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## **Cutting the Deficit: An Examination of Factors Contributing to the Success of Black Males Seeking Doctoral Degrees at a Predominantly White Institution**

Larry Paul Manthei, Jr.

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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CUTTING THE DEFICIT: AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE  
SUCCESS OF BLACK MALES SEEKING DOCTORAL DEGREES  
AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Education Leadership, Research, & Counseling

by

Larry Paul Manthei, Jr.

B.A., University of Louisiana at Monroe, 1991

J.D., Southern University Law Center, 1994

M.Ed., Louisiana State University, 2000

August 2016

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

*To Laura, my beautiful and wonderful wife, whom I love more than any words could ever express. I literally could not have done this without your support. I could ask for no better partner or friend in life, and I truly appreciate your understanding as I embarked on and completed this incredible journey. My accomplishments are your accomplishments.*

*To my three sons – Shane, Brian, and Evan – you make me proud every day. I hope this makes you proud of me. I love you.*

*To my parents, my love of learning began with growing up in your home. You taught me one of life's greatest lessons – that with enough hard work and determination, anything is possible.*

*The best part about being done is knowing that I can now call you without you asking me, “Have you finished that dissertation yet?” I love you. Thank you for being great parents.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examined the experiences of eight Black male higher education doctoral students attending a predominantly White institution in the South. Interviews were conducted asking the participants to reflect upon their educational experiences. The primary overarching research question guiding this study was:

What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominately White institution?

Sub-questions assisting in this research were:

- A) What experiences, educational and otherwise, promote academic success?
- B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking doctoral degrees at a predominately White institution?

Analysis of the findings revealed factors that contributed to the academic success of Black males seeking a doctoral degree in Higher Education at a predominantly White institution. They were grouped into three main categories: 1) the Impact of Early Experiences Related to Education; 2) the Impact of Experiences During Graduate School; and 3) the Final Perceptions of Participants. Findings regarding the impact of early experiences related to education were comprised of two primary components: 1) Support from Family and Teachers; and 2) a Focus on the Value of Attaining a College Degree. Key themes that emerged from the findings related to the participants' experiences during graduate school could be further categorized into four areas: 1) Program Characteristics, which included Black faculty, a social justice aspect, mentor relationships, financial aid, and feeling valued; 2) Racial Identity; 3) Race Talk; and 4) Support from Others. Finally, the last main category was related to the final perceptions of participants

and included summaries of participants' responses labeled as: a) the most significant hurdle to overcome, and b) the most important factor in academic success.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The overriding narrative thread that runs through a great deal of past research done on Black males in higher education has consistently focused on the problems that plague Black males academically. Constant negative portrayals have helped to create a stereotype of Black males that suggests they cannot, or will not, achieve academic success. What precipitates the barrage of overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Black males throughout society and in education? Is it true that only 47% of Black males graduate from high school in four years? Yes, it's true (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). Is it true that Black male students are consistently underprepared for the realities of college level coursework? Yes, it is (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2009; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Is it true the percentage of Black male undergraduates enrolled in degree-granting institutions has only risen by barely 1% in almost forty years, from 4.6% in 1976 to 5.5% in 2013? Yes, it's true (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Is it true that while Black males comprise only 3 to 4% of undergraduate students at public NCAA Division I institutions, they fill over 55% of the rosters of football and basketball teams? Yes, it's true (Harper, 2012). Is it true that "two-thirds of Black male students who began baccalaureate degree programs did not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial groups in higher education" (Harper, 2012, p. 19)? Yes, unfortunately, all these things are true. That's what statistics and a large amount of scholarship has expounded upon. The question I have is whether these truths are all we should be writing about?

Fries-Britt (1997) laments that "in education, we have contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amount of research that emphasizes remediation and disadvantage" (p. 65). Discourses of deficiency characterize the education of Black males as a

problem that must be solved in order for them to achieve academic excellence (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014). Research is needed, Harper (2012) tells us, that will help dispel “longstanding caricatures of Black men as lazy, unmotivated, underprepared for college, intellectually incompetent, and disengaged” (p. 25). Fifteen years ago, Taylor (1999; as cited in Howard, 2013) said it quite eloquently:

The reality that is frequently absent from the discourse on Black males is that not all of them are suffering and dropping out of schools, most of them are not imprisoned, many of them do experience varying degrees of academic success and social adjustment in schools, many are hard-working and disciplined, and yet their accounts are frequently absent from the narrative on Black males’ educational experiences and realities. In many ways, the normalized depiction of Black males as academic failures has become so enmeshed in the educational fabric of many schools and districts that it almost becomes alarming and inexplicable when Black male success outside the athletic domain occurs (p. 63).

The pervasive nature of these deficit-oriented narratives has proved to be quite resilient in media, education, and society in general. Valencia (1997) explains, “Of the several theories that have been advanced to explicate school failure among economically disadvantaged minority students, the deficit model has held the longest currency — spanning well over a century, with roots going back even further as evidenced by the early racist discourses from the early 1600s to the late 1800s” (p. 19). Deficit thinking, he writes, advances the idea that the student who fails in school fails because they possess internal deficits or deficiencies. These deficits are evidenced, supposedly, by “a lack of intellectual ability, dialectal shortcomings, immoral behavior, and a failure to demonstrate the drive to learn” (p. 20).

Deficit thinking is not the only flaw plaguing a majority of the research done regarding Black male academic success. Frequently, theoretical frameworks or modes of analysis used by researchers simply do not fit the situation. Past research, in its efforts to “fix” the Black male problem in education has applied models and theories that simply do not truly fit the situational

context of the Black male in the American education system. Traditional theories and models were developed and applied primarily in four-year predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as the site of research. It is only relatively recent that theories specifically for studying Black males have been developed for use at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and community colleges (Wood & Palmer, 2015). According to Wood and Palmer (2015), “given the exponential increase of research on Black men in education, this population has been strikingly both under-theorized and inadequately theorized in prior scholarship” (p. 34). One example of a deficit based approach is Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) oppositional culture theory which posits that minority students resist and devalue education to avoid being perceived as “acting white” by their peers. In an article published in 2012, Harper and Quaye use evidence from a study of applicants’ responses to a graduate program application process to refute the validity of Fordham and Ogbu’s theory. In presenting a review of essays written by potential graduate students that revealed evidence to the contrary, Harper and Quaye want society to know:

Black men do care about education. Despite their recognition of how schools, postsecondary institutions, and policies unfairly disadvantage them and others in their families and communities, [...] Men in this study knew that schools persistently remanufactured inequity, but yet felt empowered to commit their careers to addressing such problems on behalf of other Black persons. (p. 116)

To combat deficit thinking, a decidedly anti-deficit approach is needed. That’s the approach developed and employed by Shaun Harper in utilizing an anti-deficit theoretical framework in conducting the National Black Male College Achievement Study (see Harper, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Harper and Quaye, 2007). Drawing from over thirty years of research in sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education, Harper (2012) sought to “develop a framework that researchers, educators, and administrators can use to better

understand Black male student success in college” (p. 5). It is a framework that inverts questions asked about factors related to Black male academic performance. Rather than ask why a student has failed, an anti-deficit approach asks how a student has succeeded.

According to the latest statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015), Black males make up 3.8% of post-baccalaureate enrollment numbers. There is tremendous benefit in promoting the increase of Black males in professional and academic ranks. Black students perceive Black faculty to be more understanding, supportive, and more student-centered than White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005). Nettles (1990) tells us that studies related to educational attainment, especially at the doctoral level show disparities between minority students and their majority peers. “All prescriptions for increasing minority success in higher education and creating better race relations on campus include increasing minority faculty, a solution that depends on increasing Ph.D. attainment” (p. 494). If we want that number to increase, then research has to tell the stories of those who have been successful, those who have proven that it can be done. According to Harper (2012), “No one is a better source of instructive insights on what it takes for Black men to succeed in college than Black men who have actually succeeded in college” (p. 25).

This study was situated at a large predominantly White public research university in the South United States. For the purposes of the study, I’ll call it “South State University.” All the facts mentioned before are certainly true at South State University. Yet, South State University’s School of Education still manages to graduate Black males with Doctoral degrees at five times the national average. Bonner and Bailey (2006), as does Harper (2012), points out that a great majority of the burden should be placed on the institution to develop environmental conditions and support structures that promote and engender Black male student success. Likewise, Wolf-

Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) call for research related to student success that will “expand beyond a focus on attributing success to individual effort” (p. 422). This study expands that focus by using an anti-deficit approach to investigate and examine factors that contribute to the success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominantly White institute.

### **Statement of the Problem**

If pressed to identify the most significant issue facing American education at local and/or national levels, there is no doubt many would single out the low academic performance of Black males. President Obama recently launched the “My Brother’s Keeper” Initiative in an effort to help young men of color reach their full potential. While this effort to recognize and combat disproportionate difficulties faced by young men of color is commendable, the obstacles to success in education faced by Black males are not relegated only to the young. As Bonner and Bailey (2006) assert, “Like its K-12 educational predecessor, higher education too has presented a major stumbling block for many African American males” (p. 25). Unfortunately, the overriding narrative of Black male students is that they are one of the most disengaged, if not the most disengaged, groups attending colleges and universities (Harper, 2009).

Despite researchers’ efforts to call attention to the troubled status of Black male students in education, few recommendations have produced significant results, and educational outcomes remain troubling. Many researchers believe this is at least partially, if not greatly, due to the deficit orientation of academic research, educational practice, and portrayals of Black males in media and society (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Leonardo & Grubb, 2007; Majors & Billson, 1992; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; Solórzano

& Yosso, 2002; Steele, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015). While the bulk of studies conducted in higher education settings have focused on Black male undergraduate and community college students, research related to the academic success of Black male graduate students, especially those enrolled in doctoral programs at public predominantly White institutions, is almost nonexistent. This qualitative study uses an anti-deficit approach to explore and examine the factors contributing to the success of Black male students seeking doctoral degrees from a public predominantly White institution.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to add to existing research and literature on Black male student success, specifically as it relates to those seeking doctoral degrees from a predominantly White four-year public research university. Though research regarding Black male student's collegiate experiences (Allen, 1986; Cuyjet, 1994, 2006; Harper, Carini, Bridges & Hayek, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Perrakis, 2008; Wood, 2010; Harper, 2010, 2012) has grown a great deal in recent years, that research has focused primarily on Black male undergraduate students attending a variety of institutions. Very little research has been conducted to uncover factors contributing to the success of Black males engaged in achieving doctoral degrees, especially at predominantly White institutions. Using an anti-deficit approach, this study examines the experiences of Black male graduate students who have achieved academic success at a predominantly White institution.

This qualitative study uses Harper's (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement theoretical framework to gain an understanding of ways that experiences contributed to Black male student success. Understanding the experiences of these students has the potential to assist policy and decision makers in higher education in the formulation of programs and support systems that will



promote persistence and completion goals, thereby engendering future Black male post-secondary student success. Harper (2009) has suggested, “Scholars who undertake future research projects concerning Black men must deliberately counterbalance popular negative dispositions with achievement-oriented pursuits” (p. 709). His guiding statement informs my purpose in the pursuit and exploration of knowledge that may be gained by listening to the experiences of academically successful Black male doctoral students.

### **Research Questions**

The primary overarching research question guiding this study was:

What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominately White institution?

Sub-questions assisting in this research were:

- A) What experiences, educational and otherwise, promote academic success?
- B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking post-baccalaureate degrees at a predominately White institution?

### **Study Design and Theoretical Perspective**

This research utilizes a phenomenological qualitative study to fully explore the lived experiences of participants through the lens of an anti-deficit achievement theoretical framework. Personal open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted to address the overarching research question examining the factors that contributed to the academic success of Black male students seeking doctoral degrees at a predominantly White institution.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is its contribution to the existing body of research on Black male student success at predominantly White institutions by providing the opportunity to gain

additional knowledge directly from the source. Examining the educational experiences of Black males provides insight into the factors that contributed to their ability to persist and succeed academically in spite of all the obstacles named by deficit oriented scholarship. While greater emphasis has been placed on the “Black male problem” through research and resource allocation among governments, policymakers, philanthropists, stakeholders, and institutions of higher education over the past several years, it seems that little has changed. Harper (2014) blames a great deal of that on deficit oriented narratives and discourses of deficiency that continue to plague Black male academic achievement, contending that efforts over the past fifteen years have “tended to focus more on fixing the Black male student than on addressing structural and institutional forces that undermined his academic achievement, sense of belonging, and psychosocial development” (p. 127).

One of the goals of anti-deficit oriented research is that it will prompt institutional responses to inhibitors of Black male access, achievement, and attainment. Many researchers agree that a much greater focus is needed on institutional responsibility and the creation of environments, strategies, and support structures that will engender Black male student success (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014; Harper & Davis, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2014). An anti-deficit perspective that explores how students succeed, rather than how they fail, will provide information to administrators, educators, policy and decision makers, and institutions of higher education so they can formulate curriculum, interventions, programs, and other support systems to improve Black male student success.

As stated previously, two-thirds of Black male undergraduate students will fail to graduate in six years (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper 2012). Museus and Quaye (2009) tell us that high

rates of postsecondary failure for Black males are accompanied by a broad array of negative consequences, not just for the individual students, but also for society. Citing the research of fellow scholars, they explain that students who only graduate high school earn significantly less than those who attain college degrees, they incur negative financial consequences, and can only pay half the taxes contributed by college degree recipients (Baum & Payea, 2005; Choy & Li, 2005; Swail, 2004). Additionally, lack of degree attainment results in higher incarceration rates, lowers academic levels of future generation, and decreases civic participation (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004). Consequently, if these disparities continue, there will not be a large enough pool of college-educated labor in the United States to sustain economic and social growth (Kelly, 2005). Museus and Quaye (2009) assert, “For higher education policymakers and practitioners to effectively serve increasingly diverse student populations with limited resources, they must better understand how to foster success among students of color” (p. 68). Nettles (1990) describes the importance and impact for holders of doctoral degrees, explaining that they are in “a position to expand the boundaries of knowledge, motivate, and teach generations of students, and exercise leadership in the professions, business, government, and society” (p. 495). Hopefully, information found in this study will empower Black males with doctoral aspirations by acknowledging the difficulties that exist and providing them with strategies, solutions, and suggestions to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

### **Definitions**

The following definitions are provided for the sake of uniformity and to ensure understanding of the use of these terms throughout the study. Definitions not accompanied by a citation have been developed by the researcher.

*Academic success/Student Success* – academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies,

persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance. (Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J.A., Bridges, B.K., Hayek, J.C., 2006, p. 5)

*Black* – used to describe a person who is of African descent; or who self-identifies as Black

*Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)* – any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015).

*Predominantly White Institution (PWI)* – institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Brown & Dancy, 2010)

### **Assumptions**

1. It is assumed that the participants responded openly, honestly, and to the best of their abilities in answering interview questions.
2. It is assumed that the sample of participants chosen for the study was adequate in size for findings to have value.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Research involved a very select group of Black male students, or alums, in a Higher Education doctoral program at a predominantly White four-year public research university. Results of this study may not be generally applicable to Black male students attending other types of institutions or pursuing doctorates in other fields of study.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The participants in the study were chosen from a singular site for several reasons: to keep the data collected by the research manageable; due to time constraints and the financial costs of travel; the research site contained a large pool of potential participants that met the criteria necessary to make the findings of the study meaningful.

## **Organization of Study**

Chapter 1 presents an introduction, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, the significance of the study, a brief explanation of the study design and theoretical perspective, definitions of terms, assumptions, and limitations/delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides the review of relevant literature and research regarding the academic achievement of Black males seeking doctoral degrees at a predominantly White institution. A more robust explanation of the methodology and procedures that were used to gather data for the study are presented in Chapter 3. Results of data analysis and findings to emerge are contained in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of conclusions drawn from the findings, and the researcher's recommendations regarding the education of Black males in K-12 and post-secondary settings.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The goal of this research was to collect data, analyze, and report on findings related to the Black male doctoral students' experiences in education for the purpose of identifying characteristics or factors that have contributed to their academic success. While some research, with a great deal more in recent years, on the Black male's collegiate experience has been collected (Allen, 1986; Cuyjet, 1994,2006; Harper, Carini, Bridges & Hayek, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Perrakis, 2008; Wood, 2010; Harper, 2012), the line of investigation has focused mainly on Black male undergraduate students, or on Black male students attending community colleges. There has been very little research done examining the characteristics or factors attributed towards the success of Black males engaged in achieving doctoral degrees, especially at PWIs. Twenty years ago, Hood and Freeman (1995) contended that research related to the experiences of Black males in graduate postsecondary education had not kept pace with research conducted on Black males in K-12 settings, or with research conducted on Black male undergraduates in HBCUs or PWIs. Hilton (2013) maintains that little has changed, stating that "it is equally important to provide context about the experiences and, more importantly, success factors for African American males in doctoral programs" (p. 1).

In the review of literature, the link to previous research will be established, along with a brief examination of enrollment statistics indicating the need for this line of inquiry. Next, the review will explore characteristics found to influence academic success regarding Black male postsecondary students. Finally, an examination of Harper's (2010, 2012) anti-deficit achievement framework will address why it is the appropriate theoretical framework to apply in examining the experiences of Black male doctoral students in the field of higher education.

## **The Recent Expansion of Research on Black Male Postsecondary Students**

Over the last twenty years, the examination of educational issues related to the Black male has expanded considerably (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). In their examination of literature related to the educational experiences of Black males, they referred to the beginning of no less than five new journals related to this topic. As examples, they listed the *Journal of African American Men* (later renamed the *Journal of African American Studies*) started in 1995; *Challenge Journal: A Journal of Research on African American Men* in 2007; *Journal of African American Males in Education* (JAAME) in 2010; *Journal of Black Masculinity* in 2010; and *Spectrum: A Journal of Black Men* in 2012. Suffice it to say that research on the academic experiences of Black males is a line of inquiry that is in the midst of rapid development, historically speaking, and is particularly salient and rich for educational research.

In their examination of the titles of presentations given from 2003 to 2013 at the annual research conference sponsored by the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Palmer and his associates (2014) found that the number of presentations related to the Black male collegiate experience has increased dramatically. With only one presentation given in 2003, the number of presentations averaged from four to five every year until 2010, after which it more than doubled and averaged 11 presentations per year through 2013 (p. 3). Keep in mind that this was only a review of the presentations accepted and given at the annual ASHE conference and does not include the number submitted. Nor does it include any of the research accepted for presentations at other major conferences such as the ones sponsored by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), NASPA, the University Council for

Educational Administrators (UCEA), or any of the various local and regional conferences that take place throughout the United States.

Not only has the number of peer-reviewed works increased dramatically over the last 10 to 15 years, but there has been a large increase in the number of books published on Black males in postsecondary education. A simple search on Amazon.com using the terms “Black male higher education” revealed 88 results, with titles like *Black Male Collegians: Increasing Access, Retention, and Persistence in Higher Education* (Palmer and Wood, 2014), *Black American Males in Higher Education: Research, Programs and Academe* (Frierson and Wyche, 2009), *Educating African American Males: Voices From the Field* (Fashola, 2005), *The Brother Code: Manhood and Masculinity among African American Men in College* (Dancy, 2012), and *African American Men in College* (Cuyjet, 2006). After examining the publication dates for the results from this quick rudimentary search, one title was from 1980s, and six titles were from the 1990s. The rest of the books were from the 2000s, with the vast majority of the titles published within the last five years, plus a few more still in press.

Harper (2014) tells us that more has been written about Black male students in college in the last fifteen years than any other specific racialized or gendered group in higher education. The recent deluge of research on Black males in postsecondary education is a clear indication that the gaze of a collective establishment of educational researchers, stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers in this area has begun to shift from the P – 12 arena to examining and attempting to understand the postsecondary educational experiences of the Black male in our society. According to Palmer et al. (2014), the rationale for investigating Black male postsecondary experience is primarily based on three main ideas:

- (a) Black men occupy a sociopolitical–historical space in American history that is unique and that manifests acute challenges to success; (b) Black men are both racial and



gendered beings that have distinct socialization experiences that influence how they navigate, interpret, are perceived, and received by educational institutions; and (c) Black men often exist on the margins of postsecondary life yet have stories of resistance, triumph, and resiliency that can inform educational programming, policies, and practices for *all* students. (p. 4-5)

Given the context of the position occupied by the Black male and how they typically encounter racism in education, there is distinct value in understanding how they navigate the tumultuous halls of educational settings and succeed where they may be marginalized or limited by existing attitudes and beliefs about the potential for their academic success.

