a low graduation rate represents institutional failure or institutional success. But also, this is a point of interest that too many colleges hide behind. While a simple definition of retention or attrition may not be possible, an accurate description needs to consider the goals of the student upon

entry, and for the vast majority of traditional age students, the main goal is graduation and getting a 'good' job.

The following definition captures the essence of the problem of students leaving college prior to graduation: 'A *leaver* or *drop-out* is a student who enters a college or university with the intention of graduating, but due to personal or institutional shortcomings or both, leaves school for an extended period of time and does not return to the original or any other school.' In considering any definition, it is important to identify if the definition is from the perspective of the individual student, the institution, or from the economic or labor force perspective (Astin, 1997, pgs. 647-658).

Student retention for African-American males and all other nationalities is valuable to institutions because it assures a continued flow of revenues into the institution through the payment of tuition. It is important for both private and public institutions because institutional support is based on the size of the student body and success factors. *Enrollment Management* provides continuity to the policies and programs that result in student retention. Enrollment Management activities include attracting the right students, providing financial aid, easing the transition to college through orientation programs, using institutional research to gather and analyze data about students, using appropriate interventions for students lacking skills or needing guidance, conducting research to identify the factors associated with student retention, helping with job placement, and enlisting the support of alumni (Astin, 1997).

Conclusion

The literature presented identified four primary factors that influence whether African-American males will be successful and persist to graduation. Wilson (2007) stated 'academic unpreparedness or inadequate academic preparation' prior to entering college is intricately linked to both African-American males and females and their ability to develop the necessary skills to compete and meet the demands of college before they arrive on campus.

Noted scholars such as Pascarella (1980), Tinto (1987), Astin (1993), and Kunjufu (1997) agreed that institutional support in the form of academic integration and social integration plays an important role in the retention of minority students. Also, Astin (1975), Tinto (1999), and the study based on the University of Ages (Shelton, 2008, pg. 26) confirmed in their research that receiving financial support throughout a college student's experience, particularly the African-American male student, becomes paramount to the student's retention rate.

Additionally, the University of Ages Study reported that completing the Introductory Course Sequence proved to be a leading factor tied to persistence to graduation for African-American students. The goal of this course is to provide the basics in research, writing, presentation skills, and teaching the ability to work collaboratively in a learning team (Shelton, 2008, pg. 8).

Prior educational preparation, academic and social integration, and financial support are factors that relate to the African-American male student who

persists to graduation; therefore, my research will examine these factors more closely. The nature of the literature compiled for this study directed me to the qualitative methodology I used to explore multiple perspectives of the participants.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss the research design, data collection method, analysis of the data, trustworthiness, and ethical consideration.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Use of Qualitative Research Method: *Focus Group Interview*

In order to explore successful retention rates for African-American males at an Art-Based College and understand what factors contribute to low retention rates, I chose to use a qualitative research design. There are several presuppositions that made this design best suited for the study. One is that a qualitative design is rooted in an 'interpretivist' or 'constructivist' paradigm, which portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing (Wilson-Taylor, 2006, pg. 36). This interpretivist paradigm depicts the qualitative design as being philosophically oriented to interpretive research where the aim of the researcher is to find the various perspectives and not to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm (Wilson-Taylor, 2006, pg. 36). The researcher's challenge is to gain access to the multiple perspectives of the participants in order to inform his/her interpretations.

A qualitative research design is also best for this particular study because it gives the researcher the ability to provide understanding of 'direct lived experience' instead of abstract generalization (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The data collected 'in a real-life, natural setting' are often rich, descriptive, and extensive.

Another characteristic of a qualitative design is that the researcher seeks *emic*, which is the insider's point of view, rather than *etic*, the outsiders point of view (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Gaining the insider point of view was one of the goals of this study in interviewing the students at this Art-Based College. My aim was to understand, report, and evaluate the meaning of events for African-American male students who find themselves in particular academic and social situations. The focus group interview provided rich data because participants responded to open-ended questions from their own socially constructed reality.

Qualitative research is all about exploring issues, understanding phenomena, and answering questions. A careful-thinker is consistently writing, thinking, and reflecting as he/she (thinker) goes through the research process. Critical reflection was useful for this Applied Inquiry Project because it required me (the researcher) to reflect upon and evaluate my own experiences, memories, values, and opinions about retention and succeeding in college. It reminded me about my life as a college bound African-American male and being able to succeed-against-the-odds.

Any biases, values, and interests were to be acknowledged and included in the final report (Glesne, 1999). A research term for this data collection approach is called 'bracketing' where I (the researcher) kept a journal of sorts about my experiences as I conducted the focus group study and noted what challenges I encountered and how I noticed and dealt with my own biases.

Research Design

Data gathering in a qualitative research design is usually dominated by the data-gathering techniques of participant observation, interviewing, and document collection (Wilson-Taylor, 2006, pg. 38). The data for this study were gathered by use of a focus group design that employed face-to-face interviews consisting of 10 clear, open-ended questions (See Appendix C). This encouraged an in-depth group discussion with six African-American male students who are academically successful and near completion of their graduation requirements at this Art-Based College. Preparation for the focus group session involved planning an interview schedule, securing a location, and designating a time to meet. In order to collect accurate data and exact responses from the participants, I used a tape-recorder along with a trusted note-taker for effective transfer and validity of the information acquired during the discussion. The participants sat as a group around tables arranged in a U-shaped formation. In my opinion, the U-shaped table formation allowed for each participant to feel equal to his peers, and it provided a comfortable environment for effective collaboration and discussion between the participants and me. Even though they

sat as a group, they were interviewed individually in an order that allowed each student a chance to be the first person to respond to an open-ended question.

Population:

The population for this study included a total of six male students with an overall grade-point-average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher and enrolled full-time at this Art-Based College. There were three African-American male students classified as juniors (meaning they have successfully completed at least 60 of the 120 to 128 credit hours of required coursework for graduation within their chosen major), and three African-America male students classified as seniors (meaning they have successfully completed at least 90 of the 120 to 128 credit hours of required coursework for graduation in their chosen major). Participants were chosen on a voluntary basis from two of the Art-Based College classrooms facilitated by a faculty member. The faculty member made an announcement to all African-American males in the class who had either junior or senior status. The announcement addressed my interest in organizing a focus group to conduct research about factors leading to successful retention and graduation rates for Black males at this Art-Based College, and requested those who were interested in getting more information about participating to meet with me after class. Once the male students were assembled in a group, they were given the grade point average (GPA) requirement and additional criteria for qualifications to participate.

Those who were still interested and met the participant qualifications remained in the group to get a detailed explanation about the study. The

participants were given a flyer with bullet-point information about the study, participant qualifications, and a contact email and phone number to inform me of their decision to participant. A total of 10 qualified males responded. Although I only needed six participants for the focus group study, I extended an invitation for all 10 males to show-up at the focus group meeting. This allowed me two additional males for the pool should someone needed to cancel for any reason. The prospective participants were required to submit their official college transcripts with proof of the overall 3.0 GPA and proof of their junior or senior credit hour classification.

Once the participant's documentation was approved, they were notified via email of their selection to be part of the focus group and sent an attachment of the Participant Consent Form. The participants were also asked to email and/or call me within five days of receiving the invitation to confirm their decision. After which, seven to 10 days before the focus group interviews, participants were contacted by me again to make sure they were still available. At this point, I provided the participants with information about the exact location and time of the focus group interview. I also responded to any last minute queries or concerns (Gray, 2004, p. 222).

Obtaining Institutional Endorsement:

I obtained institutional endorsement from the Dean of Students and from the Art-Based College Interview Board (ABCIB) for conducting a focus group interview that involved using African-American male students who are enrolled

full-time at this institution. I also made it known that, at this point of the research process, I had no intentions of publishing my report.

Obtaining Participant Consent:

The Participant Consent Form (See Appendix A) was designed to check that the participants understood the purposes of the study, that they were aware of their rights as a participant, and to confirm that the participants were willing to take part in the focus group discussion (Gray, 2004, p. 234). All six participants signed the Participant Consent Form.

Data Collection Procedure

The method I chose for data collection is called a *Focus Group Interview/Discussion*. According to Gray (2004), focus groups originated in market research during the 1950s when people were brought together so that their attitudes to new products could be tested. Today, focus groups are still used for this purpose, but their popularity has spread to wider aspects of research.

Interview Methodology:

A focus group interview allows the researcher to examine and probe what cannot be observed (Wellington, 2000). I asked each participant the same 10 open-ended questions (See Appendix C). During the interview, I kept in mind the two hour discussion time-frame allotted for the interview session so that all six participants had an opportunity to engage equally in the conversation.

As stated earlier, I used a trusted 'note-taker' during the interview to record additional field notes. While leading the discussion, I was mindful to capture 'quotes' from the participants, observe their facial expressions, notice their individual reactions, and observe body movements. The trusted 'note-taker' kept a close eye on the tape recorder to make sure it did not malfunction.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved the process of breaking data down into smaller units to reveal their characteristics, elements, and structure (Gray, 2004, p. 327). Descriptions can lay the basis for analysis, but I went beyond description in order to interpret, understand, and explain the findings. I used my research questions to make valid inferences from the participants' responses. Reflection on the data required me to continuously rewind and listen to the tape-recorded session, review the field notes, and revisit the transcribed highlights. Immediately after the participant-interviews, I spent time recording my own observations noting parallel development.

The following steps below list how the data from my research were analyzed (Adapted from Gray, 2004).

- **DATA IMMERSION** - listened to tape recordings and/or read transcripts and written documents more than once to get a sense/feel of the data.
- **CODING AND DATA REDUCTION** - in the initial coding phase, the language of the participants and language from the documents was used. This helped to reduce data. i.e., used participants' own words to name the categories and the themes within the categories.

- **DATA DISPLAY AND REFLECTION** - the data was categorized to allow for conceptualization, as well as reflection.
- **CONCLUSION DRAWING** - categories were given meaningful units of data by seeking themes and comparing and contrasting units of data. These units of data were then matched to the research questions. A thematic analysis of the data was completed.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness:

Qualitative researchers have a long history of responding to the issue of the credibility of their research. Some researchers, particularly those from the naturalistic tradition, argue that trustworthiness is more important than concerns over validity or reliability (Gray, 2004, p. 345). Within my research, trustworthiness was addressed through a focus on:

- *Transferability* with purposive sampling to illustrate pertinent issues and factors when comparing two contexts for similarity; and thick descriptions to provide evidence for making judgments about similarities between cases.
- *Dependability* through the data.
- *Credibility* with the use of persistent observations.

Ethical Considerations:

The ethics of research concern the appropriateness of the researcher's behavior in relation to the subjects of the research or those who are affected by it (Gray, 2004, p. 58). Wellington (2000) identified eight ethical rules to recognize when conducting a research study. The guiding ethical rules are: (1) confidentiality and anonymity should be maintained at all stages, especially in publication; (2) participants should not be involved without their prior knowledge of permission and informed consent; (3) all efforts should be made to ensure that participants are not deceived; (4) if a control or experimental group exists, benefits should not be withheld for any participants or disadvantage imposed upon others; (5) no attempt should be made to force participants to participate in anything unsafe or against their will; (6) all participants should be treated fairly, with courtesy, respect, and honesty; (7) pertinent information about the nature and purpose of the research should never be withheld from the participant; and (8) the researcher should refrain from intruding upon participant's privacy or consuming too much of their time.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss the researcher's observations of the participants, participant demographic breakdown, individual focus group participant profiles, and collective focus group participant profiles: similarities & differences, and data analysis (emerging themes and sub-themes).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The research findings in this chapter were obtained by analyzing responses to 10 open-ended questions during a two hour focus group interview. The six young men who participated in this focus group interview represented three specific age groups and four different college majors. Three of the participants have senior-status in college and the remaining three participants have junior-status.

Researcher's Observations of the Participants

Before presenting the analysis of the data, I have provided a Participant Demographic Breakdown (Table 1) of each participant. I also provide a brief profile for all six focus group participants. Each participant had a unique

personality, but the themes that evolved represent similarities of their experiences and backgrounds.

Participant Demographic Breakdown (Table 1)

Participant Pseudonym	Age	College-Status (Classification)	Major	Hometown
Cleve	23	Senior	Theater (Acting)	Muskegon, MI
Esteban	21	Senior	Journalism	Chicago, IL
Jesse	20	Junior	Photo-Journalism	Chicago, IL
Kerry	21	Junior	Marketing Communications	Chicago, IL
Moses	20	Junior	Music (Instrumental)	Chicago, IL
Sean	23	Senior	Journalism: Magazine Program	Matteson, IL

The Focus Group: Individual Participant Profiles

Cleve:

Cleve considers himself a hard worker. He says he was a mischievous child and being the product of an extended family environment, he intentionally got into household-trouble primarily to get greater attention from both his parents and grandparents. Eventually, his parents divorced while he was still an only child. Several years later, his mother remarried and had another son. Cleve considers himself a positive role model and mentor to his younger brother. He feels he can continue to make a positive impression on his little brother by remaining on the *Dean's List* while a student at this Art-Based College and eventually graduating. Cleve is proud for transforming what he calls weak-communication into a strong relationship with his biological father. He is also

proud of the strong bond he has with his step-father. Cleve is a work-study student in the Liberal Arts and Science Department at this Art-Based College where he juggles a full-time work schedule, full-time course load, and theater rehearsals.

Esteban:

Esteban, who once attended Illinois State University, is presently a tutor at the Art-Based College Learning Center. Being an only child from a single parent household, he credits his mother for being an outstanding role model and disciplinarian. Esteban, who says he manages his time well, attended private schools before starting college. Because he grew up in a rather dangerous neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, his mother drove him every day to a more affluent neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago to attend a private school. For Esteban, higher education is a gateway to opportunity. After graduating from this Art-Based College, he says he wants to get two years of work experience in his career field. After that, he plans to begin graduate school.