### **Black Male Postsecondary Enrollment**

Enrollment of Black males at four-year colleges or universities located in the United States is a dismal 4.3% of total student population (Harper, 2006, 2012; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010), and only 5.18% of total enrollment for all postsecondary institutions (Digest of Education Statistics, 2011). Considering that that Black males make up 9.4% of the American population between the ages 15 to 54 (U.S. Census, 2010), such a low representation of the Black male population seems inexplicable. Even more distressing is that the percentage of Black males enrolled in college has remained relatively unchanged since 1976 (Harper, 2006, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2014; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015). As illustrated in Table 1 below and reported in the Digest of Education Statistics (2011), Black males accounted for 4.57% of undergraduate population in 1976. Almost forty years later, their enrollment has risen by less than one point to 5.43%. Conversely, the enrollment of Black females has eclipsed the enrollment of Black males in higher education, almost doubling in number. In a study of the student population of public flagship universities for each state, Harper (2006) found that the gap between Black male and Black female enrollment was larger than the gender difference for any other racial grouping.

Cuyjet (2006) tells us that national data reveals that two-thirds of Black men who start college will never finish. It is clear upon examination that “Black males have long been underrepresented at the collegiate level” (Luke & Palmer, 2014, p. 2).

Table 1. Percentage of Black Males and Females Enrolled in Degree-Granting Institutions

	1976	1980	1990	2000	2010
Black male undergraduates (%)	4.57	4.09	3.74	4.38	5.43
Black female undergraduates (%)	5.44	5.64	5.84	7.38	9.36
% Difference	– 0.87	– 1.55	– 2.10	– 3.00	– 3.93
Black male post-baccalaureate	2.50	2.19	1.97	2.70	3.61
Black female post-baccalaureate	3.22	3.23	3.39	5.70	8.71
% Difference	– 0.72	– 1.04	– 1.42	– 3.00	– 5.10
Black male total (%)	4.27	3.83	3.50	4.14	5.18
Black female total (%)	5.12	5.31	5.51	7.15	9.27
% Difference	– 0.85	– 1.48	– 2.01	– 3.01	– 4.09

Sources: Digest of Education Statistics (2011); Palmer et al. (2014)

Due to the focus of this research study, of particular interest is the enrollment of Black students at the post-baccalaureate level. In 1976, the enrollment of Black male graduate students was 2.5%. That number has remained relatively the same for twenty years, only increasing by 1.1% in the last ten years or so, while Black female graduate students have seen an increase of 5.5%. The latest figures reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show little change since 2010. Releasing data collected from fall enrollment of 2013, the NCES (2015) reports that Black male undergraduates comprise 5.5% of the student population at degree-granting postsecondary institutions, while Black females make up 8.9%. In regards to post-baccalaureate enrollment, Black males total 3.8% and Black females total 8.9%. These numbers indicate that enrollment trends are holding relatively steady, with only a 0.2% increase

since 2010 and a constant % differential of 5.1% between Black males and Black females enrolled in post-baccalaureate programs. Harper and Davis (2012) inform us that Black male enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs also trails behind that of Latino and Asian-American males. “For instance, during a 30-year period (1977-2007), Black men experienced a 109% increase in post-baccalaureate degree attainment, compared to 242% for Latino men and 425% for their Asian-American male counterparts” (p. 104-105). It becomes even more vital, then, to investigate and address the doctoral experiences of Black male students who have achieved academic success.

### **Black Males Enrolled in Predominately White Institutions**

Given that this research study is situated in a PWI, one must look carefully at the situational context of Black males attending PWIs. Relying on previous research (Allen, 1992; Cuyjet 1997, 2006; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper et al., 2011), Palmer et al. (2014) explain that many Black males are immediately faced with being the “Other” when they set foot on the campus of a PWI. Bonner and Bailey (2006) advance the notion that Black male students’ “experiences in K-12 and higher education contexts have been at best chilly and at worst hostile” (p. 24). Where Black males at HBCUs report a welcoming or friendly environment, research has revealed that Black males attending PWIs find them to be the opposite (Palmer et al., 2014). Palmer et al. (2014) concludes, “Specifically, Black men at PWIs experience alienation (Allen, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996, Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), have strained and unsupportive relationships with faculty (Guiffreda, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), and are likely to view the curriculum as culturally exclusive” (p. 63).

There is also evidence that faculty at PWIs have “low expectations, biases, and prejudice regarding the intellectual abilities of Black men” (Palmer et al., 2014, p. 63). Bonner and Bailey (2006), in their discussion of factors important to Black male academic success in the higher education environment, tell us that Black males must overcome faculty’s perception that they have poor academic socialization and low expectations for their own educational success (p. 31). Moore, Madison-Colmore, and Smith (2003), through their study of Black males majoring in engineering, found that some Black men cultivate a desire to “show their doubters” by fully committing themselves to their academic pursuits and develop a “prove them wrong mentality” towards their educational pursuits. Revelations about faculty perceptions of Black male students highlight the need for PWIs to develop diverse faculties. Guiffrida’s (2005) work focuses on the perceptions black students attending PWIs have regarding their relationships with faculty, and explain that Black students perceive Black faculty to be more understanding, supportive, and more student-centered than White faculty.

Bonner and Bailey (2006) speak to the nature of the academic environment at PWIs, noting that as Black males become socially integrated into the campus environment of PWIs, they often find themselves embroiled in the competitive environment characteristic of these institutions. Given the competitive nature of many typical graduate programs, this challenge to Black male academic success is particularly relevant. Bonner and Bailey (2006) have posited that most PWIs are comprised of environments that are less likely to produce positive learning outcomes for Black men who demonstrate improved performance and a preference to be in a socially oriented academic atmosphere. Based on the general nature of the environmental contexts attributed to PWIs, it becomes even more pertinent to uncover the commonalities

associated with Black male students who have attained academic success in a graduate program situated in a PWI.

### **Influences Affecting Black Males Pursuing Postsecondary Education**

In their very thorough review of literature related to Black male collegians, Palmer et al. (2014) provides insight into what influences impact Black male academic success. Among these influences are background characteristics such as age, dependency, generational status, and environmental pressures. Examining prior research (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Perrakis, 2008), Palmer et al. (2014) cites that “age has been found to be an important consideration in student success. For instance, for community college men, being younger is a significant positive predictor of persistence” (p. 16). Dependency – or whether or not the student is married, is still dependent on his parents, or has dependents of his own – is also a factor. Independent students must engage in their postsecondary pursuits without the support of others, and in some cases may have the added stress of having to provide support themselves for a spouse and/or children (Palmer et al., 2014). Palmer et al. (2014) also explain the importance of generation status, relying on research by Freeman & Huggans (2009) and stating, “Research has shown that first-generation students are significantly less likely to succeed than those whose parents have earned a college degree” (p. 17).

Even more insight into Black male postsecondary academic success is provided by consideration of environmental pressures that “relate to factors that are outside of college that influence student success in college (Palmer et al., 2014, p. 17). While some of these environmental pressures are related to background characteristics such as marital status, or whether or not a student has children, other environmental factors may relate to whether or not a student is a military veteran or whether the student has financial stability. Veterans may have

trouble integrating into a campus setting or have health issues that affect their educational attainment (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Mason (1998; cited in Palmer et al, 2014) has established that financial barriers are one of the main obstacles to Black male postsecondary academic success. Granted, the issue with Black male doctoral students in this study is likely not one of access or persistence as they have achieved or will soon achieve their doctorates, but these obstacles are still relevant given that Black male graduate students had to find, and must continue to find, ways to deal with many of the challenges presented by these issues. Though they are more likely to be older than the typical Black male undergraduate student, the pressures felt from environmental factors may have presented, for some, even greater obstacles to overcome as they pursued academic success.

In addition to the already named influences, Palmer et al. (2014) have sought to illuminate additional factors they identify as “vital to the success of Black male college students: (a) financial support, (b) spirituality, (c) family support, (d) non-cognitive factors, (e) racial identity, and (f) masculine identity” (p. 76). Bonner and Bailey (2006) have also identified factors they believe critical to Black male academic success. Many of these are related to, or overlap with, the same factors delineated by Palmer et al. (2014), and have been categorized by Bonner and Bailey as: (1) peer group influence; (2) family influence and support; (3) identity development and self-perception; and (4) institutional environment (p. 25). Most recently, Wood and Palmer (2015) group these and other similar factors into two main categories – internal and external. Among internal factors facilitating success for Black males in higher education, Wood and Palmer (2015) list: “(a) student organizations; (b) faculty-student interactions; (c) peer interaction; (d) Black Male Initiatives (BMIs); and (c) mentors” (p. 22). As external factors, they

list: “(a) non-cognitive factors; (b) racial and masculine identity; (c) family support; (d) spirituality; and (e) financial support” (p. 26).

A number of researchers (Allen, 1992; Palmer et al., 2014; Perna, 2006; St. John, 2002; St. John & Starkey, 1995; St. John et al., 1996, 2001; Swail et al., 2003; Titus, 2006; Wood et al., 2011; Wood & Palmer, 2015) have established that the financial status of a student is one of the most important predictors of Black male access and perseverance in postsecondary education, and that it plays a key part in determining where students attend college. Research regarding the employment status of students attending college advances the notion that off-campus jobs have a negative effect on academic success (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998; Wood et al., 2011), while working on campus as a student worker or graduate assistant can have a positive impact (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). These findings indicate the value potential graduate students would place on the awarding of a graduate assistantship, and how it factors into their decision to attend a particular school. Interestingly, the financial concerns of students do not factor into Bonner and Bailey’s (2006) analysis of factors that they believe critical to Black male student success.

Palmer et al. (2014) identify spirituality as another key factor determining Black male student success. They point out Herndon’s (2013) study of 13 Black male students and its finding regarding the importance of spirituality and the ways it strengthened resolve, sense of purpose and the support the participants received from their religious institutions. Likewise, Watson (2006) conducted a study on Black male spirituality at three HBCUs concluding that “the ability to affirm his spirituality is an essential part of the African American man’s identity development” (p. 124). As related to Black male students attending PWIs, a study conducted by Weddle-West, Hagan, and Norwood (2013) found that Black male students at PWIs scored

higher on a spiritual belief variable than Black students, male or female, attending HBCUs.

Weddle-West et al. (2013) concluded that Black males attending PWIs experienced additional stressors that prompted them to use spirituality as a coping mechanism.

The presence of a family support system and what it can contribute to Black male student success should not be underestimated. Palmer et al. (2014) point out that while Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure urges students to distance themselves from family and friends to ease integration into the college environment, other researchers (Guiffrida, 2004; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002) have found that "family plays an important role in students' persistence" (p. 79). Bonner and Bailey (2006) also disagree with Tinto's (1993) advice regarding separation from the family: "Encouragement and support from the family unit, through accolades and admonishment, is translated into student academic commitment and persistence" (p. 29). For them, the family is a "frontline defense unit to assist the student in strategically moving through a postsecondary minefield" (p. 28). Also, while the family is one important support group, a student's peer group provides another support system that may be equal to, or even more important than, the student's family (Bonner & Bailey, 2006).

Various scholars have pointed out the importance and impact of non-cognitive factors when exploring the many issues presented by the study of Black male student success (Cokley, 2003; Moore, 2001; Moore et. al, 2003; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2013; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Wood & Harris, 2013, Wood & Palmer, 2015). According to Gutman and Schoon (2013),

Non-cognitive skills are those attitudes, behaviours, and strategies which facilitate success in school and workplace, such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control. These factors are termed 'non-cognitive' as they are considered to be distinct from the cognitive and academic skills usually measured by tests or teacher assessments (p. 4).



In his research, Moore (2001) cited the importance of such non-cognitive factors as self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, and persistence. Strayhorn (2013) labels these factors collectively as “grit” in his discussion of the part they play in the success of Black male students at PWIs (Palmer et al., 2014, pp. 80-81). From reading Bonner and Bailey (2006), it would seem that many of these non-cognitive characteristics/factors are enmeshed in the concepts they have labeled peer group influence, family influence and support, identity development and self-perception, and institutional environment. In their study comparing White and Black students’ academic success using non-cognitive variables, Tracey and Sedlacek (1987) state that one of the key non-cognitive factors affecting Black students at PWIs is their “understanding of and ability to deal with racism” (p. 334).

A non-cognitive factor related to postsecondary Black male student success that has been singled out for in-depth study is Racial identity (Cokley, 2011; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Lott, 2011; Okech & Harrington, 2002). Racial Identity is “the process whereby African Americans come to terms with their Blackness and the ways in which they situate their identities among others from different racial or ethnic backgrounds” (Harper & Harris, 2006, p. 135). Based on Cross’s (1971) model of Nigrescence, the process is a four stage progression in which “a preexisting identity is transformed from non-Afrocentrism to Afrocentrism to multiculturalism” (p. 135). There are studies (Nasim, Roberts, Hamell, & Young, 2005; Reid, 2013; Hrabowski et al., 1998) that have linked concepts of positive racial identity with academic success. Bonner and Bailey (2006) combine notions of racial identity with Black male students’ desire to project or establish their masculinity. Likewise, Palmer et al. (2014) have established a link between some Black males’ concepts of masculinity and their desire to pursue academic excellence. Citing several studies, Palmer et al. (2014) reveal that while Black male students may adopt a

“cool pose strategy” (Majors & Billson, 1992) or develop male gender role conflict (Harris et al., 2011) while trying to cope with societal projections of Black masculinity, high achieving Black males associate masculinity with “being accountable, displaying character, serving communities, and pursuing academic excellence” (p. 83). Bonner and Bailey (2006) tie self-esteem to the process Black male students go through as they develop a Black male identity to empower them in an environment where they may be perceived as powerless by themselves and others. Further exploration into how these non-cognitive factors materialize and impact Black male doctoral experiences in a PWI may reveal ways for similarly situated institutions to facilitate Black male access, enrollment, and success in their graduate programs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In his book, *Research Methods for Education*, Newby (2014) discusses the importance of education theory, explaining that it performs a vital role as a framework for advancing our understanding of a particular subject. Theory, he says, “shapes our thinking and enables us to understand processes at work and helps us assess the way in which the real world works” (p.74). Merriam (1998) considers the theoretical framework as the “lens” through which a researcher views the world (p. 45). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2010), “Theory helps data cohere and enables research to go beyond an aimless, unsystematic piling up of accounts” (p. 32). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) specifically consider theoretical framework from a qualitative viewpoint, stating that it “is a structure that is intended as a guide for thinking about the research subject and as an interpretive lens through which to view data” (p. 134). While theory provides a platform for diving into the deep waters of qualitative inquiry, it is a risky proposition to apply theory without seriously considering the contextual realities of the subject to be studied.

In much of the research related to the educational experiences of Black males, theory has been misused, or misapplied, in regards to the appropriateness of its application. According to Wood and Palmer (2014), “given the exponential increase of research on Black men in education, this population has been strikingly both under-theorized and inadequately theorized in prior scholarship” (p. 34). They point out that the distinctive socio-cultural positioning of the Black male creates a need for theories and models that are intended for use in studying the educational experiences of Black males. Regardless of this need, a great deal of prior research has relied on familiar, prominent and traditional higher education theories, failing to recognize and utilize frameworks, models, and theories designed specifically to be used in the study of Black males. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) voice concerns regarding major student development theories and “the extent to which they fail to represent the experiences of students historically underrepresented in higher education” (p. 422). Wood and Palmer maintain that this is an important point, as “theoretical frameworks are unscored by assumptions that permeate the research process. When not appropriate to the population of interest, these assumptions can serve to skew the research, impacting the quality and usefulness of study findings” (2014, p. 38).

Several scholars (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2013; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2009, 2010, 2012; Howard-Hamilton, 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992; Palmer et al., 2014; Wolf-Wendel, et al., 2009; Wood, 2010; Wood & Palmer, 2015) believe that inadequate theorizing has served to perpetuate many of the negative stereotypes associated with Black males and schooling. Fries-Britt (1997) laments that “in education, we have contributed to this negative portrait by the disproportionate amount of research that emphasizes remediation and disadvantage” (p. 65). Harper (2009) points out that “almost everything published about Black male collegians negatively portrays them as underachieving and unlikely to succeed” (p. 699).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002), in advocating for the uses of counternarrative storytelling, make the case that scholarship is needed to combat traditional research paradigms and theories that support the viewpoints of dominant groups in U.S. society.

Wood (2010) has examined theoretical frameworks from 50 studies of Black men in community colleges carried out from 1971 to 2009. In his judgment, many of the studies were guilty of weak theorizing, meaning that the theoretical frameworks were used inadequately, or frameworks were completely absent. He found that only 27 of the 50 studies had clearly articulated frameworks. In the 27 frameworks he identified, the majority of the researchers relied on predominant traditional theories. Most commonly used were Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1995, 1995), a model of nontraditional student attrition from Bean and Metzner, (1985), Tinto's retention/departure theory (1993); and variations of critical theory, including Bell's (1980) Critical Race Theory (CRT). The only studies that used frameworks concerned with Black student populations were those that used CRT and one study that employed Carroll's (1988) model of Black freshman retention. None of the 27 studies used a framework specifically oriented towards examining the educational experiences of Black males.

To be fair, Wood's (2010) examination focused on literature relegated to studies conducted at community colleges. However, his revelations are demonstrative of the same trends evident in scholarship conducted on a larger scale at other settings across the United States. A great deal of research on Black males has relied upon traditional frameworks developed for use in studying White men in four year institutions and serves only to solidify educational imbalance (Wood and Palmer, 2014). Certainly, the application of traditional frameworks can provide a sound theoretical foundation for many studies, and even some of the work done by the authors in the field of Black male academic success has relied, at times, on

these same theories. However, if we consider the unique socio-cultural positioning of Black males as Bush and Bush (2013) suggest we should, “then these theories may not fully address the nuances of their realities, identities, and experiences” (Wood & Palmer, 2014, p. 38). As Majors and Billson (1992) state, “social science literature has tended to view Black males negatively. Analysis of the social condition of Black males in America all too often proceeds from a deficit model” (p. 106).

### **Deficit Thinking Theory**

Valencia (2010) explains deficit thinking theory as “an endogenous theory positing that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, adherents allege, in limited intellectual disabilities, linguistic shortcomings, a lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior” (p. 6). Deficit thinking fails to acknowledge institutional inadequacies and points the finger of blame for lack of student success on the student’s family and cultural background and inherent lack of academic ability (Harrison, 2014). Grounded in racial and social stature bias, deficit thinking theory operates on the premise that students of color, particularly those who are poor with cultural deficits such as being first generation, possess certain intellectual hindrances, as well as behavioral issues, and a lack of motivation to learn that are the cause of low educational attainment (Valencia, 2010; as cited in Harrison, 2014). In formulating deficit thinking theory, Valencia (2010) identified six aspects indicative of deficit thinking: (1) Blaming the victim; (2) Oppression; (3) Pseudoscience; (4) Temporal changes; (5) Educability; and (6) Heterodoxy. For definitions and examples, please see Table 2 below.