Jesse:

Jesse is a photo-journalism major at the Art-Based College. He grew up being a *ward-of-the-court* and has never met his biological parents. He characterizes himself as an over-achiever who feels he has a lot to prove to himself and to the world. He says he is self-determined. Jesse also says growing up a ward-of-the-court has taught him invaluable survival skills, and has helped him effectively adjust to change in many ways. As a child, Jesse was

involved with community based mentorship programs on the South Side of Chicago. He received his first professional camera as a gift from a mentor of his church. Later, he developed a strong skill-set for writing and rhetoric while in junior and senior high school. Jesse believes in order to be a successful photo-journalist; you must first gain in-depth knowledge of the subject matter.

Kerry:

Kerry grew up in the home with both parents. His first statement during the focus group interview was that he hungers for personal and academic growth. He characterizes himself as outspoken, persistent, and a detailed goal-planner. Kerry mentioned several times how his father, who remarried and presently has five children in college at the same time, has always encouraged him to excel academically, attend college and graduate. Kerry considers himself a high-achiever and is competitive with his four siblings to see who can perform best.

Moses:

Moses is a cancer-survivor who was born in Chicago, and once lived in Pennsylvania and New Jersey before returning to Chicago. His peers sometime call him arrogant, but he calls it possessing a high level of self-confidence. Like Sean, he is the product of a single (female) parent household. Even though his parents are separated, Moses wants to prove to them that he can earn a degree. Neither of his parents have college degrees. He is the eldest of three children, and his passion is music and playing the keyboards. Moses says he did not

have a close relationship with his father as a child growing up. However, he credits his unwavering spirituality for the strong bond and better communication they now have. Moses says he is more of a hands-on-learner than a minds-on-learner; therefore he partly credits the academic support system at the Art-Based College for helping him perform well in the classroom. He says his mother also encourages him to excel academically, and he dare not disappoint her.

Sean:

Sean calls himself a hybrid-learner because he learns most effectively as an audio and visual learner. Sean is also the product of a two-parent household. Sean's father is an author and has earned his Ph.D.; his mother is presently working to complete her Ph.D. requirements. Sean spoke fondly of both parents. He credits his mother for teaching him to be goal-oriented, and credits his father for instilling in him the traits for being an over-achiever. As a child, he was encouraged by his parents to attend one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Instead, Sean chose to attend the Art-Based College because of its mission to educate the creative-and-academic-minded-student, and for the Art-Based College's cultural diversity. He expressed determination to follow-in-the-footsteps of his parents and eventually earn a Ph.D. himself.

This concludes the brief descriptions about each participant in the focus group. The analysis of the data provides insight of their backgrounds in a granulated way. Also, an analysis of the data helps to answer the question of what these African-American males perceive to be the most influential factors to their persistence to graduation.

The Focus Group: Similarities & Differences

As stated earlier, each participant had a unique personality. In addition, there were similarities and differences within the group. A common similarity exists where each participant experienced academic preparedness before entering college. The majority of participants had contact with a particular positive role-model growing up; whereas others were exposed to community based mentorship programs, and/or experienced the positive influence of parent(s), a guardian, extended family members, or neighbors who are educators themselves. In some way or another, each participant expressed being self-determined, and/or a high-achiever. Both Cleve and Esteban transferred prior college credits from other institutions to satisfy general education degree requirements at the Art-Based College. Sean received Advanced Placement (AP) college credit while still in high school.

Striking differences existed with three of the participants being the product of a two parent household, one participant being a ward-of-the-court who has never met his biological parents, and the remaining two participants being products of single parent (female) households. There was also a variation in ages of the participants. The six participants are all creative-and-academic-minded-students. However, between the six of them collectively, their passions (departmental majors) represent four different academic areas at this Art-Based College.

All six participants, except Moses, were enrolled in either a college-preparatory, advanced placement, or honors program while in high school. Cleve attended Western Michigan Private Christian High School located in Muskegon, Illinois, and he also attended Muskegon Community College before enrolling at the Art-Based College. Esteban attended the all male private Saint Patrick High School located in North Chicago. Jesse attended Kenwood Academy-College Preparatory High School located in Hyde Park, South Chicago. Kerry attended Lincoln Park Public High School located in North Chicago. Moses, who also attended schools in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey, graduated from Thornwood Public High School located in South Chicago. Sean attended Rich Central Public High School located in suburban Olympia Fields, Illinois.

After arriving to the location for the focus group interview, I noticed that the participants immediately began interactions with each other. After completing the interviews, each participant expressed an interest in staying-in-touch with each other personally. Even though the participants were in the midst of mid-term exams, they asked if we could meet again before the semester convened to have a follow-up conversation about the focus group topic. In order to acknowledge the participants' request to share results of the focus group interview; I will meet with them again after the final stages of my Applied Inquiry Project (i.e., Thesis) are approved by DePaul University's Graduate Student Program Review Committee (GSPRC).

Data Analysis

Four themes emerged from the data. All four themes relate to the participants' perceptions concerning why they are persistent toward graduation from college. Several of the themes are in-line with the literature of African-American males' retention success, as referred to in the Literature Review.

The four themes are:

- **Self-determination to complete degree requirements and make family proud.**
- **Use of College-Wide Support System.**
- **Family Support.**
- **High-Achievers.**

Percentages for Themes that Emerged from Participants Responses (Table 2)

<i>Self-Determination</i>	100%	Perception based on more than 50% of Participants
<i>College-Wide Support System</i>	90%	Perception based on over 50% of Participants
<i>Family Support</i>	75%	Perception based on 3/4ths of Participants
<i>High-Achievers</i>	75%	Perception based on 3/4ths of Participants

Theme 1: *Self-Determination*

People, both younger and older, are centrally concerned with *motivation* and how to move themselves to act. Parents, teachers, students, coaches, and managers struggle with how to motivate those that they mentor, and individuals struggle to find energy, mobilize effort and persist at the tasks of life and work. People are often moved by external factors such as reward systems, grades, evaluations, or the opinions they fear others might have of them. Yet just as

frequently, people are motivated from within, by interests, curiosity, care or abiding values. These intrinsic motivations are not necessarily externally rewarded or supported, but nonetheless they can sustain passions, creativity, and sustained efforts. The interplay between the extrinsic forces acting on persons and the intrinsic motives and needs inherent in human nature is the territory of the *self-determination theory* that represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pg. 227-68). Perhaps, more importantly, *self-determination theory* propositions also focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance.

The data in this study revealed all 10 participants believe their self-determination makes a difference in their persistence to complete degree requirements and make family members proud. There are many things that an interviewer will notice that may not be revealed in the transcribed document (Shelton, 2008). The 10 participants spoke with such conviction about their determination to graduate, make family proud, and make a difference in society. The participants were asked, as a group, for one person to volunteer his definition of self-determination. The participants were granted two minutes for discussion among themselves. In particular, Kerry's reflective comment about *'the sky is the limit for what they can accomplish'* is pretty important.