Table 2. Valencia's Aspects of Deficit Thinking Theory

Blaming the victim	Based on the book, <i>Blaming the Victim</i> , by Ryan (1971). Ryan explained how deficit thinking translates to action – Victimless blamers identify social problems, solicit a study that seeks to identify how advantaged and disadvantaged are different, defines those differences as causes of the social problems, then create governmental interventions, programs, or suggested courses of action aimed at changing those who are different.	Appeals to social reformers because it offers simple, rational solutions. Deficit thinkers ignore complex, problematic reforms to whole systems that already in place and benefitting the majority. Instead, they look for simpler solutions that will “fix” the individual(s) identified as different.
Oppression	Deficit thinking creates oppression through “the cruel and unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their place” (Valencia, 2010, p. 9).	Examples from the past include compulsory ignorance laws that made it unlawful to teach a Black person to read and write, and school segregation.
Pseudoscience	Defined by Blum (1978) as a “process of false persuasion by scientific pretense” (p. 12, as cited in Valencia, 2010). Studies are based on weak assumptions, psychometrically weak instruments, and/or flaws in data collection methods. Caused primarily by researcher bias.	Paves the way for “scientific racism – the use of pseudoscience to support an alleged scientific paradigm of White superiority” (Valencia, 2010, p. 13). Consider the work of Samuel George Morton, who made claims of White superior intelligence using measurements of cranial capacity.
Temporal Changes	Deficit thinking is temporal in nature – it changes with the times, so to speak, and will use various explanations such as substandard culture and social class, mediocre genes, and other unfounded classifications to account for apparent deficits. (Harrison, 2014, p. 14)	Variants of deficit thinking offer different explanations such as inferior genes (pseudoscience), cultural deficiencies (classism; cycle of poverty), or a lack of traditional family values (single parent households)
Educability	The degree to which a person can be educated depends on their intellectual ability. Fails to recognize that social, political, and economic conditions within schools and society do not relate to student academic performance (Valencia, 2010, p. 16).	Relates to the disproportionate number of Black male students relegated to special education classes, low academic tracking, and/or vocational training.

(Table 2 continued)

Heterodoxy	Relies on Bourdieu's concept of "doxa," "orthodoxy," and "heterodoxy." Heterodoxy refers to nonconformists' reactions to the flaws in deficit thinking. Even though deficit thinking dominates through orthodoxy, heterodoxy gives voice to counter arguments, theories and research (Valencia, 2010, p. 16-17).	Black researchers conduct their own original research, generate their own data, and produce alternative explanations for deficit based conclusions.
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Sources: Harrison (2014); Valencia (2010)

Research that employs deficit thinking is precisely what led Harper (2010, 2012) to develop and use an anti-deficit achievement theoretical framework for studying Black male academic success.

### **Anti-deficit Achievement Theory**

Anti-deficit thinking theory contradicts deficit thinking theory and seeks to identify factors associated with student success (Gourd & Lightfoot, 2009). Positioning itself as an oppositional theory, or an alternative, to prevailing dominant theories in education, Harper (2010) refers to anti-deficit achievement theory as an "instead of" theoretical framework.

That is, *instead of* relying on existing theories and conceptual models to repeatedly examine deficits, researchers using this framework should deliberately attempt to discover how some students of color have managed to succeed... The anti-deficit achievement framework is informed by theories from psychology, sociology, and education, each of which can be explored in an instead of fashion (Harper, 2010, p. 68).

Using his theoretical framework to explore the successful educational experiences of students of color enrolled in collegiate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses, Harper (2010) explained how anti-deficit thinking could be used to reconceptualize research that utilizes some prevailing, popular theories:

*Cultural capital and social capital theories* (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987) – Instead of investigating the conditions and lack of resources contributed to low academic achievement, an anti-deficit approach would explore how successful Black male students overcame their disadvantages (p. 68-69).

*Stereotype threat theory* (Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1995) – Instead of studying and explaining how racist stereotypes affected and influenced Black male academic performance, an anti-deficit approach would seek to uncover strategies used by Black male students to “resist the internalization of discouraging misconceptions” and “respond productively to stereotypes they encounter on campus” (p. 69).

*Campus ecology theories* (Moos, 1986; Strange and Banning, 2001) – Instead of reporting and lamenting the lack of minority students in a particular field, an anti-deficit approach would try to “explain how a student of color who is one of few non-White persons in her or his major manages to thrive and negotiate environments that are [...] overwhelmingly White” (p. 71).

*Self-efficacy theory* (Bandura, 1997) – Instead of repeatedly asking why minority students have difficulty achieving academically in certain subject areas, an anti-deficit approach would seek to understand how students of color that perform well in these subjects are able to develop confidence and competence that leads them to excel academically (p. 71).

*Critical race theory* (Harper, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005) – Instead of using deficit oriented research that reinforces negative tropes regarding minority students’ academic performance, an anti-deficit approach would utilize their “experiential realities and empower them to offer counternarratives concerning their success” (p. 71).

*College student retention theories* (Swail, Redd, and Perna, 2003; Tinto, 1993) – Instead of concentrating on the barriers to persistence, an anti-deficit approach would explore the factors that enable students to remain in school through graduation (p. 71).

*Possible selves theory* (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Grant, and Ager, 1995) – Instead of researching those who dropped out, an anti-deficit approach would investigate experiences prompting persisters to remain in school and envision future success (p. 71).

In his study of Black males who were successful in STEM courses, Harper (2010) reframed deficit-oriented questions so they could be asked from an anti-deficit perspective. For example, instead of asking “Why do so few Black male students enroll in college?” – a deficit oriented question. Harper reframed the question, “How were college aspirations cultivated among Black male undergraduates who are currently enrolled?” (p. 68). “Why are Black male students’ rates of persistence and degree attainment lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education?” would be reframed as, “How did Black men manage



to persist and earn their degrees, despite transition issues, racist stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?” (p. 68). Harper has used data collected, in various forms, from his National Black Male College Achievement Study (NBMCAS) to move beyond deficit perspectives on academic achievement by identifying factors that have helped Black males succeed in higher education (see Harper, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012; Harper and Quaye, 2007).

According to Harper (2010, 2012), the NBMCAS was created to “focus on understanding why Black men excel instead of adding to the already well-understood reasons why they fail” (p. 66). The study conducted by Harper is the “largest-ever qualitative study of undergraduate Black men” (2012, p. 1) and collected data from 219 Black male undergraduates. The participants in the study were selected from forty-two colleges and universities, including six different institution types, and spanned twenty states across the United States. Participants were nominated by college and university administrators and student leaders. Criteria established that the Black male undergraduates had to have cumulative grade point averages above 3.0, a history of leadership and service in student organizations, meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enhanced educational experiences (summer research programs, internships, foreign exchange programs), and earned scholarships and honors in recognition of their achievements (2010, pp. 64-65).

Harper conducted two-to-three hour interviews of each student participant, with some follow-up interviews taking place by phone. Using anti-deficit framed research questions, Harper interviewed subjects about their experiences in efforts to uncover factors that contributed to their academic success. According to Harper (2010), the “NBMCAS magnifies lessons learned from undergraduates who maximized their college experiences and moves beyond the

deficit perspective by highlighting institutional agents, policies, programs, and resources that help Black men achieve desired educational outcomes across a range of different institutional contexts” (p. 66). Harper had no desire to add to the existing deficit based literature that brought attention to all the reasons why Black male academic performance is so low. Instead, he sought to understand how the 219 Black male achievers managed to overcome hurdles that typically disadvantage their peers and achieve academic success (Harper, 2010, 2012).

Harper’s (2010, 2012) anti-deficit theoretical framework focused on three “pipeline points” he labeled pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success (See Figure 1 below). To uncover information about students’ pre-college socialization and readiness, he placed emphasis on Black male students’ precollege educational experiences and how family, friends, and other important figures in their lives influenced their college ambitions. Moving on to college achievement, he then sought a chronological accounting of the 219 Black men’s experiences in college, asking questions about their classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, and whether they had any enriching educational experiences. Finally, in regards to post-college success, his questions focused on students’ plans after graduation, whether they had aspirations to go to graduate school or what type of career they envisioned.

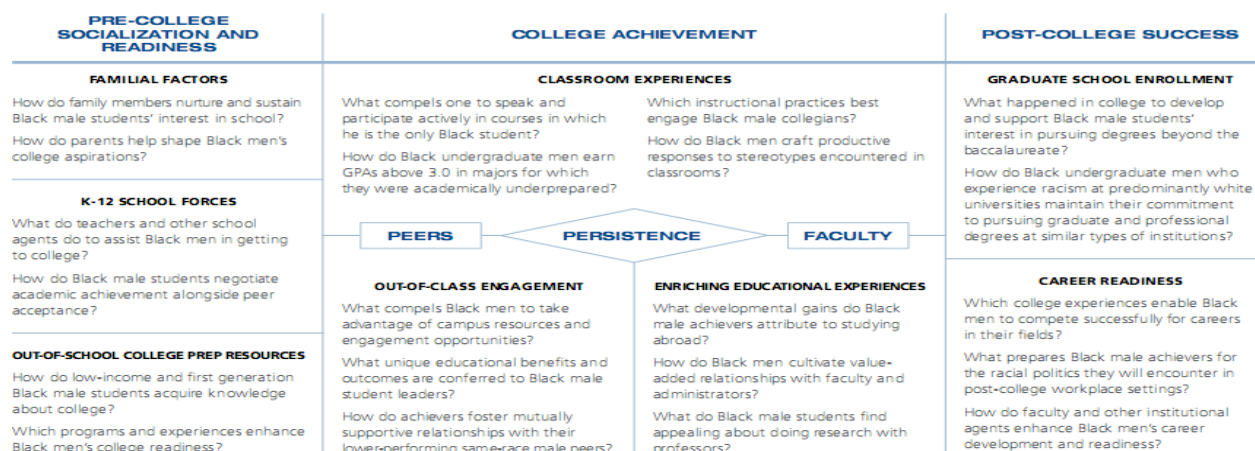


Figure 1. Harper’s Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper 2012)

Harper (2010) explains his approach:

Understanding what compelled them to become actively engaged, both inside and outside the classroom, was chosen over the popular approach of trying to discover all the reasons why Black men are so disengaged on college campuses. And instead of focusing on the resources, social and cultural capital, and precollege educational privilege that some participants lacked, efforts were devoted to understanding how they managed to acquire various forms of capital that they did not possess upon entry to their respective colleges and universities. Also explored was how these students resolved identity conflicts, negotiated popularity alongside achievement in peer groups, and thrived in environments that were sometimes racist and often culturally unresponsive. (p.66)

Harper's (2010) article on Black male STEM majors used a segment of the data derived from the NBMCAS, and reported results from his interviews of 51 Black male STEM majors. For their interviews, he slightly altered his interview questions to address issues pertinent to students in collegiate STEM programs. Harper focused on what enabled students to make the dean's list, their competitive drive to pursue research fellowships and internships, what motivated them to pursue degrees in STEM fields, and how the students persisted in the STEM disciplines, a rigorous field, with little or no Black peers and faculty. He made adjustments to the three pipeline points, changing the last pipeline label from "Post-College Success" to "Post-College Persistence in STEM," and asked STEM-specific questions related to industry careers, graduate school, and research careers (p. 70).

Two years later, Harper (2012) released his report, *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education*, a more comprehensive general report including findings from the data he collected through his interviews with all 219 participants. Guided by the anti-deficit achievement framework, Harper sought to "better understand Black male student success to the extent that it focused on their assets [...] and how they navigated instances of racism and prejudice that may have been present in their college experiences" (Harrison, 2014, p. 47). In his words, "The framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage,

underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition” (Harper, 2012, p. 5). In the report, Harper categorized his key findings into six main categories: (1) Getting to college; (2) Choosing colleges; (3) Paying for college; (4) Transitioning to college; (5) Matters of engagement; and (6) Responding productively to racism.

Findings related to getting to college reported that “parents and other family members reinforced to the achievers that college was the most viable pathway to social uplift and success” (Harper, 2012, p. 9). In regards to choosing a college, students gave a variety of reasons from financial aid, to the type of experience they wanted, an institution’s reputation, or the opportunity for post-college career options (p. 10). The difficulty of paying for college is often cited as one of the principal causes for Black male student attrition. Many of the participants in the BMSS study “financed their undergraduate education by applying for as many scholarships and fellowships as possible, working in paid summer internships away from their campuses, and by pursuing paid student leadership positions on campus” (p. 11). Participating students reported that the transition to college was made easier by summer bridge programs and relationships with Black male student leaders on campus (p. 11). Matters of engagement referred to the degree to which participating students were engaged in academic related activities outside the classroom. Students actively engaged in a variety of education enriching activities and student organizations were afforded an array of opportunities to further their success. Finally, many students cited the need to respond productively to racism to avoid internalizing and agonizing over incidents of racism. Participants at the PWIs felt pressure to prove they were admitted because of their academic ability, and not just to satisfy an institution’s diversity goals. According to Harper,

“Many became skilled at simultaneously embarrassing and educating their peers through the thoughtful act of calmly questioning their misconceptions” (p. 13).

Interestingly, Harper (2012) reports that participants did not attribute their success to any individual talents or intellect they possessed. When comparing themselves to low achieving or less accomplished Black males, most believed that low achieving Black male students had the same potential, but simply had not been fortunate enough to have had experiences that motivated them to become more engaged and work toward academic success. The importance of talking to Black males that achieve academically should not be underestimated. As Harper writes, “The most disappointing finding in the National Black Male Achievement Study was that few participants had been consulted for helpful or potential insights into their success” (2012, p. 15). “Hence, asking those who have been successful to talk about what helped them succeed is the most powerful recommendation I have for anyone who endeavors to improve the status of Black male students” (Harper, 2012, p.19). If we are to shift the tone of research away from repeatedly banging on the drum of low Black male inequities related to academic performance, we must listen to the voices of those who have been successful. It is just such an endeavor that I hoped to contribute to through the application of Harper’s anti-deficit achievement framework in exploring the experiences of Black males achieving success in seeking doctoral degrees in higher education.

### **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

The intended purpose for this research was to examine the factors contributing to the success of Black male students seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominantly White institution. This chapter includes a description of the research design, selection of participants, data collection, and method of analysis. This study seeks to address the following research question:

What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominately White institution?

Sub-questions assisting in this research are:

- A) What experiences, educational and otherwise, promote academic success?
- B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking post-baccalaureate degrees at a predominately White institution?

#### **Research Design**

While the field of research on Black male student success has seen exponential growth over the last fifteen years or so, as explained in earlier chapters, there is only a small amount of scholarship that even touches on issues specifically related to Black male students seeking doctoral degrees at PWIs. At the outset, before I began preparing a proposal for this study, I always assumed it would be qualitative in nature. I'm a former English teacher. One of my primary responsibilities in my present job is to work with the humanities divisions of teacher preparation programs. It goes almost without saying that I possess a skillset oriented towards qualitative traditions and a natural tendency to gravitate towards research that tells a story, is rich in descriptions of lived experiences, and seeks to get at the heart of how, or why, a particular phenomenon has occurred. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research and fully explore the

experiences of Black male students seeking doctoral degrees at a PWI, a study using qualitative methods was warranted.

Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as a way of “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). He also recommends the researcher use a recognized approach to qualitative inquiry as a means to enhance rigor and design sophistication (Creswell, 2007, p. 45). Given that the intent of this study was to explore the lived experiences of the participants, a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry was the most appropriate. Van Manen (1990) tells us that “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience” (p. 4). For Creswell (2007), phenomenological research is a design used by the researcher to describe lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants (p. 14). The description then relays “what” the participants experienced and “how” they experienced it, and is usually gathered and accomplished through interviews (Moustakas, 1994; as cited in Creswell, 2007). Providing a fuller explanation, van Manen (1990) gives us eight characteristics to consider.

Phenomenological research is...

1. The study of lived experience; it “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9).
2. The explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness; “it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10).
3. The study of essences; it “attempts to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experiences” (p. 10).
4. The description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them; “it attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness” (p. 11).

5. The human scientific study of phenomena; “it attempts to articulate, through the content and form of text, the structures of meaning embedded in lived experience” (p. 11).
6. The attentive practice of thoughtfulness; “a heedful, mindful wondering of what it means to live a life” (p. 12).
7. A search for what it means to be human; “to become more fully who we are” (p. 12).
8. A poetizing activity; like a poem, it “seeks to discover what is at the core of our being” (p. 13).

Patton (2002; cited in Loftin, 2010) takes a somewhat more direct approach, writing that phenomenological research approaches simply “focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness” (p. 104). Bogdan and Biklin (2010) explain, “Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 33). The inclusion of a phenomenologically based approach to qualitative inquiry voices the intention of the researcher to focus this research on the shared experiences of the participants, to lift them from their subjective consciousness as they are asked to reflect on those experiences, and give those experiences some form of solidity. Once concrete, knowledge gleaned from the lived experiences of the participants will provide value to similarly situated Black males seeking strategies to attain academic success, and to policymakers, practitioners, administrators, and leaders who want to provide avenues toward it.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

This study was situated at a large predominantly White four-year public research university in the South, referred to throughout this study as South State University (SSU). Given the storied history of segregation in the South, it is reasonable to assume that tensions still exist



to some degree between Black and White students on the campus of SSU. Additionally, we know from Bonner and Bailey (2006) and Palmer et al (2014) that Black male students report feeling unwelcome on the campuses of PWIs, and are sometimes treated in a hostile manner. For the Fall 2014 semester, SSU recorded 25,547 undergraduates. Black male undergraduate enrollment was 4.6%, below the national average at 5.5%. Black males enrolled in doctoral programs accounted for only 3% of the total number of doctoral candidates; again, below the national average. However, in the Higher Education division of the School of Education at SSU, Black males accounted for 15% of the program's total enrollment – five times the university's average.

The extraordinary number of Black male doctoral students in the Higher Education program made it an ideal pool from which to draw a sample of participants through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling, according to Creswell (2007), is indicated when the researcher needs to select “individuals and sites for study because they purposefully inform and understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). “It is essential,” Creswell reiterates, “that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 128). Luttrell (2010) tells us that the goal of sampling should be “to yield systematic, relevant, rich, accurate, and complete data” (p. 7). Luttrell (2010) also suggests that people are more likely to participate in a study if they are asked by someone they know. In this instance, I work in a building frequented by many of the participants, or was in the same program, and had some of the same professors for classes. Therefore, they at least knew me and were more willing to participate than if I was a complete stranger. Potential participants were contacted personally by me and asked if they would like to participate either verbally, by email, or by telephone. A list of potential participants was procured from the Head of the Department

to supplement a list that came from my personal knowledge of students who came through the program.

Originally, criteria for participants was that they identified as Black males and had completed at least one year in a doctoral program in the SSU School of Education with at least a 3.0 cumulative GPA. The sample size was eight students; a number that Creswell (2007) recommends as more than adequate for a phenomenologically qualitative study. Upon further reflection, as I was selecting the participants for my study, I decided that one year's experience in the doctoral program may not have provided enough opportunities for participants to have engaged in experiences which allowed for sufficient depth of reflection and contemplation to provide rich responses to interview questions. I made the deliberate decision to revise my criteria and split the sample. I chose five participants who had already graduated from the School of Education and achieved their doctorate. The other three participants were students still in their respective programs, but had completed a majority of their coursework. The GPA requirement was used for participants still engaged in pursuit of their degrees to ensure there were no doubts regarding their status as academically successful. Additional reasons for choosing SSU as the site of the study were that it will keep costs minimal and be most efficient in terms of managing data, and because I was specifically interested in the perceptions of Black males attending a PWI in the South.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

In studies involving interviews as the source of data, McMillan and Schumacher (2006) state that it is typical for "qualitative researchers to become immersed in the situation and the phenomenon being studied" (p.16). This is especially true when you are already familiar with the research site and have had several of the same classes as the participants. Such familiarity

can be advantageous as it may enhance the participants' openness with the researcher and could contribute to the quality and honesty of their responses. I was, in fact, already immersed in the situation. It was that very immersion that led to my interest in this research area to begin with. I was keenly aware of the possibility that there might be some preconceived notions related to my familiarity with the participants. While one can never be completely free of bias, I made a conscious effort to put aside any bias as well as I could and conduct the study in a thoughtful and objective manner.

Though I was familiar with all the participants, some more than others, I was not a part of the demographic group being studied. I am a White male pursuing a doctoral degree at a large, predominantly White research university in the South studying Black male academic success. As someone who benefits from White privilege, I knew it may be difficult at times to "place myself in the shoes" of my participants. However, I was determined to approach my research in as objective a manner as possible and considered the possibility that the difference in race between myself and my participants could benefit the study. Because I was not a member of the demographic group I was studying, I was free from some of the bias that may have been present if I were also a Black male like the participants. While I could certainly identify with some of their experiences as graduate students, I was able to objectively analyze many of their experiences as an outsider. Conducting the interviews and reading through the transcripts as I analyzed them, I could empathize with their experiences, but I could never truly understand what they went through as Black males seeking academic success because that was their reality, not mine. That made me more determined to attempt to present full, rich narratives that told their stories from their points of view.

My interest in the topic began with the development of an interest in the academic success of Black males in K-12 education while working as a teacher in secondary education. Through the reading of literature for Higher Education courses while pursuing a doctorate, that interest expanded, and I began to further explore the research on the academic success of Black males in postsecondary education. My relationship with my mentor, the former head of the program, and his knowledge of my research interests led to my involvement in a summit on Black male academic achievement in postsecondary settings. Participating in the organization of the summit only intensified that interest and helped me to focus my research on the factors contributing to the academic success of Black males pursuing their doctoral degree in higher education.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection addressed the overarching research question, as well as the supporting questions, and took the form of face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Interview length varied depending on the participants' answers, with most of them lasting from one hour to an hour and a half. Notes were kept by the researcher to catalog any visual cues transmitted by the participant, as well as impressions or thoughts the researcher had that were precipitated by the interviewing process. Participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interview (See Appendix B).

A semi-structured interview involves listing a set of questions to be used in each interview in order to ensure there is continuity between different interviews (Patton, 2002; cited in Hargrove, 2014). According to Newby (2014), semi-structured interviews usually have starter questions that are guided by themes that can be introduced if they are not brought out by the

subject. These starter questions are “structured to reflect the research questions and collect data on an indicator that can be used to answer the research questions” (p. 356).

The interview protocol designed for this study was divided into four sections. The first section was designed for the collection of demographic information only, and did not contain any open-ended questions. The remaining three sections contained open-ended questions, but were still targeted to three distinct areas for exploration – early educational experiences, doctoral experiences, and final perceptions (the interview protocol is contained in Appendix C). There were some questions related to racial issues in the event that responses in line with those themes did not present themselves naturally in the subject’s responses. Open-ended questions were framed from an anti-deficit orientation. Additionally, the researcher had the freedom to ask follow-up questions to clarify or explore a viewpoint, or to ask questions that were not considered when the research questions were determined. Given the description of the design of the semi-structured interview (Newby, 2014), it was the appropriate protocol design for this study.

A pilot of the interview protocol was conducted with a test participant at the beginning of the sampling process. Results of the pilot interview were used to adjust or “fine tune” any questions, prompting full, rich data, and to clarify any potential misunderstandings due to question design. Interviews were conducted in a private office using a digital recorder and transcribed for analysis by a local transcription service. Follow up questions were conducted with participants when clarification for any responses was needed. Participants were assigned anonymous names, with no one but the researcher knowing their true identities. Digital files of the interviews were kept in files secured with a password, and hard copies of transcripts and

consent forms kept in a locked file cabinet. The researcher was the only person with access to either.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2014) has developed several methods for analyzing data from qualitative studies. He reminds us, “Data analysis in qualitative research will proceed hand-in-hand with other parts of developing the qualitative study, namely the data collection and the write-up of findings” (p. 195). Qualitative data analysis is, for all intents and purposes, a recursive process. Not unlike the act of writing, revising, rewriting, revising again, and rewriting until one gets a particular essay, paper, article, poem, story, etc., exactly how they want it. Creswell explains that the qualitative researcher may be analyzing an interview collected at another time, writing up the narrative for another interview that has already been analyzed, and preparing to conduct another different interview – all simultaneously. Each one informs the other. Creswell (2007, p. 159) prescribes a six step process that he describes as a simplified version of a method discussed by Moustakas (1994):

1. Describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study – the researcher sets aside their personal experiences so the focus is directed to the participants in the study. This is sometimes referred to as *bracketing* or *epoche* (p. 59).
2. Develop a list of significant statements – the researcher finds statements from the interviews about how the participants have experienced the topic, and gives them equal worth. The researcher should end up with a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements (horizontalization of the data).
3. Group significant statements into larger units of information – these are called “meaning units” or themes.

4. Write a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon – a “textual description” of the experience. It should include verbatim examples from the interviews.
5. Next, write a description of “how” the experience happened – called a “structural description.” The researcher reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon occurred.
6. A composite description is then written, combining the textual and structural descriptions – called the *essence* of the experience. It represents the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study.

To assist in this process, transcripts were uploaded into a qualitative data analysis program known as NVivo. NVivo was used to help analyze, manage, sort, and shape the qualitative data. It enables a user to easily manipulate data and conduct searches across documents within a database that can be secured by password (Creswell, 2007, p. 167). Also, the process of coding was informed by themes that were commonly found in the review of literature and that emerged from the interviewing process. Results of data analysis and findings that emerged are contained in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a summary of the study and its findings, a presentation and discussion of conclusions drawn from the findings, and the researcher’s recommendations for further study.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the validity, or trustworthiness, of this qualitative study, the researcher engaged in two strategies commonly used in qualitative research to establish credibility. The strategies utilized were peer review (debriefing) and clarification through reflection. Peer review provides an external check of the research process through the use of a “peer debriefer.”

Creswell (2007) describes the peer debriefer as someone who attempts to keep the researcher honest throughout the process; asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations; and provides opportunity for catharsis (p. 208). This role was filled by my mentor and committee chair. Clarification through reflection occurs when the researcher recognizes their position in relation to the participants and acknowledges any biases or assumptions that may shape their interpretation of the study. It is similar to what Milner (2007) describes as, “researching the self in relation to others” where the researcher recognizes “the multiple roles, identities, and positions that researchers and research participants bring to the research process” and “issues of power are understood to be relational, and researchers understand the tensions inherent in their own interests and power in relation to the people and communities under study” (p. 395). Creswell (2007) recommends at least two strategies be followed in a qualitative study.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study is to add to existing research and literature on Black male student success, specifically as it relates to those seeking doctoral degrees from a predominantly White four-year public research university. Data was gathered through face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with eight participants. This chapter will present findings from the collected data, beginning with information illustrating the demographic makeup of the participants. The majority of the information in this chapter will reveal the central themes that emerged from analysis of the data and include excerpts from the interviews that support these themes. The primary research question guiding this study is: What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominately White institution? Sub-questions assisting in the gathering of information were: (A) What experiences, educational and otherwise, promote academic success? and (B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking doctoral degrees at a predominately White institution?

#### **Participant Information**

As previously stated, eight Black males from the School of Education at SSU participated in this research study. Five of the participants have achieved their doctorate, while the other three are students in their respective programs working toward completion of their doctoral degree. All but one completed their undergraduate study at a public PWI, with one having completed his at a public HBCU. The participants were given pseudonyms by the researcher to preserve anonymity. For a graphical summary of participants' demographic information, please see Appendix D.

Bob, 32, was born and raised in a small town in the southeast portion of the United States. He identified his family's socioeconomic status as low income and had a single parent, his mother, who graduated high school but had no college experience. Bob graduated from a predominantly White public high school. He had an older sister who attended college before him, but he was the first member of his family to attend graduate school. Upon graduating with his Master's degree from a public PWI, he accepted a student affairs position at a small liberal arts college in the West and remained there before being drawn back to graduate school to pursue his doctorate at the urging of some of his friends. Bob explains, "I was at a conference and some friends were alums from my Master's Program, I ran into them and they were like, hey, man, we need to get you back down south. You need to be closer to your family." Bob also stated that he was in a relationship with a young woman from the South (they would later marry), and he knew that she wanted to live in the area to be closer to her family. He made the decision to attend SSU after meeting with a Black male administrator who promised he would help him secure a graduate assistantship and the ability to attend school full-time. He made a point of explaining that he always expected to go to a PWI for his doctorate, as an HBCU was never an option because of negative experiences he had when visiting friends who attended one. Bob entered the doctoral program when he was 25, completed his degree in five years, and is a member of the faculty at a public PWI.

Carl, the youngest participant of the group at 30 years old, was born in a major metropolitan city in the South. He came from a middle class two-parent family and graduated from a public racially diverse high school. His father has a high school diploma, and his mother has a bachelor's degree. Carl was the first member of his family to attend graduate school. Carl was the only participant in the study to have attended SSU from undergraduate school straight

through to completion of his doctorate. As part of his work as a graduate assistant while pursuing his Master's degree, he became involved in promoting a leadership group for young Black males, and his desire to remain involved in that group prompted him to remain at SSU for his doctoral studies.

I just felt that at the time, like, where can I go? I really can't go anywhere else. I probably could have, but just to see the program grow and develop it from the ground up was really attractive for me and made me feel like, wow! It just wasn't about going somewhere else and getting experience. I felt that that experience was here, and I felt that I can make the most of my experience wherever I am.

Carl completed his doctoral program in four and a half years, and now holds an administrative position in an Educational Research and Policy organization in Washington, D.C.

Dale is from a large city in the South and was 33 years old at the time of his interview. He identified as having grown up in a lower middle class, two parent family and attended a predominantly White private high school. His mother has a Master's degree, and his father has a high school diploma, as well as having attended college for a short time. Dale earned his undergraduate degree in history from a public PWI and originally intended to go to law school, but took a teaching position in a local public school after getting a Master's degree in History for financial reasons. After teaching in the public school system for a few years, Dale took a faculty position at a local private high school. His experiences there had a profound impact on him. "I was teaching at a Catholic school, you know, and I had seen what schools that are dysfunctional looked like. Now, I was seeing what schools that were hyper-functional looked like, and how they do things differently." Dale decided to pursue a doctorate at the urging of several of his friends because of conversations they were having regarding the problems they saw with public education in the area. Dale recounted that one of his friends told him he should go back to school and study education.

It was literally a conversation with my friends; we were sitting, we were just sitting at my table just eating, and he just looked up. He said, ‘Man, why don’t you go study education?’ He’s like, ‘you always talking about it, you know more than anybody else I know on it, go study it.’ He’s like, ‘You have this wealth of experience; you have a resume that most people can’t write, and you know, you say you wanna do things to help education, then go get that doctorate.’

Dale said it was that conversation that prompted him to look at various programs before settling on the doctoral program at SSU because of its convenient location. He has finished all his coursework and is currently in the process of writing his dissertation.

Glenn came from a small city on the East coast and attended a public predominantly White high school. He considered his family’s socioeconomic status to have been middle class. Both his parents have a college degree, and his mother holds a Master’s degree. He identified the college where he attended undergraduate school as a public PWI. Glenn got his Master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from a small public PWI on the West coast. He moved to the South to attend SSU because it was recommended by a fraternity brother, and it was closer to his mother’s home. He chose SSU after a conversation with a faculty member made him feel appreciated and wanted, especially after the faculty member agreed to review his application materials even though the university deadline was that same day. When asked why he decided to pursue a PhD, Glenn expressed his desire to be taken seriously, “I got tired of talking to people, them smiling at me, and then pushing what I had to say back, almost as if had no bearing in the conversation.” At the time, he said he felt a doctorate would give him some legitimacy as a scholar.

I said, you know, what can cause people to listen? And I was like, I gotta keep going. I just have to keep going, and I thought this last degree...I didn’t necessarily think it would make people listen. I didn’t think it would be a magic wand that they’re gonna have to listen to me just ‘cause I got paper – that’s a fairy tale world. But I felt like some people just don’t take you serious, and I was thinking this degree...I was thinking it’s gonna open a door or two that wasn’t open before, and I wanted it bad.

Glenn is currently a member of the faculty and holds an administrative position at a small, public liberal arts PWI in the South. He is 35 years old.

Daryl, 36 years old, was the only participant in the study to have attended and completed his undergraduate studies at an HBCU. From a small town of about 15,000 in the South, Daryl says that he grew up as a member of the lower class and was raised by a guardian, his grandmother. His mother's highest level of education was high school. He wasn't completely sure about his father, but believed he had finished high school. Daryl had a sibling that attended college, but he was the first member of his family to attend graduate school. In his words, Daryl "aspired to pursue postsecondary education after realizing the career path I wanted was very limited without a college degree(s)." His choice of a PWI for his doctorate was driven by the SSU Higher Education Program's reputation. Daryl explained that "the program has a strong history of graduating students of color, more specifically African American males." He is currently writing his dissertation.

The oldest participant in the study, Morgan, was 45 years old at the time of his interview. Morgan was born in a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. Both his parents had Bachelor's degrees, but he was the first member of his family to attend graduate school. He listed his socioeconomic status growing up as working class, and he earned his high school diploma from a public predominantly White high school. Originally, Morgan's intention was to attend college for a brief time because college experience would help him get a union factory job like his father. Morgan decided to attend a public PWI in the South for his undergraduate degree based on cost. He did not qualify for any scholarships, but was granted federal financial aid in the form of a grant to attend school.

After the first year, he changed his original plan to attend college for only one or two years and then return to his hometown for a factory job. Instead, he stated he was “out of my element in a completely different environment, around different people and different experiences. It opened my eyes to new possibilities, and I decided that I actually did want to graduate.” He changed his major to education after speaking with his mother. She convinced him it would be a good choice, telling him “You’ve always been good with writing and reading. Why don’t you go be an English teacher? The school system needs more Black men English teachers.” After working for a few years as a teacher in the public education system, and then an administrator, Morgan felt a desire to return to graduate school for his doctorate.

I just said, this is who I am, you know what I’m saying. I’m an intellectual, this is just me. Let me experience life just being who I really am, you know? And I said, I’m gonna express the fullness of who I am, and part of that expression meant actually accomplishing something serious academically. For me it was, it was like an existential thing. [...] I am this intellectual person, and I need to prove it to the world, and prove it to myself. And so, I said, I’m going to go get my PhD.

When asked why he chose a PWI for his doctoral studies, he explained that it was strictly because of the convenience of the location – within commuting distance of his home. There were no other factors involved in his choice. Morgan finished his doctorate in four years, and currently holds a position as an administrator in a K-12 setting.

Rick, 36 years old, was born in a large city in the Southeast. He came from a middle class, two parent home. His mother and father have doctorates. Both his high school and undergraduate school were public and predominantly White. Rick also has siblings with advanced degrees. He began attending graduate school for his Master’s degree at a public PWI in the Southeast, but left after one year when the promise of a graduate assistantship fell through and there was conflict with his major professor. After taking a year off, he was enticed to transfer to a public PWI in the Southwest at the urging of a former professor from his

undergraduate school who had changed positions. Upon completion of his Master's degree, Rick returned to his hometown and was supporting himself as a musician, but expressed feelings of doubt about his career choices to his family. Rick says it was his brother, who also holds a doctorate like their parents, that prompted him to consider getting his own advanced degree. "So, it was like a lot of that stuff, and a lot of interesting, general things. Like we would always, I mean collectively as brothers, we would always have these different kinds of conversations and there were different elements of that. You know, what we were interested in, and stuff like that." He continued to explain that he had his doubts at the time, but in the end gave in to the feeling that it felt right to pursue a doctorate.

I think it's really this whole, it's just curiosity, in general, like this whole curiosity on so many levels, you know. Part of that is definitely the driving force. [...] I've done these things because there was, I was I think more curious, and then, you know, before you know it you start asking another question; kind of investigating, and before you know it you end up with two degrees in something. It's like, all of sudden, you're like three years into a doc program.

Rick began his doctoral program five years ago and is currently working towards completing his dissertation.

Tyrese, the only participant who was the first in his family to attend college, both in undergraduate and graduate school, is 38 years old. He grew up in a major metropolitan city in the Midwest in a two parent, working class household. Both his parents had high school diplomas. After attending a public, racially diverse high school, Tyrese went to a public PWI for his undergraduate degree and then subsequently a Master's degree. He worked for about five years as a low-level Student Affairs Administrator at a public PWI in the Midwest. In the beginning, Tyrese stated that he had no desire to return to graduate school for a doctorate. "When I first got there I never thought about getting a PhD. I was, like, oh I like my job, you know. I have what I need, etc." However, that feeling of contentment didn't last long for Tyrese.

But as time progressed and seeing where I wanted to go professionally, I started to have dreams. I would think I want to get a PhD, or I would ask myself if I should get a PhD. I didn't want to be held down, or held back from achieving any of my professional goals because I didn't have the right credentials. So, that, that really pushed my decision to go back to school to get a PhD.

When looking for a university to attend for his doctoral studies, Tyrese purposely applied to university programs that had Black faculty members. Two additional things convinced him to attend SSU: the local culture of the surrounding region and a phone call. He recalled that it was a personal phone call with a member of the School of Education's Higher Education faculty, the same one Glenn spoke about in his interview, that really got him to seriously consider attending South State University. Of all participants, Tyrese was fastest to completion, finishing his doctorate in three and a half years. He now holds an administrative position in Student Affairs at a large, private PWI.

### **Emergent Factors and Themes**

When constructing questions for the interview of participants, I decided early on that I wanted the participants to dig deep and consciously consider the ways that various experiences throughout their educational history had affected their academic success. It was for that reason that I decided to organize the questions in a temporal manner prompting them to begin that deep reflective process. The intent was to facilitate the participants' reflection upon the entirety of their educational experiences, taking them down a pathway through their perceptions of events related to their schooling. In this manner, the sub-questions to my main research question were linked and led to the grouping of findings into three main categories: 1) the impact of early experiences related to education; 2) the impact of experiences during graduate school; and 3) the final perceptions of participants.



## **Impact of Early Educational Experiences Related to Education**

Questions about early educational experiences were used to facilitate and focus participants' reflections regarding their early education, and how both the successes and the frustrations they experienced affected their academic achievement and their future academic choices. Analyzing the responses of participants to interview questions related to early experiences in their education revealed there were two main components of their early education they believed contributed to their successful pursuit of a doctoral degree: 1) support from family and teachers; and 2) a focus on the value of attaining a college degree.

**Support from Family or Teachers.** Of the eight participants in this study, seven of them explained the ways in which support from an outside source such as a family member or a teacher enabled them to overcome perceived barriers to their academic achievement. For Bob, his early education was a struggle. He had siblings who always seemed to come home with great report cards, while he felt like he had to work hard to manage “B’s” and “C’s” on his. Still, he credits his mother with supporting him throughout his K-12 education. Bob expressed disappointment in himself because he didn’t take advantage of opportunities in high school to take honors classes because he was bullied in the ninth grade. “I was the brunt of bullying my freshman year, so I decided to drop out of the honors program, and I let my grades slip.” It was a decision he believed was part of the reason he scored poorly on the ACT test. Bob doesn’t really remember being pushed by any teachers or faculty to do well in secondary school, and did not believe they were focused on preparing him, or other Black males, to go to college. It was in his sophomore year of college that his attitude towards his own education changed. When asked what precipitated the change, Bob said it was “having a teacher that actually seemed like she cared about what I was doing. She was not about to let me slide through the class and get the

grade that I *thought* I deserved, but she was gonna give me the grade that I really deserved. She also let me know why I was getting it.” The professor referred Bob to the Dean of the College of Education who set up recurring meetings with him where he had to check in and talk about his progress on a weekly basis. It was the influence of these two people that he credits with giving him the support he needed in college. “I think the most exciting moment that I guess I had was to graduate from undergrad, because sometimes I didn’t think that I would make it. [...] But it was some kind of push that I got, and I think it was the Dean in the College of Education and that science teacher.”

Carl credits both parents with giving him the support he needed to succeed academically. His mother was a teacher, and he says it was her that “consciously put me in opportunities and situations that were conducive to success.” Carl elaborated:

My mom knew the value of education, especially, you know, putting those certain skills in me at a young age. Even when I went to school and started first grade, I was at her school. She knew the teachers really well. She made sure I kept up with my homework, and made sure I did everything I needed to do. She put me in certain magnet schools for a certain reason.

Listening to Carl, he felt that it was the support of both his parents that enabled him to achieve academically. His father played an important role as well, keeping him focused on academics and “away from stuff that was happening in my neighborhood.” A self-described “geek,” Carl was thankful his father didn’t “push me into sports like a lot of other dads did.” Like Bob, Carl also dealt with bullying. He transferred schools in the fifth grade when his mother got a new job and found the transition difficult:

It was so different. I just went from, you know, a space where I was a popular kid. I was a cool kid. I was smart and everything like that, then to completely being in a new setting, new environment. It took a little bit of adjustment and it just, it wasn’t a great time. You know, I can just say kids can be really mean, and I think kids were mean to me because I was that new kid. I was like the outsider.