Kerry's reflection is representative of the group:

'As a group, we feel self-determination is about motivation and not giving up during challenging times. We feel being self-determined allows us to

achieve our personal goals and initiate the necessary actions for accomplishing success at the highest level possible. We've been told that life is a journey, and we feel that the sky is the limit for what we can accomplish...and if we reach for the moon, we will increase our chances of becoming a star.'

Cleve, Esteban, Kerry, and Sean said they learned discipline early on in life from their parents. Discipline coupled with self-determination is key to their persistence. It seemed that most challenges, such as lack of a substantive support system, lack of encouragement, social support and/or financial assistance that would prohibit African-American males from being successful in their pursuit of receiving an undergraduate degree has not affected the males I interviewed.

The participants kept a positive attitude throughout the focus group interview and often spoke of knowing they would persist toward graduation once they completed their sophomore year which speaks to their above average level of self determination, interpersonal development, and self identity or drive. Each participant agreed that he had not always been a model-student in the classroom, but that they learned valuable lessons by making mistakes. The participants also agreed that accepting constructive criticism from their teachers, parent(s), and mentors help mold their attitude of persistence to graduation. Sean referred to these experiences as being 'a-ha' moments.

Like many other college students when they are approaching graduation, each focus group participant expressed feelings of uncertainty about today's job market. They spoke particularly about the state of today's economy and their

concerns about how successful they will be with finding a professional job immediately after graduation. Four of the participants said they have considered starting a graduate school program after graduation from college. The remaining two participants would like to get work experience in their chosen passion before beginning graduate school.

Theme 2: *The Art-Based College & Its College-Wide Support System*

Kuh and Hu (2001) found that positive interactions between academic advisors, faculty advisors, financial aid counselors, and college-wide support groups is a leading factor in the persistence to graduation rates of African-American male students. Booker (2004) discussed the element of faculty and student interaction and proactive advising. Students want to have well-defined goals and want to receive timely feedback from faculty regarding their progress in class, and from Advisors regarding how to effectively persist toward graduation. The lack of goals and timely feedback could lead to students dropping out.

All six participants said having appropriate counseling and college-wide support from the Art-Based College's staff and administration is instrumental in their persistence to stay focused and graduate. In particular, all participants said being able to reach their necessary Advisors and Counselors whenever needed is definitely an important factor that supports their persistence to graduate. Because all six participants received either scholarships and/or Federal Financial Aid, they all feel having close and upfront communication with their Student Financial Services Counselor and an Academic and Scholarship Advisor is of

utmost importance. Being able to afford college can become an issue, especially with students who attend private institutions like this Art-Based College where tuition costs are steeper than State supported institutions. One of the greatest factors that prevent students from persisting to graduation is their ability to receive proper financial counseling and financial support to pay for college (Tinto, 1987). The same concern is currently true, especially with the state of today's economy.

Four of the six participants meet regularly with both their Academic and Faculty Advisors, one of the participants meets more regularly with his *Conaway Achievement Project (CAP)* mentor, and another of the participants is more independent and self-guided, so he meets with his Academic and Faculty Advisors whenever he has a specific concern. Each of the focus group participants use some form of federal financial aid to assist with paying tuition cost; therefore it is imperative that these students meet with a Financial Aid Advisor at some point during each college semester. Their comments and feedback during the focus group about their relationship with this particular Department suggest that an array of mixed-emotions exist when it comes to dealing with the finance part of their college journey.

Esteban stated:

'I usually meet with an Academic Advisor to discuss which classes to pick for the upcoming semester. Thus far, my academic advising experiences have gone pretty well. On the other hand, for me, the Financial Aid Office is a joke. Everyone tells you a different story and it's difficult to get an appointment with a Financial Aid Advisor. I really like this Art-Based College, but the business side of things here are really shaky.'

Moses stated:

'During my freshman year at this Art-Based College, my experience with the financial aid process was daunting and I felt as though my Financial Aid Counselor didn't really care enough about my financial needs; however, my Counselors from the Conaway Achievement Project (CAP) always followed-up with me to make sure my personal and academic goals were on-point. Also, my use of CAP's computer lab and laptop-loan-service has helped me complete classroom assignments on time and has helped me maintain good grades.'

Sean is excited about his experience with the *Academic Advising Center*. He acknowledged that he has to be pro-active many times in order to get an appointment with his Advisor, but the communication and guidance he receives is worth the effort. He said his Academic Advisor keeps him up-to-date about the required prerequisites and courses he needs to complete his major within four years. Sean also feels this relationship with the Advising Center will eventually help him gain a rewarding internship experience, as well.

All participants agreed that being proactive and meeting deadlines is paramount for excelling and for scholarship consideration. Kerry said the *Office of Multicultural Affairs* at this Art-Based College has helped tremendously with his persistence to graduate. He said this particular Department has provided him with scholarships and has introduced him to African-American role models who are successful and well established in their careers.

Jesse stated:

'Next semester, I plan to begin my internship. Although I feel this Art-Base College has provided me with the appropriate academic and hands-on learning in the classroom, I am still a little nervous about finally being able to demonstrate my skill-set in a professional work environment. I think I feel this way because there is a learning-curve involved. Fortunately, learning from making mistakes has helped me develop worthwhile survival skills, as well as help me perfect my photo-journalism skills. Actually, these experiences have provided me with the motivation to secure part-time contractual jobs where the money I've made has helped me purchase photo supplies and pay a portion of my college tuition costs.'

According to a study by Sallie Mae Corporation, the largest nonprofit provider of federal and private educational loans in this country, 69% of African-Americans who enrolled in college, but did not finish, said they left college because of inadequate financial aid counseling and high student loan debt.

Both Cleve and Esteban said the overall redesign of this Art-Base College's Student Financial Services Department has made a positive difference for them, but there is still room for more departmental improvement. They feel their ability to meet with a Counselor by appointment and to occasionally receive e-mail confirmations about their financial aid account makes the financial aspect of getting a college degree a little less stressful. All six participants agreed that financing their education is second most important to keeping at least a 3.0 grade point average because maintaining above average academic performance is their first priority.

Esteban, Sean, Kerry, Moses, and Jesse are very excited about being involved with the Art-Based College's *Office of Multicultural Affairs* and feel they

are better connected with campus-life because of events sponsored by Multicultural Affairs. This department also helps the students feel they 'fit-in' with such a diverse campus setting. Cleve, who lives off-campus, works a part-time job and maintains a demanding theater rehearsal schedule. Cleve said he cannot get involved with as many campus activities as he would like because of his demanding schedule.

Kerry stated:

'The Office of Multicultural Affairs has helped me meet other students like myself who are progressive and culturally astute. Since becoming a student at this Art-Based College, I have attended some exciting and educational campus or community events sponsored by this office. It helps keep me aware of my own heritage and it helps me learn more about other cultures and their heritage.'

Theme 3: Family Support

Based on past research, it is not surprising that the majority of participants considered their '*family*' to be unwaveringly supportive with regard to why they remain persistent to graduate. The reference to 'family' emerged as a strong theme in three of the 10 questions asked of the participants (See Appendix C). Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) reported that if a male African-American student's parent happens to be college educated, the student is better equipped and will receive substantial support for success in college. Some, but not all, African-American males will be first generation students who have family support; meaning they do have some type of encouragement to succeed. However, oftentimes the family that is uneducated may not be able to fully guide the

student to be successful, but the pride of a family member in the achievement of a first generation student can also provide support.

Astin (1987) also found a connection between religion and the persistence rate of African-American students. During the focus group interview, Moses mentioned several times about his positive experiences with spirituality, his family, and his persistence to graduate. Even though one of the participants is a *ward-of-the-court* and never had a relationship at all with his biological parents, and another participant struggled with communicating effectively with his family, all six participants still agreed that 'family' is the basic social unit where 'belief-systems' are formulated and that 'strong family ties' are important for success leading to graduation from college.

Barnett (2004) researched the importance of *family support* as it relates to the African-American students' (ages 18-23) successful retention in college. This qualitative analysis of family support and interaction among African-American college students at an Ivy League University concluded that the support African-American college students from predominantly White campuses get from their families and other kinship networks helps in reducing stress level and provides an emotional support to them for persistence to graduation. Based on feedback from the six participants in the focus group, college students still value the support they receive from their parents. However, they feel it is challenging at times for parents to figure out exactly how to be supportive to them once they leave for college, partly due to the physical distance between them. At least half of the participants mentioned either their mother or their grandmother as being

their most consistent inspiration for attending college and persisting toward graduation. Several other participants mentioned a positive and supportive relationship with their father, as well.

Sean's reflections are representative of the group:

'Both my parents have advanced degrees and have been visibly supportive of my education since I was a child...they have set examples for me to follow and have provided me with the necessary tools I need to be academically successful. Unlike me, some of my colleagues at this Art-Based College are from single parent households, and one of the participants in our focus group has never met his biological parents. I guess you can say I am fortunate to have grown-up in the household with both my parents, but my being fortunate does not mean my fellow colleagues who are not from the same environment with both parents at home to guide them cannot be successful and persist to graduation like me.'

Moses stated:

'My parents separated when I was a child, but my mother has always told me how much my father and I are alike personality wise. Now that I've grown-up and started college, my father and I talk on the phone on occasions and he always tells me how proud he is that I am pursuing a college degree. I do not see my father much in person, but to hear him say he is proud of me is encouraging enough for me to keep a positive attitude and persist toward graduation. Because of my dysfunctional family experience, I plan on being a more supportive parent myself once I am married have a child of my own.'

Theme 4: High-Achievers

Based on feedback from the focus group participants, two sub-themes in a high-achiever surfaced. The sub-themes are (1) being competitive; and (2) being an effective communicator. On college campuses, competition need not lead to antagonism and hostility although it often evokes envy and even malice among

competitors. A brief discussion about high-achievement and competitiveness among today's political and educational leaders surfaced during the focus group interview when the participants identified factors outside of this Art-Based College that has affected their journey as a college student. Participants spoke of factors such as family and friends, employers, community based mentorship programs, role-models, state and national politicians, corporate leaders, educators, and high school summer internship programs. Esteban mentioned a quote he learned in a history class while in high school. The quote reads:

'It is not the critic who counts, nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer-of-deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes up short again and again; who knows great enthusiasms, great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of **high achievement**, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.'

-Theodore Roosevelt

The literature confirms that educational leaders and politicians have encouraged success and competitiveness in the classroom. President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs called for the federal government to participate actively in reshaping primary and secondary education. President Ronald Reagan's administration provided education money to the states in the form of block-grants, leaving to the states much of the determination of how funds were to be spent. President George H. Bush favored aid to disadvantaged children and promoted state programs for excellence. President Bill Clinton gave education the highest priority in his administration. At the time, he submitted the

highest education funding package in U.S. history. President George W. Bush made the improvement of education a central goal of his administration and allocated even more money to education (Sennholz, 2003, pg. 1). Recently, our Commander-in-Chief, President Barack Obama signed an executive order renewal of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). His executive order promotes excellence, innovation and sustainability at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The Health Care/Education 'reconciliation' bill allocated \$2.5 billion to these HCBU's. This also encourages African-American college students to compete for academic excellence and high-achievement (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-signs-executive-order-promoting-excellence-innovation-and-sustainab>).

Sub-theme two addresses effective communication and the over-achiever. Being an effective communicator has the proven potential to enhance efficiency of meaningful learning experiences (Sennholz, 2003, pg.1). This is important for students at this Art-Based College because the different forms of verbal and nonverbal communications in the classroom, cultural communications in the classroom, and communication enhancers for the classroom are issues which are major crossroads in the path to receiving a successful education. Data obtained from this focus group interview proves that effective college classroom communication requires the instructor and student to send and receive messages accurately. It states that recognizing and appreciating diversity (i.e., various cultures in the classroom) allows college students, especially African-American students, to feel good about themselves and promotes achievement.

The participants talked quite a bit about how competitive they are and how much they enjoy being a winner. Again, they mentioned how proud they are to see an African-American male and his family residing in the White House and how proud they are to have President Barack Obama leading our country. The participants also compared their feelings about being African-American males, competitive, and high-achievers with that of President Obama's tenacity to compete and succeed at winning the highest held office of leadership in our country. The participants said they see President Obama as being a definite role model for them to emulate. The participants also talked about how proud they were to receive *academic awards* and *honorable mentions* from their instructors and mentors when they were in high school. The same is true now that the participants are in college. Wilson (2007) stated that success in college begins long before students ever enroll. In fact, a student's performance in the higher education arena is intricately linked to his or her ability to develop skills necessary to compete and meet the demands of college before they arrive. Consequently, high-achievers evolve.

Most of the participants in this focus group were involved in some type of athletic sport as a youngster and throughout their secondary education or was a member of their school's *Debate Team* and *Honor Roll Society*. They felt they performed best when they encountered competition or a challenge of some sort, and that wanting to perform better than their peers encouraged them to become

high-achievers. This is pretty important for understanding how to finish at the top-of-their-game.

Cleve stated:

'Well, I am definitely a high-achiever and I believe people like me view life as a marathon, not a sprint. This external factor enables me to avoid burnout and other serious stress-related challenges that might occur during my mid-term and final-exams.'

Comments from all six participants revealed their feelings about what they think are traits of an over-achiever. Four of the six participants feel they are *excellent* communicators, and the remaining two feel they are *good* communicators. However, they all agreed that high-achievers should recognize the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication in the classroom while persisting to graduate from college. All of the participants remembered being encouraged by a parent or mentor to always strive for excellence or make *Honor-Roll* in grammar school, junior high, and senior high school. All participants agreed that this challenge has motivated them toward high-achievement and to make the *Dean's List* in college, as well.

Esteban stated:

'My mother and teachers always told me to reach higher than expected of me and to perform 101 percent. Whenever I failed to measure-up, I got reprimanded. Because of my mother's advice and my own ability to stay focused on my goals, I am able to do the same while in college. I definitely feel I can do anything I set my heart and mind to do.'