Carl was able to deal with it and perform well, he said, with the support of his teachers.

Reflecting on that experience, Carl said that he realized it was the beginning of a trend for him when dealing with educational transitions such as going from middle to high school, then high school to college, and so on. “I will say that it will probably be my greatest accomplishment because I know I can adjust. I think I look forward to the challenge. I’ve been at school almost my whole life, and I just kind of know just from those experiences what to do to be successful.”

For Tyrese, the path of academic success began with the realization that he could perform at a high academic level. An elementary teacher noticed he was often bored, or not paying attention in class, and advised his parents to have him evaluated. His mother had him tested, and it had quite an impact on Tyrese. “I still remember it,” he said. “I got switched; I think it was third or fourth grade. I got switched to the gifted program in my school, and that’s when it started. That led to my high school, which was a college prep school.” Although the encouragement and support he received were tremendously important to him, Tyrese revealed that he also had to deal with some frustrations along the way. Specifically, he spoke about the disappointment that occurred when he did not perform well on standardized tests. “I had good grades. I just couldn’t do well on those tests, and I was frustrated about how that reflected on me.” Those feelings of inadequacy led to what Tyrese characterized as one of his earliest feelings of success – getting accepted into college. The experience was profound for him because “it brought to fruition the ideas I had about what the next part of my life was going to be, and knowing that it was real. Things were beginning to develop, and it was actually happening.”

When asked about earlier experiences that he believed promoted his academic success, Rick was quick to point out the support he received from others. While he said it seemed there

was always someone willing to help him, not all Rick's early experiences were pleasant ones. He recounted how an experience in his fifth grade math class was so terrible for him that it has stuck with him all these years and still causes him to sometimes doubt himself. He approached the teacher's desk and asked her (a White female) for help with a long division problem. As the teacher began breaking the problem into parts, she quizzed him on his multiplication tables, and Rick was unable to answer some of her questions. He explained what happened next:

So she tells me to go sit down, and maybe like two minutes later she walks up to the front of class and says, 'All you that know your multiplication tables, please stand up.' Everybody stands up except for me, right, and then she says, 'I would like to thank all of you for being mature enough to know your multiplication tables.' And then she singles me out, and she says, 'See Rick, they know their multiplication tables, they are mature.'

The experience damaged his self-esteem, and he has always had issues with self-confidence in some situations. Still, it was the outside support he received from others, he says, that has helped him persevere during periods of self-doubt and succeed academically.

Whether I was going through middle school, elementary, high school, whatever, I always had another person on the outside that kind of helped. You know, maybe it was the parents sitting down and helping me out with a project. Maybe it was a teacher willing to go through and helping me better understand something. Maybe it was meeting someone doing other stuff outside of school, and they helped me understand something that was their profession because I was interested.

Glenn felt he had no choice other than to succeed. His mother set high standards and demanded he always do his best when it came to schoolwork. Her demands didn't just stop with Glenn, but even extended to his friends:

That was her thing – you did your work. I think it was known in the neighborhood that I was from, if you came to my house, you did your homework before we all stepped outside. Even if you may have never done your homework before, if you came to my momma's house it was expected and accepted that you would do your homework with me. Then we could go out and play.

Glenn remembers also having to do academic work in the summers when school was out. His mother gave him workbooks to complete and enrolled him and his sister in summer reading

programs. Like Tyrese, Glenn's mother also had him evaluated in third grade. A teacher complained to Glenn's mother that he never paid attention in class. Instead of assuming the problem was Glenn's fault, he says his mother "took offense with that. She had me tested to see where I should be placed, and I tested out as gifted." Glenn was the only Black male student in his gifted classes, but doesn't recall feeling singled out or special in any way. Glenn said, "I was just a person in the class. I was treated like everybody else. I felt like I was competing [...] and I always wanted to be there at the top of the class."

While Glenn was confident in his academic abilities in elementary and middle school, it was his high school and undergraduate studies that presented him with challenges. As Glenn got older, his parents moved often due to job opportunities, and it was a source of frustration for him. After a relocation from where Glenn was attending a performing arts school, he began at a new school and was put on a vocational track. Other than his basic, required academic classes, Glenn was assigned to shop classes and taught how to bend conduit pipe and install electrical wiring. In his words, "I think the teachers just did what they were told...we really didn't talk much about college or anything like that." Another relocation two years later caused problems because many of the vocational classes Glenn had been taking would not transfer, and he had to catch up academically. It impacted him when he went to college because he was unable to secure any scholarships and had to take out student loans. He admits to being more concerned with fitting in socially in high school, but maintains that his grades were okay. They would have been better, he believes, if someone had talked to him about Advanced Placement classes. "I feel there was a lack of investment on some people's behalf, because I was new. So, by the time they started to recognize my ability, it was too late."

Dale gives all the credit for his early academic success to the members of the religious orders that ran the parochial schools he attended throughout his elementary and secondary education. According to Dale, the nuns that ran the K-8 school he attended set high standards for all students and expected the best from everyone. It was also an environment heavily focused on education, even early on. Dale remembered a conversation he had in the fifth grade with Sister \_\_\_\_\_, the principal of the school, about choosing high schools and how the next step after that was to go to college. “Catholic schools are very mission-oriented,” he said, “and if you wanted to do certain things in life, [they believe] you have to put in ‘x’ amount of work, and that work included college. They didn’t accept half-hearted measures.” The trend continued for Dale as he matriculated through a Catholic high school that was affiliated with and run by the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. Dale recalled that it was his experiences in high school that really prompted him towards academic success:

They [the Brothers] very much encouraged, you know, not only your academic learning; what you learned in the classroom. They encouraged you to drink deeply of philosophy and different books, and social criticism. You know, ask those questions that are hard to ask and taboo, but don’t be afraid to hear the answer. It [the Catholic School] was a healthy learning environment, and it very much fostered a deep love of learning within me.

Following high school, Dale started attending a public HBCU, but he was not happy there.

There were things he liked about attending an HBCU, “It was the first time I had ever not been a minority at anyplace, and I did get a lot of the idea that I wanted to be a professor from my time there.” He explained, however, that “It was just not a good fit socially. I was from Black middle class and into different styles of music, different styles of clothing. I was a sore thumb there.”

He transferred to a public PWI, and was transfixed by the change in environment. “It just felt like it was really liberal, you know. It was the first time I saw gay couples, the first time I saw

interracial couples; couples of all different combinations. I was just...it was like there's something happening here." He felt like he was in the right place.

In contemplating his early experiences, Morgan recalled that a tone was set for him to achieve academically from the very beginning. He was the only Black student in his class in elementary school:

I was bussed from my working class Black neighborhood, because of integration, to a fabulously wealthy White suburb area and went to like one of the wealthiest public schools in the state. It's even ranked, I think, in the country. So the students I went to school with at that time were a bunch of prominent Jewish kids. [...] That's an important distinction, 'cause those kids are very serious about academics, and there was a whole bunch of prominent White kids. I was in Gifted and in the advanced sections among my White peers and friends. When I got to middle school and I was among these kids, it was natural for me to compete to be near the top of them academically. These were really high-achieving kids, and it just helped raise my standard. We pushed each other and, you know, I took school seriously. All the way from K through eight, I took school seriously.

He remembered, with pride, being singled out along with another student in the sixth grade to make a presentation in front of his classmates because their research projects were chosen as best in the grade. "I stood out above them academically, and that was a very empowering moment for me that I have always carried with me."

Morgan's serious attitude towards school didn't stay with him through high school, however, as he soon realized that high school was a whole new, different environment. He attended high school in an area closer to his home that was still predominantly White, but had a high percentage of Black students. Because of his academic background, he was placed in all Honor's classes and again was the only Black student in the class. There was a social divide between White and Black students in the school, and like most teenagers his focus on academics shifted to other things. He spoke about it, seemingly with some regret:

So, just hanging out with my White friends wasn't gonna work if I planned on ever getting a girlfriend. So, I sat at the lunch table with my Black friends, socialized with

them, and none of my Black friends were in my classes. I was in Honor's classes, only Black kid in there; and I'm like, I'm missing out on the girls. So, I got out of the Honor's program, went into regulars and just said screw academics, and just focused on socializing until I graduated.

It was Morgan's mother that provided the impetus for him to examine his life during his second year of college when he sought her advice on changing his major. In his words, "I kicked butt academically from that moment forward, and I loved it. I loved studying English. I loved everything about becoming an English teacher."

Unlike the other participants in this study, Daryl did not feel inspired to succeed by his early educational experiences. He was supported by the grandmother that raised him, but was repeatedly frustrated at school. Growing up in a small town in the South and attending a racially diverse public school, he felt "unchallenged" and "was always being punished for being overly creative and for wanting to be a leader, not a follower." Despite the feeling that he was "discouraged from attending college," Daryl persisted. He recalled that he "was an unorthodox student and learned to turn what could have been a very challenging secondary experience and make it work for me to get to a diploma and beyond." He chose to attend a public HBCU for undergraduate school based on its location, access, and perceived leadership opportunities. For Daryl, college (undergraduate) was the first time he really felt happy being in school, and he formed relationships with a few mentors that provided support along the way. One professor in particular, he said "took me under his wing and gave me good advice. He helped me with what classes to take, and it was him that got me thinking about going to graduate school."

**A Focus on the Value of Attaining a College Degree.** Hand in hand with the support participants received from family members and teachers was a focus on the value of attending college and attaining a degree. At some point in their academic career, it was instilled in each of the participants that attending college and graduating with a degree was the path to success, or



proof of it. It happened at different times and because of different reasons for these eight participants, but it happened nonetheless.

According to Bob, he may not have even attended college if not for a Black female guidance counselor at his high school. He explained, “Coincidentally, she was the mother to my best friend, my female best friend through elementary, middle and high school, and she pushed us to look at post-secondary education.” It was the guidance counselor who convinced Bob that college was a way out of the small town where he grew up. Bob explained his desire not to get “caught up in staying” in that town “because there’s nothing there. Nothing is there.” Later, as he prepared to graduate with his first degree, he remembered trying to impart that same advice to family members. “I’m getting ready to graduate, and you know, I think education is the best thing going. So, like, I’m trying to convince my younger brother, even my older brother and all my cousins, to get out! Get away from home and go to college.”

Like Bob, Glenn didn’t consciously decide he was going to college until midway through high school. Even though it required student loans, Glenn explained that, thanks to his mother, he became convinced that going to college after high school was really his only choice. He remembered, “I was 16 when my mother told me [...] when I finished high school, I would have to get out of the house. She told me it was either college or the Army, so .... yeah, college was the next thing.” Glenn laughed as he told the story of his mother’s “ultimatum.” Glenn didn’t believe his mother was being mean or actually going to force him out of the house. It was just “her way of setting him up for the next level” and getting him to give some serious thought to his future.

The desire to have a good career and the advice of family members made all the difference for Tyrese and Daryl in deciding that a college education was important. Tyrese

recalled that it was early middle school when his teachers “began talking about career pathways and asking them what they wanted to be when they grew up.” Those questions from his teachers led to conversations at home with his older brother: “My brother was ten years older than me, so by that time he had gone to college. Those conversations about school were had at home, as well. There was reflection and conversation on what he was doing, and why it was important to go to college to have the career you wanted.” Daryl revealed that it was his grandmother’s reassurances that he was capable of going to college and succeeding that convinced him to pursue a degree. In his words, “She taught me to never give up on myself no matter what other people said, or didn’t say.” He said she also helped him realize that “the career path I wanted was going to be very limited without a college degree.”

Three of the participants recollected that they always knew they were going to go to college, and there was never any question or doubt about it. From an early age, Carl said that he always believed he would go to college. He had two older sisters who attended college. He even had the chance to witness his mother’s return to college to get her degree. He remembers going to night classes with her when he was six or seven years old. The prospect of attending college was cemented for him when he visited his second oldest sister on campus at the college she was attending. Coincidentally, it was SSU, the same university Carl would later attend straight through from undergraduate to completion of his doctorate.

I was about fourteen, and I remember coming to campus with her when she was moving in for the first time, and then visiting her on campus. I was like – Wow! This is what college is about. That’s when it became definite in my mind. It was not a matter of if or when. I told myself, ‘You’re going to college.’

Rick, too, had a family that placed great emphasis on going to college; not a surprise considering both his parents had doctorates. Conversations his parents had with him, he said, were not about

*whether* he would go to college. They were “more along the lines of what did you want to do when you went to college, and where did you want to go.”

Dale’s early expectations regarding college were not instilled so much by his parents, he believes, as they were by the nuns, Brothers of the Sacred Heart, and teachers during his middle and high school years. Upon reflection, he said he realized his parents probably intended for him to go to college and that was why they sacrificed financially to send him to parochial schools. However, the prospect of a college education began for him at school, where he says it was a “foregone assumption” that all the students would attend college. He remembered taking part in “College Days in middle school when teachers and students would wear college colors to school instead of the regular uniforms.” He recalled that the expectation of attending college was everywhere. He remembers seeing “college banners hanging in the hallways” from local colleges, and from “schools like Howard, Harvard, Yale, and Notre Dame.” He also fondly remembered taking field trips to local and regional college campuses. “We were always doing something tied in with colleges,” he said. “I mean; it was really planted in your head.”

Morgan’s stance towards the desire to attend college and the value of a degree changed over time as he progressed through school. When he was younger (elementary and middle school), he said that he always knew he wanted to go to college. He associated a college degree with success. Then, when he got to high school, his opinion regarding the importance of a college education changed. Coming out of high school, Morgan was initially only planning to attend college as a means to getting employed in a factory job, or with the city. He actually had no intention of even finishing college. For him, the idea or notion of success was no longer tied to education, at least as far as obtaining a degree. He only saw it as “a stepping stone” to another type of success gained by securing a job with good benefits and steady employment.

The goal of my peer group was to get a job working for one of the factories, or working for the city. They had good benefits, high pay; that's what all of us, that's what success was to us; and going to college was a way to get hired, get preferential hiring, and first crack at opportunities for advancement. It didn't require a degree. It just required that you're one of the guys who got some college under your belt.

Since his approach to his classes was not that of a student who necessarily planned on graduating from college, his grades were terrible. However, at the beginning of his second year, he had an epiphany of sorts and changed his viewpoint toward the value of a college degree. It was after a candid conversation with his college advisor who questioned his motivation for attending college that he decided, "No, I actually do want to graduate."

### **Impact of Experiences During Graduate School**

In seeking to answer the principal research question, it was important to ask participants questions about different aspects of their graduate school experiences. The second phase of questioning was designed to prompt participants to reflect on those experiences, and the impact the experiences had upon their academic success. Interview questions were related to areas such as their reasons for choosing to pursue a doctorate, their choice to enroll in a doctoral program at a PWI, their relationships with faculty and colleagues in their program, and issues related to race in their coursework. Through examination of the data in the form of their answers to these questions, a few key themes emerged that revealed participants' perspectives of the key factors contributing to their success in a doctoral program at a PWI. These themes were categorized into one of four areas: Program Characteristics, Racial Identity, Race Talk, and Support from Others.

**Program Characteristics.** Analysis of the data revealed that there were certain features or characteristics of the Higher Education Graduate Program that appealed to participants. They perceived these characteristics to be especially important to their academic success as they pursued their doctorates. Characteristics of the program identified by participants as important to

their academic success were: 1) Black faculty; 2) a social justice aspect; 3) mentor relationships; 4) financial aid; and 5) feeling valued.

**Black Faculty.** All participants in the study spoke about how important it was to them that there were Black members of the faculty in their program. Tyrese discussed how it was a deciding factor for him when he was making a decision about which university to attend for his doctoral studies. “I consciously looked for institutions or programs that had Black faculty members,” he said. “I actually wanted to study with a Black faculty member, and only applied to places where I knew they had Black faculty members.” While it may not have been a requirement for choosing a program based on whether there were faculty of color or not, other participants were certainly cognizant of being given the chance to take classes taught by Black faculty members. Morgan, who had classes with three different Black faculty spoke about how surprising it was for him: “Those three professors were more African-American teachers than I’ve ever had – K through the end of my master’s degree combined.” Morgan also voiced what he perceived as the difference between his White and Black professors.

My experiences with the White professors were great and solid, but they weren’t inspirational. My guess is that their road to getting where they were was probably not the same type of road that the African-American professors took to get to where they are because I didn’t get anything extra from them. I got excellence from the White professors academically, but I didn’t get that extra something from them that I got from my African-American professors. To me, really, it transcended race. Just being in class with these professors was inspirational. It was like the best experience in my life.

Carl voiced his belief that it made it easier for him to succeed because he saw himself represented as an academic, “Once you see folks that look like you, doing the same kind of thing you want to be doing, I think it makes it easier to get into the frame of mind that you can do it.” Other participants were able to recall experiences of comfort and an ease of association with

their Black professors. Daryl explained, “They have personal experience of some of the same issues faced by minorities in graduate school.” For Glenn, it opened up lines of communication:

With the professors of color, I felt like they knew the language. Like, if I threw a slang out, or some slang out there, just to test the water, I think they would know it. At least they would understand it. I feel like we’re on the same playing field, like the language is known. I think the interactions are interesting, because there’s a similar language that’s assumed, but I think because of their presence it makes it a safe space to attempt it. They’re not stuffy; they didn’t really say, ‘Don’t try this.’ They weren’t pontificating on, you know, the Black experience. They weren’t super academic in a class setting.

Dale, too, thought communication was easier with Black faculty. He elaborated, “I think it allowed conversation to flow more freely. I think it’s more of a personal comfort factor.” Rick spoke about the comfort level he experienced in his classes with Black professors as an “awareness of the issues that add complexity to the situation of being Black at an institution like this (a PWI).” The development of close relationships with Black faculty members was instrumental in Bob’s academic success throughout his graduate studies. To him, “it almost felt like those faculty members were family because when you did something wrong, they would tell you. It was that kind of relationship.” He did not receive the same outside support from White professors. He explained, “The Black professors that I had pushed me way further than my White professors. I could do what I was supposed to do, or not; it didn’t matter to my White professors. My Black professors – if I turned in some half-ass work, they would call me out in a heartbeat. They would say, ‘No, this is not your best work. You’re better than this.’”

**Social Justice Aspect.** Five of the eight participants’ responses revealed that they valued their graduate school experience because it possessed a social justice aspect. Bob remembered participating in an exercise, “It was based off social justice issues and identifying racially, and in terms of gender and sexual orientation. We had open and honest conversations that I never had. This was in my master’s program, then those same kinds of issues were brought out when I got

here for my doctorate.” Carl believes that social justice issues are what attracts many Black males to enter the field of education because they perceive it as one of the ways “you can really change things and have an impact on your community.” He described the doctoral program as one that was “driven by social justice,” and thought it highly important that “a lot of issues we deal with in class are social justice issues.” For Dale, the inclusion and exploration of social justice issues is about honesty:

Some people are uncomfortable with the topics because, you know, it begins to push buttons that people don’t like to have pushed. People are able to see the levers and the pipes that are the system. [...] Some people don’t like having their prejudices and their biases exposed in front of them, and this department will do that. You know, we’re here, we deal with what is. We don’t deal with the narratives that people wish to say, and we don’t deal with wishes. We deal with what is before us; the structures of society. We don’t hide away from them. That’s what I like about the department and the program. We’re not going to deny what we see to make somebody feel good.

As a “product of a higher education program that is fascinated with social justice and critical cultural issues,” Glenn believed the social justice aspect of the program influenced his research interests. “I think my scholarly interest became different from what it was in the beginning, and it was well accepted because I feel like that’s what this program was founded on.” Bob recalled talking with other students, “I had a conversation with a couple of master’s students, and new doctoral students that they were like, yeah, there is a strong social justice feel to this program.” Tyrese said he tried to bring social justice issues to the forefront of his interactions with others because it was a way for him to get to know where others stood. “I’m never afraid to bring up [social justice] issues because I’m not asking questions to be spiteful or to incite a fight or anything. I just like to get people’s perspectives on different things.” It’s his hope that confronting issues of social justice will provide an agent for change, “Hopefully they want to hear my perspective too, and maybe we can come together on certain ideas of how we can change what’s going on in education or in our communities.”