In conclusion, self-determination to complete a degree and make family and peers proud, use of a college-wide support system, family support, and being high-achievers were the major themes which emerged from the data. In Chapter Five, I will discuss implications relative to the themes that greatly influence the focus group participant's persistence to graduation, and how this study presents a body of knowledge that should be taken in consideration for future studies. Chapter Five will also provide a summary of the study, discuss key findings, and provide some conclusions. I also provide a list of recommendations for future study. Then I suggest, in detail, my recommendations for how this Art-Based College's African-American male retention and persistence to graduation rates can be addressed more effectively.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fundamental question in this research asked '*what are the factors that positively influence retention and lead to higher graduation rates of high achieving African-American male students at this Art-Based College?*' The notion of 'perception' is important because it was very insightful to have the focus group participants share personal experiences and speak from their own perspective about being a student. From information obtained during the interview, it was important to determine the factors that help these students persist to complete requirements for their undergraduate degree.

A review of the literature provided insight into how matters such as academic integration, academic preparedness, the achievement-gap, financial support, and social integration play a key role in whether African-American males will persist to graduate (See Definitions, pg 8).

The most common factors the participants of this focus group perceive as the greatest influences to their persistence toward graduation are *self-determination; use their of college-wide support system; family support; and being high-achievers*. The last three factors are congruent with the literature. The one and only influence mentioned, but not significantly addressed in the literature is *self-determination*. This is important and should be elevated because all six participants agreed that self-determination to complete their degree, attend graduate school, and therefore make family members and peers proud of their accomplishments is highest on their list of goals. Their level of determination is congruent with their self-identity as being high-achievers. Moreover, especially the participants who are first in their family to attend college did not want to disappoint their family by not completing their degree requirements. For them, failure is not an option. Over one-half of the participants agreed that having a supportive family structure and a college-wide support system encouraged them to be successful.

The participants spoke energetically about receiving unwavering support from their mother, father, or both parents (if they were not from a single parent household), grandparents, brothers, and sisters. One participant is a *ward-of-the-court* system and has never met his biological parents. His level of 'family

support' came from foster parents, community churches, and state and local Illinois funding. The participants felt that if they did not know someone such as a mentor or educator who held high-expectations of them, they would not be so adamant to remain in college and graduate. Support plays a recognizable role in this focus group's persistence to complete graduation requirements. This is a really important point and it raises the question of how to instill this component for success in other African-American male college students.

Faculty-student relationships are key factors to a higher retention rate among African-American males (Richardson & Bender, 1987). Three of the six participants spoke highly of a particular faculty member who taught them, who had an effective teaching style, and who they identified as being a role model. African-American male students look for role models they can admire and look to for guidance. In particular, instructors serving as a mentor or even the notion of the instructor needing to be African-American for the student to connect in a more effective way to the instructor did not seem to be a major concern for the participants of this focus group. However, two of the six participants felt this Art-Based College should seek to hire more African-American instructors. Richardson and Bender (1987) discussed the importance of having African-American faculty on staff at college campuses. All six participants also discussed how certain instructors treated them with respect, seemed interested in their academic performance, and encouraged them to remain focused in order to succeed-against-the-odds. Also, several participants said some instructors seemed more

difficult to relate to than others because of cultural differences, which highlights a topic referred to as 'cultural competence' in the classroom.

The literature discussed how use of institutional factors or college-wide support systems such as counseling services, new student orientations, retention programs, and learning centers lead to high retention rates and the persistence to graduate among African American students (*'Racial-Gap,'* 2004). All six participants feel their Academic Advisor plays an important role in their persistence to graduate. The participants said meeting regularly to discuss academics, track their progress, and plan their class schedules is very instrumental for their persistence to graduation. One participant utilizes mentor-assistance from this Art-Based College's Conaway Achievement Project (CAP) and finds this relationship to be most rewarding, especially for developing better time-management skills. The participants said meeting with their Academic Advisor regularly to track their progress and help plan their class schedules is instrumental for their persistence to stay enrolled and graduate.

Four of the six students agreed that effective communication and follow-up with the Student Financial Services department in a timely manner has been of utmost importance for helping both their parents and them secure and manage the finances needed for paying their college tuition. The literature confirmed that the ability to afford college becomes an issue for many African-American students and can prevent them from persisting to graduation (Tinto, 1987). Three of the participants mentioned their concern about the state of today's economy and how often their parents or guardian have encouraged them to

budget their monies wisely. Five of the six participants work part-time jobs (federal work-study and work-aid included in this calculation), and the remaining one participant works an off-campus full time job while in college.

The participant's expectations of this Art-Based College's support system centered on the support they received about academics and financial aid. The participants also feel they need 'guidance' and not to be 'hand-held' throughout the processes because they want to avoid any situations where their overall grade point average drops below a 3.0 or they do not have adequate aid to pay their tuition cost. Four of the six participants expressed appreciation for having use of the Art-Based College's Writing Center, Math Lab, and Computer Café (computer labs) whenever needed. The Art-Based College's *Office for Multicultural Affairs* and staff were mentioned rather frequently as being a central point for cultural diversity and a way to remain connected both academically and socially through participation in campus-wide events with other students, faculty, and administrators. Several participants spoke about how they have been successful with securing scholarships by using links on the Multicultural Affairs website.

Freshman year at most colleges and universities is hard. For some students, in particular African-Americans, it can be a make or break year. Based on feedback from our conversation during the interview, over half of the participants said they knew they would persist toward graduation from the very beginning of their freshman year. Because they needed a little more time to make the transition from high school to college, the remaining participants felt

they would persist to graduate after their sophomore year. At this point of their college journey, they believe nothing can discourage them from reaching their goals because quitting in midstream is not an option.

During the focus group interviews, Kerry recited a quote from a speech by political activist Jesse Jackson, Sr. He said the quote made a positive impact on him and has boosted his overall confidence to succeed in college. For Kerry, the defining part of the quote is "*Keep hope alive.*" In addition to educational, political, and social contributions made to society by Jesse Jackson, Sr., the participants also felt 2008 was a year when the education and determination of one African-American male took him to the highest office which is President of the United States of America. The participants felt President Obama gave life to the Jesse Jackson, Sr. slogan about 'hope' and indeed made it the substance of his own Presidential campaign.

It was amazing for me to hear the participants discuss their strong determination and overall motivation to complete their degree requirements when in the year 2010 there are so many other African-American males in the U.S. whose educational future is bleak. The literature reported on the statistics of those African-American males who dropped out of college, but not much about their confidence level or that the majority of them would be successful in their persistence to graduate from college.

In conclusion, I find that a students' zest for high-achievement incorporates an array of necessary areas for success. These areas consist of

prior academic preparation, family support, and campus-wide support. Campus-wide support includes academic advising, financial-aid counseling, faculty and administrative support, mentorship, and multicultural affairs. These areas are in concurrence with what the literature presented. Tinto (1987) and Pascarella (1980) discussed the importance of support, whether it be from family, peers, or as a means of social integration. Positive influence from instructors, financial support, and academic advising also aligns with academic integration factors identified in the literature. In the next section, I will discuss what I feel are the limitations of the study.

Limitations of the Study

Some researchers and college educators may feel that randomly choosing six participants who have junior and senior status from a much larger pool of upper-class African-American male students who attend an Art-Based College is too small of a sampling to determine whether the focus group participants' perceptions are valid compared to a wider scope of numbers. In addition, I may have been able to collect different data from the study if I had interviewed participants who are older and attend a college that offer traditional majors different from those offered at this Art-Based College. Also, had I included African-American female students in the focus group, the data might have been significantly different. Had I included students who are in the middle of the college degree completion process, but are struggling to succeed could possibly provide data different from what this study provided. A study that involved 'online

students' from a distant-learning environment may have provided different data, as well. The next section will discuss implications for future research.

Implications for Future Research

This study found four major themes that contribute to the persistence of the six participants to graduate. The study also revealed that a high level of *self-determination and confidence to succeed* exists between all six participants. Before and even more so since conducting this study, I support further research about the topic. To best of my knowledge, no empirical study similar to this one has been published on factors contributing to successful retention and persistence to graduation of high achieving African-American males at this Art-Based College.

As a method for future research, I would consider a similar topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. However, I would broaden my scope to include participants and focus group interviews from institutions of higher learning across geographic locations such as New England, Mid-Atlantic, Pacific Northwest, Midwest, or Southern regions of the United States.

As stated earlier, all six focus group participants expressed an interest in arranging a group meeting with me to follow-up about the results of this study. I am very impressed with their concern about the subject matter and for their interest in supporting any additional research that will provide positive support for retention of African-American males at this Art-Based College or any other college/university in the United States faced with the same challenge. For this

reason, I would consider contacting them in the future after they graduate for assistance with future research.

I will now present and discuss recommendations that may enhance retention and persistence to graduation for high-achieving African-American males at an Art-Based College.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: *Conduct Deeper Psychological Research of Black Males.*

I strongly feel deeper qualitative research should be conducted regarding the psychological profile of African-American male students from around the United States who have successfully completed both undergraduate and graduate school degrees to include those who have successfully completed their Ph.D and Ed.D, as well. Future research should include how African-American

males succeed in high school since this is a gateway for a student coming to college with the skills they need to be successful. My research points out that this is not the case with many who fail to succeed. It might also be beneficial to explore aspects of human development and the psyche of successful African-American males.

Recommendation #2: *Organize Additional Task-Force at this Art-Based College.*

A second recommendation would be for this Art-Based College to organize another Task-Force to specifically explore the human development aspects that influence students to acquire such high levels of determination and confidence like that portrayed by the African-American males in this particular focus group study. This study revealed that because the participants have a high level of self-determination and are goal-oriented, they knew they would persist to graduation by either their first or second year in college. Presently, this Art-Based College conducts a variety of institutional research surveys to gather feedback from students about their college experience when they first arrive, while they are enrolled, and even after they graduate. This particular feedback is important for further research about minority retention and graduation rates at this Art-Based College.

Recommendation #3: *The leadership and administration at this Art-Based College should provide a more current report to the college-wide community with information regarding the institutions efforts to increase retention and graduation rates for minority students. The first report is titled **2006 -Toward a Conscious College-Wide Effort to Better Recruit & Retain Minority Students.***

A third recommendation is to have this Art-Based College's *Office of Student Affairs* in consultation with the *Enrollment Committee*, the *Student Affairs Committee of the College Council*, and the *Office of Multicultural Affairs* with the support of the *Office of Research, Evaluation & Planning* provide an updated 2010 comprehensive report of it's efforts to better recruit and retain minority students. The 2006 study addressed minority faculty and staff hiring trends, minority student satisfaction, minority student academic preparation and performance, minority student retention, and minority student profiles. An update would identify any changes (if any at all) that have occurred since the 2006 report was published. I suggest a push for benchmarks on making progress toward these goals that are departmental specific.

Recommendation #4: *This Art-Based College should aggressively continue its efforts to involve the college-wide community in open-forum-discussions about ways to improve minority retention and graduation rates.*

The fourth recommendation acknowledges that this Art-Based College's leadership and administration appreciates feedback from its college-wide community and they recognize the need for deeper research addressing the topic

of low retention rates for African-American students, particularly Black males enrolled at the college. This Art-Based College recently announced several initiatives to bolster its success in recruiting and retaining minority students. These initiatives include the addition of over 200 additional low-income scholarships, totaling more than \$1,000,000; the creation of a \$100,000 fund managed by the *Office of Multicultural Affairs*; a significant expansion of resources and staffing within Multicultural Affairs; and the formation of a vibrant *Black Faculty and Staff* organization.

At this Art-Based College, monthly campus meetings have been held to build partnerships and encourage collaboration between leadership, administrators, and students about ways to improve minority retention rates. This effort encourages African-American males to become more visible and vocal on campus; especially since Black males have the lowest retention and graduation rate of all students at this Art-Based College. The focus group participants themselves called this a 'hot topic.' Scholars such as Pascarella (1980), Tinto (1987), Astin (1993), and Kunjufu (1997) agreed that institutional support in the form of academic integration and social integration plays an important role in the retention of minority students.

The *African American Cultural Affairs* department at this Art-Based College could organize a Campus Retreat specifically for Black college males. During the Campus Retreat, the college could use successful students/graduates like the participants in the focus group to encourage and empower others who follow them. The Campus Retreat would provide the students an opportunity to

brainstorm, voice their personal opinions, and offer their own ideas about current issues and challenges facing today's Black college males. I would also encourage some kind of linking of this goal to an outreach or partnering with Chicago elementary/middle/high schools, particularly any organizations with an arts-focus. My research points out that some of the problems and challenges encountered by African-American students start early in their schooling. This alone is an important assessment.

Recommendation #5: *This Art-Based College should continue with its efforts to effectively evaluate, assess, and improve the mission and purpose of campus-wide student support groups. If necessary, additional campus-wide student support groups should be incorporated.*

A fifth and final recommendation speaks to the various campus-wide student support systems. The literature discussed how institutional factors such as whether the provision of retention programs, new student orientations, counseling services, or tutoring and learning centers lead to an increased persistence rate among African-American students ('Racial Gap,' 2004; Tinto, 1987). At this Art-Based College, it is necessary that the *Office of Student Affairs* continue their quest to respond to the individual needs of each student regardless of their cultural diversity; foster and support their intellectual; social and cultural development; and encourage the development of Programs that bond each student to the college community.

Encouraging diversity is vital to the creative learning community and this Art-Based College. Therefore, the college should continue its dedication to cultivating an appealing and multi-cultured student body. The participants felt the *Office of Multicultural Affairs* could be effective in building retention and persistence of African-American males to graduate. The *Office of Multicultural Affairs* is a division of the Student Affairs department and consists of several separate units, each of which supports a specific under-represented population. These populations by department are: African-American Cultural Affairs, Latino Cultural Affairs, International Student Affairs, LGBTQ Culture and Community, and Asian/Asian-American Cultural Affairs. Multicultural Affairs is also home to the Peer Support Network (PSP), which is a mentorship program staffed by student mentors who offer support and encouragement to new students who are faced with transition into college life. In particular, African-American Cultural Affairs provide services and support initiatives that encourage participation in mentorship opportunities, specialized workshops, cultural celebrations, and social activities and organizations that help African-American students maintain a healthy academic, social, and cultural balance.