Mentor Relationships. Mentors played an important role in the academic success of all the participants. Bob spoke about how important it was to him when the professor he considered his mentor, a Black male faculty member, gave him his cell phone number: “Some people probably look at that like it doesn’t mean anything, but to me it meant a lot. I felt like he was invested in me.” Bob graduated with his terminal degree feeling like he had been challenged and set up to be successful. Dale identified his mentor as a Black male professor, and said that he wanted a mentor that would challenge him, as well. He characterized himself as somewhat confrontational and needed someone like himself to be able to engage him honestly. He said that he got along well with his mentor and believed it was because the mentor was a Black male. “It’s easy to talk to him,” Dale said, “because he’s a Black male PhD, and I’m trying to be a Black male PhD. We’re very frank with each other.”

Glenn described his mentor, a Black male professor, as someone he really looked up to and respected. His relationship with his mentor “felt genuine” and he appreciated that it was very informal. “I knew when I walked into the room that Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ was gonna dap me up, give me a handshake and embrace me. He could have stayed in his Associate Professor mode, but he came down to me, to my level. I respected that. It made me respect him and his work.” Tyrese considered two faculty members to be his mentors while he was in the doctoral program, a Black male professor and a White female professor. He reported that he developed “relationships built from mutual respect with both mentors,” and that they provided guidance for him “academically, personally, and professionally.” He did believe that he might discuss some things with the mentor who was a Black male that he might “second guess before discussing them with a White female.”



Three of the participants, Daryl, Rick, and Morgan, contended that race was not a factor at all in their development of relationships with their mentors. Daryl responded that he was completely focused on “completing my studies in a timely fashion and gaining as much experience as possible.” Any relationships he built with mentors were “based on that understanding,” and he chose to solicit help from the best person available to answer his questions regardless of race. Rick’s mentors are both White female professors who he sought out because they are considered experts in his field of research. Rick believed one of the mentors is so completely nonjudgmental about race that “she works with a degree of freedom where she is almost completely unaware of race.” His other mentor, Rick said, “works in her research with people whose voices are muted because of race or gender, so sometimes I think she is doing or saying things to make sure I’m comfortable, that I don’t feel marginalized.” I asked Rick if he thought it was genuine on her part, or if he believed it was more because she was worried about what his perception of her might be. He replied, “You know, I can say I totally think it is genuine on her part.” Morgan speaks well of all mentors he had relationships with:

I had very high quality relationships with mentor faculty members – Black, White, male, female. I don’t think race had anything to do with it. They were all extremely high quality mentor opportunities, and they gave me a lot of support. All these people I mentioned, they also mentored other students, White students and students of other races, too. I don’t think race is a factor in those relationships. I just think they were good mentors.

Carl sought multiple mentors, throughout his academic career, especially in graduate school. He talked about the role they played in his success:

Having a mentor, not a mentor, but *mentors*; that really helped me out so much. Not only did I have one person where I could go for advice, I had a group of people; a consortium. Different people I could see and talk to about the things I could do to better myself and my career. I feel like the things I’ve done I can attribute to having a strong group of mentors. They protected me, kind of buffered me, from some of those really negative experiences that some other folks say they have had by giving me advice about what I should be doing, and what direction I should be going in.

Carl described his mentor group as “a collection of all different kinds of people.” They included Black professors and administrators he worked with on campus, a White female professor, and other students in the doctoral program who were older than him. Carl admitted to being more comfortable with Black mentors because, “I think most people are more comfortable with people you share similar characteristics with,” but he typically “just tried to find the best person to talk to.” Carl gave an example of the type of advice he received from one of his mentors, T.M., an older doctoral student. He explained that T.M. “showed [me] the game” by telling him he should choose a dissertation topic early, then write all his papers for his different courses about issues related to that same topic. By doing that, T.M told him that he was effectively writing the literature review for his dissertation and getting his coursework done at the same time.

Financial Aid. Seven of the eight participants in this study relied on some type of financial aid to enroll in graduate school for their doctoral degree. For several of them, that was one of the primary factors affecting their decision to attend SSU. A financial aid package was crucial for Bob, who would be leaving a job to return to graduate school for his doctorate. “If I was going to go back to school,” Bob explained, “it had to be full-time, and the only way I could do that was with some financial help from the school.” When Bob was told, “You come here, we’ll get you in school” by an administrator in the program, he accepted a graduate assistantship and began working towards his doctorate. Rick secured a graduate assistantship position working on a grant being run by his major professor. Carl worked on campus as the House Director for his fraternity during the pursuit of his Master’s degree. That job combined with a part-time graduate assistantship enabled him to stay and SSU and continue straight on through into the doctoral program. For Carl, “It just worked out where it made sense financially and

helped me decide where I needed to go. That's probably one of the big reasons why I chose SSU over leaving to go to another school."

Daryl and Tyrese, both concerned with "access financially" were also able to secure graduate assistantships so they could enroll in the program. Dale, because of his teaching experience, was able to get a Teaching Assistantship. "It was basically a free ride, because tuition was waived for assistants, so I took it." Glenn, who had narrowed his choice of a doctorate program down to two choices decided on SSU because, "They were the first one to offer me an assistantship." Morgan was the only participant in this study who did not have an assistantship. He continued working full-time in an outside position while pursuing his doctorate.

**Feeling Valued.** One of the themes that emerged from participants' responses that appeared to contribute to academic success was that they felt valued by program faculty. Six participants cited examples of instances or experiences where they felt appreciated for the contributions they could make to the program, the school, or their field of study. A key factor for several of them was the idea that they believed they were treated as individuals, and not just another applicant, during their decision making process regarding where they would attend graduate school.

Three of the participants pointed out that a personal phone call from a faculty member or administrator was instrumental in their decision to enroll in the doctoral program at SSU. Bob, concerned about the financial impact of leaving a full-time job to return to graduate school, was reassured after a phone call with an administrator who told him, "You come here, we'll get you in school." Other schools had told him that he could apply and possibly be awarded an assistantship, Bob said, but no one else made him feel like "they were really willing to work for

me and help me because they wanted me to come to their school.” Tyrese was impressed with the attitude and friendliness of the faculty member who spoke to him on the phone after Tyrese sent an email inquiring about the program:

I just sent an email with like a general cover letter...He gave me a call back that same day, and we talked about the program. We talked about what a PhD really is, and etc., and he invited me to come visit. He was like, ‘Oh, you should come down just to see what we’re doing, you know, sit in on a class,’ and I did that. The other schools I applied to, you know, they did have conversations with me, but it was more of a formal application process. Get the application and apply, then being invited for interviews, but here, I felt more of an investment. I felt like he was more invested in me and my development.

Glenn also recalled how a phone call from a faculty member helped him make his decision regarding the program. He remembered speaking with Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ on the phone on the date that was the deadline for submitting an application to the program, and he knew his materials would not get to the university on time. Believing it was too late to even be considered for admission, he called to talk to the professor about deferring his application until the next semester. Instead, he was told to send an electronic version for review while the hard copies were being mailed. It was instrumental in his decision, “I felt like, wow, nobody else would do that for me. They would just tell me it was too late. So what happened is SSU kind of jumped up to the top of my list after talking to Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. It made me feel like they thought I was worth having there.”

Another aspect of the program and department that made them feel valued was the accessibility of the faculty while they were pursuing their doctoral degree. “I think the faculty are very approachable and very accessible. I’ve never had a hard time getting in touch with any of my professors,” explained Dale. Tyrese echoed that sentiment, “If I had questions, they were very responsive and set up times to meet with me to talk. They had a very good open door policy.” Two participants, Bob and Carl, were grateful for being given the opportunity to co-

teach a course with one of their professors after they had finished their coursework. Bob spoke appreciatively of the faculty member who “invited me to work on a journal article with them” because it “made me feel like I was being taken seriously.” Daryl summed it up, “The program has a strong history of graduating students of color, specifically African-American males, and I feel like they wanted me to be part of that history.”

**Racial Identity.** Participants in the study identified racial identity as a factor in the way they experienced the doctoral program, but they varied on the importance that it played in their academic success. Bob recalled that he was surprised when he began taking classes for his doctorate, “It was different than I thought it would be. There were a lot of Black students in my classes, and I never expected to come here and see that kind of racial makeup.” Bob feels there is a benefit to going to school with classes that have a diverse makeup because it “takes the pressure off when you don’t have to be the rebuttal as the only minority student in a class” like he thought he did in undergraduate school. He also emphasized that while he was “extremely passionate” about issues central to race and identity, it was something that was “smaller on his agenda” as he got closer to finishing his degree. Instead, Bob spoke about thinking of racial identity as “only a piece of the puzzle” because he wanted to broaden his research and not “get trapped into being a Black male doing research on Black males.”

Carl, who considered himself equally adept at navigating both predominantly White and predominantly Black environments, also downplayed the impact of racial identity on his academic success. “It hasn’t been totally seamless without any kind of problems or anything like that; but I think that for the most part, once you get to this level, it’s just about connecting with people regardless of skin color.” While acknowledging that race seemed more of a factor in undergraduate school and during his Master’s program, he believes the emphasis shifted once he

entered the doctorate program and things became “more academic, where there are folks that are able to connect the theoretical stuff to the actual practical stuff.”

Other participants placed more of a focus on racial identity as something that was endemic to their individuality. Dale, for example, said he was “fiercely protective of his Blackness” believing that “if anybody else can define my Blackness for me, then they have power over me.” He elaborated:

If you ever forget that you’re Black, someone who’s not Black will remind you that you are Black. So, you know, when I say things like ‘I’m proud to be Black,’ what I’m really saying is that I’m okay with myself. I’ve accepted myself for what I am, and it’s very much on a deep personal level. I’m really bent on just owning it and not letting others dictate what it is for me. I just don’t think that there’s a giant playbook we should run by. I think if you ask 100 Black guys what their Blackness means to them, you’ll get 100 answers, and I think that’s the way it should be. We’re not a monolith. I’m very determined not to be put in a monolith.

Glenn also felt that his racial identity is a big part of who he is, “I know my racial identity has influenced my movement in my assistantship, in this program, and I’m happy that I can at least acknowledge that it’s there.” Glenn viewed racial identity as a part of himself that he can’t ignore, feeling that you have to accept it because it’s a part of who you are. He illustrated his viewpoint:

If I were to do something to a White person, I wouldn’t be Glenn. They wouldn’t say ‘Glenn did that.’ I’d be the Black guy that punched them in the face, or the Black guy that cussed them out, or the N-word that got smart with them. It wouldn’t be Glenn, so I struggle with it, but I also feel like it’s where I’m from. Once you don’t acknowledge your racial makeup, you quit acknowledging somebody else’s, and if you don’t recognize mine you’re not seeing me as a full person. I want to show them, like, this is who I am.

Glenn said he believed the doctoral program “provided the avenue to acknowledge difference, not that one is any better than any other, but just different.”

Tyrese, like Glenn, brought up his mother when he discussed racial identity, “From a young age, my mother always taught me to be proud of who I was, to be proud of my Blackness.

She would say, ‘You are a Black man, and an extension of your community.’” Tyrese spoke about how his doctorate, his racial identity, and the expectations of his mother are intertwined. “I’m the first one from my family to get a PhD. I have a cousin who’s a dentist, and some who are lawyers, but I think there’s an expectation that I will always shine a positive light on my family, and be a Black man that will make a positive contribution.” Daryl believed he used his racial identity as motivation. He explained, “I know the statistics. I know Black men don’t pursue graduate education or complete. That caused me to work harder to attempt to shift the curve.” Rick’s sense of racial identity is related to perception. While he said it is “an element that plays into the academic experience,” he doesn’t necessarily tie it to ideas of academic success. Similar to Bob and Carl, Rick saw race as only a part of everything that makes us who we are. “I don’t ever want to sit there and try to lay a template on somebody, and say, ‘Well, this is how you really should be,’ or ‘This is how you should think.’ If anything, it’s more about the idea of interconnectedness; the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, all of it.”

Morgan divulged a belief he had for a long time that the whole concept of racial identity was limiting. He explained that he used to believe “the script of what it means to be Black was limiting because it was written by somebody else. It’s scripted by the media, scripted by White people, even scripted by other Black people.” It was not a script he viewed as “challenging, optimistic, or hopeful” and he wanted something more. Morgan’s response was revealing, “I looked at racial identity as a hindrance, and I didn’t tap into a sense of racial identity at all. I did the opposite.” Morgan recollected the moment that his outlook towards racial identity changed:

My first year in the program, I was talking to Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ (a White female professor) about my dissertation, and she said I should start thinking about my dissertation topic. I said that whatever I decided, I didn’t want it to be a racially identifiable topic. I wanted it to be just a general universal topic, because I felt like race was nothing but a limiting thing. I wanted to try to transcend my racial identity. She challenged me. She asked, ‘Why would you as a Black person not want to do something racially identifiable?’

When she said that, it made me really think about it. It was, like, a very meaningful statement and a very meaningful moment to me. What that inspired me to do was to go and challenge myself to get caught up. I thought I knew Black history and the Black story, and I did to a certain extent. But to get, you know, but to get on an academic level and be able to discuss it with professors and other graduate students, I had to go back and really do a lot of reading. I had to read the masters of the subject, and learn about critical race theory and go back and read people like Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. I did so much reading, it was ridiculous. In my book collection, I now have a whole section of just hardcore Black intellectual literature. I was inspired to go back and educate myself because of Dr. \_\_\_\_\_'s challenge.

It was a powerful moment for Morgan that he credited with giving him a much stronger and useful perspective. He ended by summing up, "It gave me a firm foundation and helped me contribute to discussions about race in the university, and I learned you can't just escape. It's not useful to detach yourself from something that's a part of who you are."

**Race Talk.** Conversations about race, whether with faculty or their peers, were an integral part of the doctoral experience for all the participants in the study. While there were mixed feelings among participants about the degree of effectiveness such conversations had, it was evident in all their responses that they believed having conversations about race were an important part of their doctoral experience. Bob described the frequency of conversations about race, "A million conversations – I can't count how many conversations we had in any one class as it pertained to race, probably nine out of ten. How it played out? It was always different, but it was important." Morgan pointed out that the frequency of conversations about race varied depending on who the professor was. "Black professors insisted on racial discussions when it was right for the topic. The White professors? Some of them did. I'd say maybe fifty percent would engage in discussions about issues of race and gender. The other ones just stuck to the textbook religiously." He, like Bob, also thought it was important to have conversations about issues related to race. He stated, "It was extremely important. It was extremely important because it was so central to what I, what we, do in education."



Rick believed conversations about race were valuable because they “allowed you to step outside yourself and think about how we talk to, or perceive, a student or group or particular demographic of students.” Along with that idea, Rick also explained that he found conversations about race to be situational, based on context, as they “shifted from individual to individual and improvised based on the type of relationship.” Because Rick sees these conversations as fluid and complex, related not just to issues of race but also gender, class, and sexuality, he admitted that he sometimes “filtered” the things he said.

It manifests itself in several different ways, the filter. And sometimes I think about the filter as a way to maybe soften the language a little bit to maybe get across what I’m saying. But at the same time I want to, here comes my whole point; I want to bring people in, right. So, sometimes you have to switch it. You don’t necessarily have to change up the content, but maybe you do have to change up the language just a little bit to bring somebody in, you know.

Daryl also stated that he “discussed race in general terms because it seemed well received by all, and it makes it easier for all to digest without making things too uncomfortable.”

Glenn and Dale, on the other hand, both revealed in their responses that they think it is necessary to make people feel uncomfortable for there to be progress. Glenn explained, “There’s gonna be moments where you don’t feel comfortable saying something, but when you start showing a little bit of you, that racial piece of you, then I say okay. I say it’s okay. Let’s talk about it.” Dale stated, “It’s a conscious decision. I’m trying to come up with solutions to Black situations, and I’m very to the point. I’m not gonna sugar-coat it because I want to help this group of people. I acknowledge that there’s a group experience; that there’s things we think we are bound by.”

Carl sees conversations regarding race as bridges, opportunities to connect and understand each other. His viewpoint became clear as he elaborated on his opinion, “Just to say that this person completely knows what I’m going through, you know, they really can’t. I can’t

know what they're going through. But I think as long as there is a willingness to try to learn, I can really accept and respect that." Tyrese echoed Carl's response, "I'm never afraid to talk about these issues or topics...I just like to get people's perspectives on different things.

Hopefully they want to hear my perspective too, and maybe we can come together on certain ideas of how we can change what's going on in education or in our communities." However, Morgan and Bob came across as more skeptical in their responses. Morgan stated:

I had a lot of those conversations about Black kids and the education system with people who were not African-American. I'd talk to them and listen to them. Then, I'd walk away from the conversations feeling like they're very empathetic and very sympathetic toward the plight of these African-American children, but I don't think they really understand. I don't think they really understand these kids are awesome and just need a chance!

For Bob, conversations in class could be frustrating because he felt that White students were extremely uncomfortable having those conversations. He brought out the point that a lot of students in his classes were either older, current administrators, or future administrators and faculty members who should have been exposed to these settings ripe with racial difference somewhere in their life. He voiced his frustration, "They've been exposed to these settings, but it's like they've never had these conversations. And I'm wondering how they've made it through life this long without having these conversations?" Bob searched for a way to reconcile his perception of the incongruity. He concluded, "I'm like, you know that you are part of a privileged group. Okay, now move beyond that and have some honest conversations. I guess I attributed it to the placement of the institution (a PWI in the South)."

Glenn summed up why he relished the opportunity to engage in conversations regarding race while in the doctoral program at SSU:

I feel like our conversations about race were accepted at this program because they're based on what we were founded on. I feel like my higher education program is gonna be way different from other institutions. Another program may be tense. You know, when

you get in a program and a couple of professors don't know how to deal with race...when it hits that class, it's tense. But in this program, it's almost like, okay, let's talk about it. Where are you coming from with it? How does that make sense to us? The possibility of saying that's not really real, that's a lie. I think that's what this program does, and I think that's what makes it easier for us to have those conversations about race.

**Support from Others.** Much like the support they were given during their early education, participants cited support from others as vital to their academic success during their graduate school experience. The distinction between the support they received during their early educational experiences compared to that received during their graduate school experiences was the additional support they received from their colleagues and other outside sources. Bob credited his fraternity ties with providing a “support network of about 400 professionals that engage in online conversations regarding issues like how to succeed in predominantly White spaces.” Glenn found support within an on-campus organization, the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. He characterized his involvement as minor, but stated that “knowing they were there, that I could turn to them if I needed them, was enough.” Tyrese went to those who were there before him. He explained, “I developed relationships with people who had gotten their degree before me, or who had taken the classes before me, and I think that was very helpful.” Likewise, Carl received support in the form of fellowship with other graduate students. He recalled meeting regularly for “Sunday Dinner,” a potluck supper always held one Sunday a month at the home of a graduate student who organized the gatherings. He elaborated, “We took it upon ourselves to connect and support each other. The ‘Sunday Dinner’ was a place, not just to talk about school, but also to chill and relax. It was about hanging out with some friends and getting away from the grind of being a PhD student, and if you needed to vent, it gave you a place to vent.” Daryl said that he relied on his mentors and family for support when he needed it. Dale, Rick, and Morgan all cited departmental faculty as source of support.

Dale called departmental faculty an “institutional source of strength,” while Rick referred to faculty as “genuine interested and curious in finding out what you do and helping where they can.” Morgan expressed great appreciation for the support he received from the graduate faculty he studied with, stating that he felt “philosophically connected” to some of them. He acknowledged, “There was academic excellence, but they were knowledgeable about so much more and they were willing to share.”

### **Final Perceptions of Participants**

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to consider the breadth of the conversation they had just had with the researcher and reflect on two key issues:

- (1) What did they believe was the most significant hurdle that Black male graduate students had to overcome when attending a PWI?
- (2) What did they believe was the single most important factor contributing to their academic success?