In addition to Multicultural Affairs, I recommend that *Enrollment Management* continue their outstanding efforts to manage the college's student enrollment. According to Austin (2007), *Enrollment Management* at colleges and universities across the United States provide continuity to the policies and programs that result in student retention. This ensures that the most appropriate mix of students is attracted to this Art-Based College. In addition, Enrollment

Management activities at this Art-Based College involve attracting the right students, providing financial aid, easing the transition to college through orientation programs, using institutional research to gather and analyze data about students, using appropriate interventions for students lacking skills or needing guidance, conducting research to identify the factors associated with student retention, helping with job placement, and enlisting the support of alumni.

The *Strategic Planning Committee* at this Art-Based College recently reported that the college is effectively addressing some, but not all aspects of the goals for enrollment growth and enrollment management included in the 2010 Strategic Plan (Strategic Planning Committee-Report to the College Council on Growth, 2009). This Art-Based College sponsors an event called *In-The-Mix*. The event allows parents and students to learn more about financial aid, scholarships, loans, out-of-pocket expenses, and other ways to help finance a college education, assists students with choosing a major, selecting the right classes, graduating on time, and how to get involved on campus. At this Art-Based College, learning doesn't stop at the classroom door.

Use of the *College Advising Center* by African-Americans males at this Art-Based College is essential for their retention and persistence to graduation. It is important that all students, in their first year of study and throughout their college journey, continue meeting with their assigned academic, faculty, and portfolio advisors to ensure a successful transition into the college community and develop a plan towards graduation. When minority students visit the College

Advising Center, they also learn more about their academic curriculum and progress, explore their career goals, and learn how to navigate the campus resources.

The literature confirms that learning about college costs and how the financial aid process works are key elements to making education a reality for the African-American male (Dixon, 1999). Therefore, it is imperative that *Student Financial Services* at this Art-Based College remain responsible for helping all students learn about college costs and how the financial aid process works. Participants of this focus group consider it very important that Student Financial Services provide them with the highest quality of business and finance services. The participants spoke quite a bit about the importance of getting regular feedback regarding their financial aid files in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The *Conaway Achievement Project* (CAP) is a vital component at this Art-Based College. This office supports and helps low-income, first-generation college and special needs students actualize their maximum potential and persist toward graduation. This is a great source for mentorship and academic tutoring relationships between CAP staff members and minority students.

Finally, the *Counseling Services* staff at this Art-Based College provides students with support in the form of individual counseling, group counseling, and psycho-educational workshops. This service can be effective for increasing retention and persistence to graduation of African-American males because

students at this Art-Based College are eligible for 10 counseling sessions per academic year. Students can utilize these sessions in order to address any challenges they experience during the academic year that may hinder their classroom performance.

In conclusion, I sincerely hope the research conducted on *factors that contribute to successful retention of high achieving African-American males at an Art-Based College* will help better prepare and inform current and future students about the importance of being self-determined, success-driven, and having the ability to persevere until graduation. A mission of this Art-Based College is to provide a comprehensive educational opportunity in the arts, communications, and public information within a context of enlightened liberal education; to produce well-educated students who are culturally prepared; students who are successful in their chosen passion and will be equipped to give something of substance back to their community.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

RESEARCHER:

TITLE: Factors Contributing to Successful Retention of African-American Males at Art-Based College

STUDY SPONSOR: DePaul University, School for New Learning, MAEA (Master of Arts in Educating Adults),

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before agreeing to participate in this study, it is important that you read and understand the following

sections explaining the proposed study procedures. The following information describes the purpose, procedures, and benefits associated with this study. It also describes your right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. In order to decide whether or not you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its benefits and purpose to be able to make an informed decision. This is known as the *Participant Informed Consent Process* questions. Please ask the Research Coordinator to explain any words you do not understand before signing this consent form. Make sure all of your questions have been answered by the researcher to your satisfaction before signing this document.

Purpose

You have been asked to participate in this focus group interview located at an Art Based College on the topic of 'factors contributing to successful retention of African-American males who attend this Art-Based College.' This focus group is designed to provide a better understanding of what factors have contributed to your overall success as a college student. Data collected will be used in developing recommendations for retaining and graduating more successful African-American male college graduates at this Art-Based College.

Procedures

You are asked to participate in a two hour focus group session. During this session, you will be asked ten open-ended questions involving your experiences

as a college student. These questions are designed to be engaging and collaborative among you guys as a group. I am interested in what you think and how you feel about your success and accomplishments, as well as your challenges (if any).

Risks

There are no risks associated with participation in this focus group session.

Benefits

Information gathered from this focus group interview will hopefully provide a better understanding of knowledge and attitudes towards incentives and barriers for successful retention and graduation rates of other African-American males at this Art-Based College.

APPENDIX B: Participant Informed Consent Process: Questions

- I have read the information describing the study.
- I have received sufficient information about the study for me to decide whether or not to take part.
- I understand that I am free to refuse to take part if I wish.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason.

- I know that I can ask for further information about the study from the Research Coordinator.
- I understand that all information arising from the study will be treated as confidential.
- I know that it will not be possible to identify any individual respondent in the study report, including myself.
- I agree to take part in the study.

Declaration

I declare that I have read and understand the purpose and process for this research. I consent to participating in the focus group interview and I understand that my name and responses **will not** be personally identified in the final summary report that will be submitted to the Research Coordinator's graduate school instructor at DePaul University.

Signature (written): _____

Signature (block-letter-form): _____

Date: _____

Comments (if any):

APPENDIX C: Participant Open-Ended Interview Questions

The following open-ended interview questions guided this research study:

- What are the motivations and characteristics you possess that have contributed to your persistence to graduate from college...in essence, what factors have contributed to your overall success in college?
- What barriers to academic success did you have to overcome and how did you do that?

- Tell me about a specific time during your college coursework that stands out in your mind? Who was there? What was happening? How did you feel?
- Tell me about a specific time when things were not going well for you in your Program (your major in college). What happened? Who was involved?
- Tell me about a specific time when things were going well for you during your Program (your major in college). What happened? Who was involved?
- How, if at all, has this Art-Based College academic advising, student financial services, multicultural affairs, and other campus-wide support contributed to your persistence to graduate from college?
- If applicable, how has your participation in this Art-Based College's peer support-mentorship benefited you as a student?
- In your opinion, how can this Art-Based College do a better job in producing more successful African-American male college graduates?
- In what ways, if at all, has this Art-Based College reached out to your parent(s) or guardian(s), particularly male figures, to take part in your success before and since you entered college?
- What are the external factors (outside of this Art-Based College) that you feel have contributed to your persistence to graduate from college?