These questions were instrumental in soliciting each participant's overall opinions regarding Black male academic achievement at the doctoral level. It was important to ask them at the end of the interview, as each preceding question was positioned in a manner to facilitate the participants' deep reflection providing a depth and richness to their answers. Simply asking these questions off-the-cuff without laying any groundwork would have likely resulted in shallow, inconsequential answers lacking in individuality. It was my suspicion that asking these two questions singularly may make it difficult to differentiate participants' responses from the prior research on Black male students pursuing other, lower levels of education. The answers to these two questions coupled with responses to questions related to the participants' graduate school

experiences provided a clearer picture of the strategies and resources the Black males in the study utilized while seeking doctoral degrees at a predominantly White institution.

**Most Significant Hurdle to Overcome.** When asked to consider what they viewed as the most significant hurdle for Black male graduate students at a PWI, the participants' responses were fairly similar in nature. Carl advised, "No one should try and get through by themselves. More than anything, you gotta have support. Hardly none of us have family members that have a PhD, so you have to be able to have people you can ask for help." Tyrese gave a similar response. He said, "I think the biggest thing they can do is get out of their own way. Depending on where they are, there may be some institutional hurdles in the way. Just keep knocking on doors until you find the right one and get the answer you need." Morgan cautioned against Black male graduate students letting race become an excuse. He elaborated, "You can't let race become a limitation. You may have to go back and learn some things, but the only way to be successful in a challenging program is to remove any self-limiting ideas and beliefs." Daryl echoed that sentiment. He stated, "They will have to fight against stereotypes that they were admitted because they're a minority, or that they are not as prepared as other students in their program. But they can't let other people tell them who they are. They have to show them they belong there."

Glenn believes Black males can overcome the challenges of attending graduate school at a PWI by "finding their place." He explained, "They have to find that place academically and then be comfortable in that setting so they can feel like they're a part of something. You feel good because you're staying true to who you are." Rick, likewise, expressed the importance of a strong sense of self. "You have to be comfortable being yourself. That strong sense of culture and self is what enables you to go out and interact with people and love difference." Following

along those same lines, Dale responded with one word, “Isolation.” Then he expounded, “They have to get used to being in that environment. You’ve got to move past it, and its gets very disconcerting. It changes everything. They may be the only one, so it’s really how they deal with that isolation.” Bob believes a student can deal with that isolation by “having the drive to finish.” It’s being able to get through, sometimes without support, that Bob suggested was the most significant hurdle for Black male graduate students at a PWI. He elaborated, “They may feel like they’re not being supported by the institution, or their family may not understand why they want a PhD, or there’s a job in the way. There has to be some reason they want to get that degree. I think when you get to the doctoral level, it’s all on you.”

**Most Important Factor in Academic Success.** After guiding participants to reflect about their educational journey for an hour to an hour and a half, they were asked to identify the singular most important factor they believed was responsible for their personal academic success. Though their responses were individualized, there were some commonalities. Daryl, Glenn, and Tyrese all had “family” as a component of their answer. For Daryl, he responded that he believed he was successful because of “the support of mentors and family.” Glenn credited “family and faith” then expanded on what he meant, “I say faith because my family taught me to have faith in myself, and faith that I can do what I set out to do.” Tyrese spoke about the difficulties in persevering through challenges and the desire to sometimes give up while he was pursuing his doctorate. He said, “My family and friends were the support system that really encouraged me to keep going, to really achieve my goals and dreams.”

Carl relied on an inner drive and stated that the key to academic success for him was “resilience.” He explained, “It’s really just being resilient. I would say to myself, ‘I can do this.’ It was really about believing that I was going to do it.” Rick’s answer mirrors that idea. He

credited his success with “having a strong sense of self.” Morgan recalled how he had been a voracious reader his entire life and believed reading influenced his success the most. He elaborated, “The reading that I’ve done throughout my life has built so many connections to academic material and allowed me to overcome academic challenges.” Bob was driven by the lack of Black males in the field of educational administration. “There are not many Black males graduating with doctoral degrees,” he said, “and not that many people of color in high level positions. That’s what drove me to continue on this path.” Finally, Dale was thankful for “a safe and active learning environment” that gave him a “safe space” to develop and “find his voice.” He explained, “The professors here are not trying to clone themselves. They let you be who you are. We have a lot of conversations here that you could only have in a safe, open place, and I don’t think you can find that in a lot of other institutions.”

### **Summary of Chapter**

The factors that contributed to the academic success of Black males seeking a doctoral degree in Higher Education at a predominantly White institution can be grouped into three main categories: 1) the Impact of Early Experiences Related to Education; 2) the Impact of Experiences During Graduate School; and 3) the Final Perceptions of Participants. The impact of early experiences related to education could be divided into two main components that participants believed contributed to their successful pursuit of a doctoral degree: 1) Support from Family and Teachers; and 2) a Focus on the Value of Attaining a College Degree. Findings also indicated that the impact of experiences during graduate school could be further divided into a few key themes that emerged from participants' responses regarding Black male graduate student academic achievement at a PWI. These themes were categorized into four areas: 1) Program Characteristics, which included Black faculty, a social justice aspect, mentor relationships,

financial aid, and feeling valued; 2) Racial Identity; 3) Race Talk; and 4) Support from Others. Finally, the last main category, the final perceptions of participants includes summaries of participants' responses labeled as: a) the most significant hurdle to overcome, and b) the most important factor in academic success.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in a Higher Education program at a predominantly White institution. Face-to-Face interviews were conducted with eight participants to gather data related to the educational experiences of the Black male subjects throughout their academic career, with particular emphasis on their graduate school experiences. The overarching research question for this study was: What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominately White institution?

Sub-questions assisting in this research are:

- A) How did early educational experiences promote academic success?
- B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking doctoral degrees at a predominately White institution?

This chapter contains the discussion of the major findings, a visual representation of the findings, recommendations, and the researcher's conclusions.

#### **Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

Understanding, or recognizing, the various factors contributing to the academic success of Black male doctoral students attending a PWI is a complex issue that necessitated deep reflective thought on behalf of the participants. To prompt this reflection, questions were asked regarding the participants' experiences related to their early education (elementary, secondary, undergraduate) and their graduate school education. Themes that emerged during discussion of the participants' academic achievement during their early education were the support they received from family and teachers, and a focus on the value of attaining a college degree.

Themes related to the impact of participants' experiences during their graduate school education

could be categorized into four main areas: 1) Program Characteristics, further subdivided into factors labeled a) Black faculty, b) social justice aspect, c) mentor relationships, d) financial aid, and e) feeling valued; 2) Racial Identity; 3) Race Talk; and 4) Support from Others. Finally, the last main theme to emerge from participants' responses were their final perceptions regarding the most significant hurdle to overcome for Black graduate students attending a PWI, and the most important factor in the participants' own academic success. A graphical representation of the factors contributing to the academic success of Black males in a doctoral program at a PWI can be found in Appendix E.

### **Impact of Early Educational Experiences Related to Education**

**Support from Family or Teachers.** In their article on enhancing academic climate for Black male students, Bonner and Bailey (2006) call attention to an overriding narrative that Black male students' "experiences in K-12 and higher education contexts have been at best chilly and at worst hostile" (p. 24). Judging by the participants' responses to questions about their early educational experiences, there is some support for this idea. Consider Rick's experience with his fifth grade Math teacher embarrassing him in front of his class, and the negative impact that had on his self-esteem. Daryl consistently felt "unchallenged" even "punished" by his K-12 experiences. Bob didn't believe his teachers cared about preparing their students for college. Glenn, who moved and changed schools, was forced into taking vocational classes in electrical wiring.

However, the theme driving this narrative fails to recognize that there can also be supportive relationships and positive experiences for Black male students. That is precisely the problem with deficit oriented research. It focuses on the negative and does not acknowledge the alternative point of view. While these four participants' experiences would certainly be

characterized as negative, they also had positive support that enabled them to persevere and move past these unfortunate happenings. In recognizing and calling for an anti-deficit approach to research on Black male education, I am not advocating that we ignore the difficulties that exist for Black males in early education. On the contrary, we must recognize those difficulties as real barriers to achievement that are perpetuated by a singular lens that blames educational inequities on the student as opposed to the system.

Out of eight participants in the study, seven of them identified early support from family and teachers as an important factor in their academic success. Carl and Glenn gave examples of how their parents put them in situations to set them up for success. Bob, Tyrese, and Dale spoke about a teacher that made a difference in their life. Rick and Morgan provided examples of experiences from their early education when both parents and teachers provided support that impacted their academic success. Even Daryl, who reported negative K-12 experiences, believed he benefitted from the mentorship and support of a college professor during the second year of his undergraduate studies. Providing examples of the ways that family and teacher support has enabled students to overcome their difficulties is one of the ways we can promote positive interactions early in the schooling of young Black males.

**A Focus on the Value of Attaining a College Degree.** Along with providing support, family and teachers provided the participants in this study with an understanding for the value and importance of a college degree. Without taking that first step towards an undergraduate degree, none of the participants could have continued their journey towards the realization of their final academic goal. In their study, Freeman and Huggans (2009) found that Black first-generation college students are significantly less likely to succeed than those whose parents have earned a college degree. That finding is supported by this study, as only one of the eight

participants in this study was the first in his family to attend college. Bob was pushed to consider college by a guidance counselor. Tyrese and Daryl listened to a family member's advice regarding the value of a college degree and its importance to a desirable career path. For Glenn, a mother's "ultimatum" forced him to consider college a viable option for his future. Carl and Rick followed the examples set by parents and family siblings. Dale knew of no other option thanks to the teachings of the parochial schools that he attended. Finally, Morgan came to understand the value of a college degree when contemplating a difficult choice presented to him by a college administrator.

It should be pointed out that while almost all the participants were not the first in their families to go to college, five of them were the first to go to graduate school. Whether or not family members attended graduate school does not seem to be a factor in the potential for graduate school success. The benefit comes from the realization that achieving a college degree will empower them as individuals and provide career choices they might otherwise not have. This benefit can be realized when the family member shares the positive outcomes of their college experience. For example, as Rick and Tyrese's brothers did with them, or when Carl visited his sister on campus while she was attending college. For others, the benefit is realized when the student hears an influential adult or family member extoll the virtues of attaining a college education. Such was the case with Bob and his guidance counselor, or Dale and the religious orders that ran the Catholic schools he attended. Harper's (2012) findings related to getting to college reported that "parents and other family members reinforced to the achievers that college was the most viable pathway to social uplift and success" (p. 9). Those findings are mirrored and completely substantiated by the findings in this study.

## **Impact of Experiences During Graduate School**

**Program Characteristics.** Participants in the study frequently referenced factors contributing to their academic success as characteristics of their Higher Education program. Analyzing the data within which these program characteristics were revealed led to their assignment into one of five components: 1) Black faculty; 2) a social justice aspect; 3) mentor relationships; 4) financial aid; and 5) feeling valued.

**Black Faculty.** Participants reported that one of the most important features of their academic program was the opportunity to study with Black faculty. According to one line of research, Black male students attending PWIs typically have strained and unsupportive relationships with White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). It is my contention, based on the characterization of faculty interactions in the responses of participants in this study, that this supposition is not always accurate. While some of the participants' responses indicated a slight difficulty in feeling completely comfortable communicating with White faculty, it could hardly be characterized as strained and unsupportive. Several of the participants also reported positive and supportive engagements with White faculty in the program, characterizing them as "great and solid" or "high quality relationships." Half of them acknowledged one or more White faculty members as mentors, and said it didn't matter if they were Black or White, they just wanted to find the best person to talk to regarding their situation.

One of Guiffrida's (2005) other notions, that Black students perceive Black faculty to be more understanding, supportive, and more student-centered than White faculty, would seem to be borne out by the participants' responses. When working or studying with Black faculty, participants reported feeling more comfortable working with them because they were: a) able to

communicate more naturally with them; b) more receptive to constructive criticism from Black faculty; c) able to visualize themselves in the same position; and d) more understanding due to a commonality of life experiences.

**Social Justice Aspect.** Five of the eight participants revealed that one of the factors contributing to their academic success was that the program had a social justice aspect. Palmer et al. (2014) posits that Black male students are more likely to view the curriculum at a PWI as culturally exclusive, and that many Black males are immediately faced with being the “Other” when they set foot on the campus of a PWI. This viewpoint, however, can be countered by classes that make a conscious effort to include sources, classes, and experiences that include the Black perspective. Such is the case with the program explored in this study. When one peruses some of the course titles, a social justice aspect is suggested by courses such as “Race and Gender in Higher Education,” or “Engaging Taboo Topics in College Teaching,” with required reading in texts such as Friere’s (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or Fox’s (2004) *When Race Breaks Out*.

Bob remembered participating in an exercise based off social justice issues. Carl described the program as “driven by social justice issues,” and Glenn believed the social justice aspect influenced his research interests. Tyrese said the presence of a social justice aspect facilitated interactions between students of differing perspectives. Interestingly, the inclusion of a social justice aspect was not mentioned as one of the factors facilitating academic success in previous research. A program with a social justice aspect has several advantages over a program that does not. It creates a more open, honest environment for conversations to take place that deal with controversial topics related to issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Such a program may also engender in students a desire to become an agent for change once they

graduate and take positions or begin careers in other settings. A program with a social justice aspect also has the potential to attract new students who care about social justice issues and increase enrollment in the doctoral program.

**Mentor Relationships.** Much of the previous research counts mentor relationships as crucial to the academic success of Black males. That belief is certainly echoed by the findings of this study, as mentors played an important role in the academic success of all the participants. The participants professed to have great respect for their mentors in the SSU program. For some of the participants, the race of their mentor was a factor. Those that had a Black male mentor asserted that communication was more natural and “easy” given that they shared a common bond. The value of cross-cultural mentor relationships may be called into question by previous research purporting that Black male students typically have strained and unsupportive relationships with White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). However, the responses of participants in this study indicate that the notion of strained relationships between faculty and students of different color may well be on its way to becoming a thing of the past. Several of the Black male graduate students in this study were more than willing to work with White faculty as their mentors. While some of the participants did indicate they were more comfortable working with a Black mentor, three of the participants claimed that race was not even a factor in the development of relationships with their mentors. The argument could be made that the degree to which a Black male doctoral student is comfortable working with a mentor of another race is much more a matter of individual preference and is predicated on a variety of reasons, rather than a product of the difficulty of different races to forge working partnerships.

Financial Aid. Kuh et al. (2007) and Mason (1998) have established that financial barriers are one of the main obstacles to Black male postsecondary academic success. Indeed, a majority of research in the literature review listed financial aid as one of the primary factors in Black male students' academic success due to issues of accessibility to post-secondary institutions. Participants in this study also cited financial concerns as a major factor in their ability to attend graduate school and attain academic success. Of eight participants in the study, seven of them either needed assistantships to attend SSU, or were enticed by the offer of one. Financial aid was critical for Bob, Glenn, Tyrese, and Daryl as they all left full-time positions and relocated over considerable distances to enroll in the program. Doctoral students tend to be older and may have more financial burdens than younger students. Financial aid in the form of assistantships and/or scholarships for Black male students is instrumental in allowing accessibility to doctoral programs.

Feeling Valued. Palmer et al. (2014) explains in their research that many Black males are immediately faced with being the "Other" when they set foot on the campus of a PWI. Participants' responses in this study indicated ways for programs to counter that feeling of being "Othered" by making students feel valued by program faculty and administration. While it may be tempting for some to characterize "feeling valued" as a variation on the theme of support. They are not the same thing. Participants who felt valued by program faculty and administration believed their presence in the program was desired, or they felt appreciated for the contributions they could make to the program, the university, or their field of study.

In terms of students' desire to feel valued, it was evoked by a faculty member or administrator's recognition of the student as an individual with talents that could enhance or contribute to the reputation of the program. Three of the participants (Bob, Glenn, and Tyrese)



recalled instances of feeling valued after receiving phone calls, invites to visit campus and sit in on a class, and an offer of an assistantship. The participants' description of the experience made it sound similar to the recruiting of a highly prized NCAA athlete. Each of them indicated that "being recruited" made them feel valued and did indeed sway them towards enrolling in the program at SSU. Glenn explained it succinctly, "They made me feel like they thought I was worth having there."

Other qualities of the program that made participants feel valued were the accessibility of faculty and inclusion. It made a difference to participants if the faculty were approachable and accessible, especially if they answered email or set up appointments in a timely manner. Both Dale and Tyrese mentioned the open door policy of their faculty members as examples. Bob and Carl felt included when they were invited to co-teach a class once they had completed their coursework. Bob felt valued after receiving an offer to serve as a co-author on a journal article and the subsequent presentation at a conference. Policies and practices that make Black male doctoral students feel valued in the program will engender feelings of loyalty and satisfaction, enhance working relationships between faculty and doctoral students, and promote persistence leading to higher completion rates. Valued students are successful students.

**Racial Identity.** According to Palmer et al. (2014), several studies have established a link between positive racial identity and high achieving academic performance. Participants in the study did identify racial identity as a factor in their educational experiences while in the doctoral program. However, their responses seem to indicate that a positive racial identity played more of a factor in the formation of a positive sense of self and how they chose to navigate their environment, than it did their actual academic success. Indeed, behind the responses of several

of them there would seem to be an element of rejection to the notion of their identity being reduced to any one categorization.

Dale, for example, stated his belief that no one else can define his Blackness for him because issues of Blackness are deeply personal and individual. Bob talked about racial identity in regards to his relief that in many of his doctoral courses he didn't have to be a spokesperson for all Black people because there were other Black students in the class, also adding that issues of race became "smaller on his agenda" as he neared graduation. Carl deliberately stated that he considered his racial identity to be a very small factor in his success. In his mind, success was about "connecting with people, regardless of skin color." For Rick, it is antithetical to discuss race without also discussing class, gender, and sexuality. Glenn felt his racial identity was an important part of who he was as an individual, but did not necessarily relate it to his academic success. Morgan revealed that, for a time, he rejected his racial identity as a Black male because he felt the narrative of the Black male in society was limiting. Then, after being challenged, he actually went through an intense phase of introspection and sought to understand concepts related to racial identity through researching and reading the writings of prominent Black intellectuals. Of all participants, Daryl was the only one that specifically tied his racial identity to his drive to be academically successful, citing the small number of Black males who attain doctorates as the driving force that caused him to work harder to not be a member of the statistical group composed of Black males who do not complete their degree.

The situation is further complicated when you bring elements of masculinity into it. Bonner and Bailey (2006) and Palmer et al. (2014) discuss racial identity in conjunction with masculinity when they connect Black masculinity to accountability, character, community service, and academic excellence. Indeed, in discussing his racial identity, Tyrese brought out

how he wanted to live up to his mother's expectations that he, as a Black man, would always represent his family and community in a positive way. It is problematic to tie notions of Blackness to masculinity because it tends to homogenize a positive concept of the Black male as one that only fits a certain type or mold. The findings from the data point to the difficulty inherent in generalizing factors for success that are found in one demographic group and applying them to others that are somewhat similar. While an overwhelming majority of previous postsecondary research regarding Black males has been done on Black males who are undergraduates or attending community colleges, it would seem that racial identity is not as strong an indicator of academic success at the doctoral level as it is at others. Yes, racial identity is loosely linked to the academic success of Black males pursuing doctoral degrees, but only so far as it goes to the formation of a strong, positive concept of self. The strong concept of self that allows participants to be academically successful as doctoral students and degree holders did not end and begin with them identifying themselves as a Black male.

**Race Talk.** It has been asserted that "Black men at PWIs experience alienation (Allen, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996, Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), have strained and unsupportive relationships with faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), and are likely to view the curriculum as culturally exclusive" (Palmer et al., 2014, p. 63). However, participants' responses regarding the value of conversations about race reveal that there are ways to combat cultural exclusiveness. Race talk can give a voice to Black students' culture in the classroom and promote the understanding and acceptance of cultural difference. Indeed, "conversations about race" was the second most referenced theme in the entire study, surpassed only by references to the general category of "support." While there were mixed feelings among participants about the degree of effectiveness such conversations had, it was

evident in all their responses that they believed having conversations about race were an important part of their doctoral experience.

Rick and Daryl did disclose that they felt the need to temper their degree of honesty based on the situation and context in which the conversation was taking place. However, Glenn and Dale took the opposite tack and professed to use conversations about race to provoke “real” conversations as the only way to promote change in attitudes and beliefs surrounding diametrically opposite races and cultures. Glenn believed that opportunities to engage in conversations about race were a large factor in what made the program special. Bob and Morgan felt somewhat frustrated by what they perceived as White persons’ refusal to acknowledge, and disengage from, White privilege and engage in honest discourse. Morgan felt that most White students participated in conversations about race only in a superficial or shallow manner, offering sympathy, but never truly gaining any understanding. The degree to which conversations about race can combat cultural exclusivity would seem to be dependent on how willing the participants are to engage in open, honest communication with each other. There is no disputing, however, that Black males at PWIs will continue to feel alienated unless faculty create an environment that allows students to engage in conversations about racial issues. Conversations about race directly impact the degree to which Black male doctoral students feel included and accepted by the program and the faculty, and they are crucial to promoting academic success and achievement for these students.

**Support from Others.** Factors Wood and Palmer (2015) list as facilitating success for Black males in higher education include student organizations, faculty-student interactions, peer interactions, and mentors. Findings in this study compare favorably and indicate the application of these factors to the context of Black male doctoral students as well. They have been

categorized in this study as “Support from Others.” Bob brought up ties to his fraternity brothers, and Glenn extolled the benefits of belonging to graduate student organizations as supporting the pursuit of their doctoral degrees. Tyrese and Carl explained how peer interaction was helpful and supportive in providing valuable insight into the doctoral process, as well as having someone to vent frustrations to. In Bonner and Bailey’s (2006) research, they assert that the students’ peer group is equal to, or even more important than family, and that family support translates into students’ academic commitment and persistence. This assertion is evident in participants’ responses, and never more clear than through Carl’s recollection of “Sunday Dinner” social gatherings for fellow graduate students at a colleague’s home.

Interestingly, though spirituality was listed as a factor by several authors of previous research (Herndon, 2013; Palmer et al., 2014; Watson, 2006; Weddle-West et al., 2013; Wood & Palmer, 2015), none of the participants credited spirituality with providing them support. In their research on Black male undergraduate students, family support was cited by Palmer et al. (2014) as vital to the success of Black male college student. Participants’ responses reveal that family support is also important to Black male doctoral students at the graduate level, as three of the students listed family support as the most important factor in their academic success. Bonner and Bailey (2006) speak to the nature of the academic environment at PWIs, noting that as Black males become socially integrated into the campus environment of PWIs, they often find themselves embroiled in the competitive environment characteristic of these institutions. While this may be true of undergraduate students, the same cannot be said of the participants in this study. That contention was simply not evident in their responses. Instead, participants gave multiple examples of instances where they rallied behind and supported each other in their goals. They frequently wrote papers together, took time to observe each other’s presentations, or voiced

support for each other when they had important milestones in their doctoral program. Support for Black male academic success in doctoral programs comes from a variety of sources, including student organizations, faculty and mentors, family, and their peer group.

### **Final Perceptions of Participants**

Two questions were asked at the end of each interview soliciting each participant's overall opinions regarding Black male academic achievement at the doctoral level. First, they were asked what they believed was the most significant hurdle Black male graduate students had to overcome when attending a PWI. Secondly, they were asked to identify what they believed was the *single* most important factor contributing to their own academic success. It was important to ask them at the end of the interview, as each preceding question was positioned in a manner to facilitate the participants' deep reflection providing a depth and richness to their answers. Simply asking these questions off-the-cuff without laying any groundwork would have likely resulted in shallow, inconsequential answers lacking in individuality. It was my suspicion that asking these two questions singularly may make it difficult to differentiate participants' responses from the prior research on Black male students pursuing other, lower levels of education. The answers to these two questions coupled with responses to questions related to the participants' graduate school experiences provided a clearer picture of the strategies and resources the Black males in the study utilized while seeking doctoral degrees at a predominantly White institution.

**Most Significant Hurdle to Overcome.** When asked their opinion regarding what they perceived as the most significant hurdle Black male students need to overcome, several of the participants unknowingly seemed to be in agreement. Carl, Tyrese, and Dale believed a lack of support was the largest obstacle to success. Rick and Glenn felt that students who did not have a

strong sense of self had the most difficulty succeeding. Morgan, Daryl, and Bob spoke about resilience, or rather the lack of self-motivation as the primary barrier to success for Black male doctoral students. The participants' responses to this question were indicative of the research results. Findings in this study have revealed a variety of ways that students could overcome these obstacles. Support from family and teachers in early education, along with support from family, teachers, and other sources in graduate school, assisted Black male doctoral students in overcoming a variety of obstacles as they successfully pursued their doctorates. Likewise, working through issues related to racial identity gave Black male doctoral students the confidence and strong sense of self they needed to persist towards completion of their degree program.

**Most Important Factor in Academic Success.** Again, as with the previous question, there was some agreement between a few of the participants when asked to identify the most important factor in their own individual success. Daryl, Glenn, and Tyrese all credited family support as the single most important factor in their success. Carl and Rick spoke about resilience and believing in themselves. Other participants had very specific, individual reasons they believed they were able to be academically successful. Morgan was convinced that his academic success stemmed from his love of reading, and its connection to academics that allowed him to overcome other challenges. Bob was driven to succeed so he could belong to the small percentage of Black males in higher education faculty and leadership positions. Dale believed he was able to succeed because the environment was a “safe space” that allowed him to be who he needed to be. The variation in their answers serves to illustrate the individual nature of what Black male doctoral students perceive as the greatest help on their way to completion of their degree program. Yet, even as the individual reasons exist, they still can be seen reflected in the

factors identified by the results of this study. Family support is the one consistent factor mentioned throughout both early educational experiences and participants' experiences during graduate school. Even Morgan's love of reading was instilled in him by a parent that promoted reading at an early age. We also see the value of attaining a college degree in Bob's desire to forge the career he imagined for himself as a successful Black male faculty member. Finally, Dale's safe space existed due to the efforts of faculty in having the courage to engage in conversations about race and promote an atmosphere of openness through a program with a social justice aspect.

### **Implications**

Even though college and, more specifically, graduate school has never been more accessible to Black males, they are still the least represented group in doctoral programs. The percentage of Black male doctoral students has only increased 1.3% in 40 years (Digest of Education Statistics, 2011). If we, as a society, value diversity and want to promote equality in education, it is clear that this trend, or lack of one, needs to be reversed, and actions must be taken to introduce more Black males into the academic pipeline. Colleges and universities need to recognize that Black male graduate students have different needs and put strategies into place to create open, safe environments for Black male graduate students to attain academic success. The brisk pace of research on Black male students over the last 15 years or so would seem to indicate that researchers in this area have noticed the need to pay more attention to removing barriers and creating pathways to higher education for this demographic group. Otherwise, the low number of Black doctorates in faculty and leadership positions has the potential to negatively impact admissions and retention of Black male graduate students, thus reducing the number of Black male professionals in academia, and in society as a whole.



### **Recommendations for Universities**

It is vital that universities make it a priority to recruit more Black males in their graduate school programs. There is tremendous benefit in promoting larger numbers of Black males in professional and academic ranks. The findings of this study indicate that Black male doctoral students are more likely to achieve academic success if they are given opportunities to work with Black faculty. Also, understanding the experiences of Black male students will assist faculty and administrators in higher education make decisions regarding programs and support resources to promote persistence and completion, resulting in a possible increase in Black male academic success. Academic departments should create and administer exit surveys to measure student satisfaction regarding barriers and obstacles identified by Black male undergraduate and graduate students. Data collected could be utilized to ascertain areas of improvement at both levels. At the undergraduate level, it may increase the continuation of Black male undergraduates into graduate programs. At the graduate level, it would help identify areas that graduate schools could improve upon to increase persistence and completion rates.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education Programs**

It is clear from the research that Black male doctoral students' pathway to success is facilitated by a caring faculty sensitive to the needs of their particular population. According to my findings, Black male doctoral students benefit from strong relationships that evoke the sense of feeling valued in their program. These relationships are more easily developed with improved accessibility of faculty members. Programs should advocate that faculty institute an open door policy for students and be prepared to offer guidance and support, along with information about additional campus resources available to their students. Faculty should also invite experienced graduate students with similar research interests to co-author papers and presentations. Faculty,

or program leaders, could also conduct online informational sessions that celebrate the successes and accomplishments of their existing graduate students, while also calling attention to features of their programs that make them appealing to potential students.

Productive mentor relationships are also a factor in promoting Black male doctoral students' academic success. A mentoring program should be instituted that would utilize both faculty and experienced doctoral students and pair them with incoming doctoral students. Mentor training should be included as a part of that program. The mentoring role could be assigned to experienced doctoral students who have graduate assistantships as a part of their departmental responsibilities. This would have several beneficial effects as it would make the experienced doctoral students feel valued for the contribution they are making to the well-being of the department, while at the same time providing support for the incoming doctoral students.

Another factor identified by the research that promoted academic success was the support they received from outside sources such as campus organizations and their peers. Efforts should be made to improve morale and satisfaction of existing graduate students while recruiting larger numbers of new graduate students. Given the degree to which social groups of similarly situated students have been shown to improve academic success, departments should promote and conduct departmental socials for graduate students to facilitate contact and fraternization between new, incoming students and existing graduate students. Departments should sponsor in-house mini-conferences, or perhaps regularly occurring luncheons that would allow graduate students the chance to present their research to peers and faculty. As another potential resource for support, on-campus graduate student organizations should be allowed, or requested, to post informational flyers. These same organizations may want to take advantage of opportunities to host departmental socials as a recruiting tool and gesture of good will.

Financial Aid was identified as an area of need critical to Black male doctoral students if they are going to be given a fair chance at pursuing the successful completion of a doctoral degree. A steady, consistent amount of funds should be included in the departmental budget to finance graduate assistantships and sponsor travel for students whose proposals are accepted for presentation at educational conferences. Finally, an interesting, newly uncovered factor that participants identified as contributing to academic success for Black male doctoral students was the presence of a social justice aspect within the program. A social justice aspect combined with conversations about race helps reduce Black males' feelings of being the "other" on the campus of a PWI. To engender this aspect of social justice, departmental faculty should commit to creating safe, open spaces in their classrooms for students to engage in conversations related to issues concerning race, class, gender and sexuality. Departmental orientation sessions should be held annually that address social justice issues common to all graduate students, as well as featuring issues specific to students of color.

### **Recommendations for K-12 Schools**

The two primary factors promoting academic success among Black male students' early educational experiences were support from family and teachers and a focus on the value of attaining a college degree. Several actions could be taken at the K-12 level to promote the value of a college degree and the career pathways it opens. Providing opportunities for young students in the K-12 arena to meet and interact with Black male professionals would create a positive image of the academically successful Black male that presents a counternarrative to the image of the Black male portrayed through mainstream media, the entertainment industry, and popular culture. To further this aim, K-12 schools should hold career days that feature and include Black male professionals. K-12 faculty should invite professors from both genders and of different

ancestry to serve as guest lecturers and combat the stereotypical image of the college professor as a White male.

Support from family and teachers could come in the form of scheduled field trips, with parents assisting as chaperones, to local colleges and universities so that young Black males can visualize themselves as potential college students and come in contact with the resources that universities have to offer. Community outreach programs could include a program where middle schools and high schools within the same geographical region form partnerships to develop a student mentor program that pairs junior or senior academically successful Black males with students in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade who are academically at-risk. In addition to providing guidance and support for the younger student, it would create leadership opportunities and experiences for the older students.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Initially, the thought was to study the aspects of the program that facilitated success among Black males who were doctoral students in the program. However, it occurred to me that, perhaps, that might be “putting the cart before the horse.” That is to say that if you were to give a large portion of credit for the doctoral students’ academic success to the Higher Education Program, it implies that those same individuals would not be equally as successful in other settings. It then became incumbent upon me, in my desire to be as objective as possible in conducting research, to investigate and identify the participants’ perceptions regarding contributions to their success first, with implications for future research entailing avenues for further exploration and discovery.

Based on findings, there is indeed a need for further study of the Higher Education Program at SSU. Students identified enough salient features regarding their experiences and the

impact these features had on their success in the SSU School of Education's Higher Education doctoral program that a more in-depth look at the various features of the program, and how graduates and current students perceive it, is warranted. A large scale in-depth study should be conducted that includes the perspectives of an increased number of current Black male doctoral students and alumni. A survey could reach a maximum amount of students and alumni from the program and seek to identify the specific components of the Higher Ed program that respondents believe most contributed to their academic success and outcomes.

There has been very little research done regarding the academic achievement of Black male doctoral students. Further lines of inquiry should involve expansion of the study to include the perceptions and experiences of Black male doctoral students in other departments and programs across campus, paying special attention to compare results between areas where there are higher or lower concentrations of Black males. Given that results were limited to a small number of students in one university in the field of education, the study should be expanded to include Black male doctoral students from other universities and fields of study. A larger-scale study would allow for comparison regarding the experiences of Black male doctoral students attending HBCUs and the experiences of those attending PWIs. Relationships with faculty and administrators were linked to the academic success of Black male doctoral students. It would certainly be valuable to examine their viewpoint through a study conducted to gather faculty's perceptions of the factors that influence Black male graduate students' academic achievement.

### **Conclusion**

Harper (2009) points out that "almost everything published about Black male collegians negatively portrays them as underachieving and unlikely to succeed" (p. 699). That deficit oriented narrative perpetuates a cycle of failure that can only be broken by the positive, hopeful

stories of Black males who have found ways to overcome challenges and succeed academically despite the viewpoints of dominant groups telling them they cannot. The necessity for scholarship that uses counternarratives to tell stories of the marginalized and combat these research paradigms is clear (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). The purpose of this study was to determine the answer to the following research question:

What factors contribute to the academic success of Black males seeking doctoral degrees in Higher Education at a predominantly White institution?

Sub-questions assisting in this research were:

- A) What experiences, educational and otherwise, promote academic success?
- B) What strategies and resources did Black males utilize in persisting and seeking post-baccalaureate degrees at a predominately White institution?

This study identified factors that contributed to the academic success of Black males seeking a doctoral degree in Higher Education at a predominantly White institution. Those factors can be grouped into three main categories: 1) the Impact of Early Experiences Related to Education; 2) the Impact of Experiences During Graduate School; and 3) the Final Perceptions of Participants.

The impact of early experiences related to education could be divided into two main components that participants believed contributed to their successful pursuit of a doctoral degree: 1) Support from Family and Teachers; and 2) a Focus on the Value of Attaining a College Degree. Key themes emerged from the findings related to the participants' experiences during graduate school and could be further categorized into four areas: 1) Program Characteristics, which included Black faculty, a social justice aspect, mentor relationships, financial aid, and feeling valued; 2) Racial Identity; 3) Race Talk; and 4) Support from Others. Finally, the last

main category was related to the final perceptions of participants and included summaries of participants' responses labeled as: a) the most significant hurdle to overcome, and b) the most important factor in academic success.

There is no perfect college experience for anyone, but this study has shown Black males can have positive experiences at a PWI and succeed academically. While the narratives supplied by the participants' experiences is encouraging, there is still room for improvement. There remains a need for knowledge that can be used by schools and universities to provide opportunities for Black males to succeed. Anti-deficit research can reverse the dominant narrative regarding Black male academic achievement. Sharing the story of these eight articulate, accomplished Black men provides examples to other Black males and demonstrates a pathway to academic success and a promising future.

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**APPENDIX A  
APPROVAL OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

**ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST**



**TO:** Larry Manthei  
Human Sciences and Education

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** February 25, 2016

**RE:** IRB# E9801

**TITLE:** Cutting The Deficit: An Examination of Factors Contributing to the Success of Black Males Seeking Post-Baccalaureate Degrees at a Predominantly White Institution

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu) | [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 2/25/2016

**Approved**     X     **Disapproved**           

**Approval Date:** 2/25/2016 **Approval Expiration Date:** 2/24/2019

**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 1; 2b

**Signed Consent Waived?:** No

**Re-review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable)

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman 

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –**

**Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## **APPENDIX B CONSENT FORM**

Study Title: Cutting the Deficit: An Examination of Factors Contributing to the Success of Black Males Seeking Doctoral Degrees at a Predominantly White Institution

Performance Site: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m.

Paul Manthei                      (225) 578-2814                      pmanthei@lsu.edu

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to make inquiry into the factors that have contributed to the educational success of Black male doctoral students.

Subject Inclusion: Black male doctoral students, either enrolled in or graduated from LSU's School of Education graduate programs.

Number of subjects: 8-10

Study Procedures: Data will be collected from the results of interviews administered by the principal investigator.

Benefits: Information collected may yield valuable information regarding the LSU School of Education's graduate programs and their ability to provide culturally responsive educational service to Black men and challenge pervasive notions about Black male educational achievement.

Risks: This study is anonymous. The identity of the subjects will not be linked to the data. No one other than the principal investigator will have knowledge of the participants' identities. Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality. Files will be kept in a secure cabinet to which only the investigator has access. Electronic records will be protected by a password known only to the investigator.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### **Demographic Indicators**

1. Name? Age? Place of Birth?
2. Family structure?
  - ☐ Single Parent
  - ☐ Two Parents
  - ☐ Guardian/Other Caregiver
3. Family's socioeconomic status?
  - ☐ Low Income
  - ☐ Working Class
  - ☐ Middle Class
  - ☐ Affluent
4. Mother's highest level of education?
  - ☐ No college degree
  - ☐ Associate's Degree
  - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
  - ☐ Master's Degree
  - ☐ Doctorate
5. Father's highest level of education?
  - ☐ No college degree
  - ☐ Associate's Degree
  - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
  - ☐ Master's Degree
  - ☐ Doctorate
6. Are you the first member of your family to seek higher education?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
7. Are you the first member of your family to attend graduate school?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

8. Please identify your high school's type and racial composition.
- ☐ Public - Predominantly Black
  - ☐ Private – Predominantly Black
  - ☐ Public – Predominantly White
  - ☐ Private – Predominantly White
  - ☐ Public – Racially Diverse
  - ☐ Private – Racially Diverse
9. How would you classify the school where you received your undergraduate degree?
- ☐ Public – Historically Black
  - ☐ Private – Historically Black
  - ☐ Public – Historically White
  - ☐ Private – Historically White
  - ☐ Other

### **Early Education Experiences**

10. What is your earliest memory of making a conscious decision to pursue a postsecondary education?
11. What factors influenced your choice of undergraduate school?
12. Would you say your early educational experiences promoted academic success?
13. Describe one of the most successful/frustrating moments in your educational history – elementary, secondary, and post-secondary.

### **Doctoral Education Experiences**

14. What factors influenced your choice of graduate school?
15. What compelled you to continue your academic training at the graduate level? At a PWI?
16. What institutional supports/constraints do you believe are in place for your graduate training?
17. Were you inspired by any prominent African-American figures in your chosen field of study?
18. What unique perspectives or personal views do you envision yourself bringing to your chosen field of study?

19. How has your sense of racial identity affected your growth as a scholar and participant in the higher education programs at Louisiana State University?
20. Do you ever talk to other graduate students about issues related to race, teaching and learning?
- If so, what is the nature of that conversation?
  - If not, why?
  - In prior educational settings, how have these conversations impacted your scholarly presentations/publications?
21. When receiving your graduate training, have you had the opportunity to study with any professors of color? Male or female?
- What were those experiences like?
  - How if at all did they differ from studying with European-American professors?
  - Did you ever consciously reflect on the frequency or infrequency of these opportunities?
22. Describe the relationship(s) you have with your mentor faculty and the degree to which you feel race is/was a factor in that relationship.
23. How, if at all, was racial difference addressed in your graduate courses?
- How do you approach it in your scholarship?
  - Do you see these as being related?
  - How are these issues received by other students in general; African-American students, European-American students?
  - Can you recall any particular events or topics that brought race to the forefront of any discussions in your graduate courses?

### **Looking Ahead to the Future**

24. Black PhD recipients are more than twice as likely to earn their degree in education than the national average; 36% vs. 15% (Hoffman, 2003). What do you think is the reason?
25. What do you perceive as the most significant hurdles that have to be overcome for African-American graduate students attending a PWI?
26. Describe what you believe is the single most important factor that has contributed to your academic success?
27. What are your future/current career plans? Administration, faculty, or other?

## APPENDIX D PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 3. Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Place of Birth	Family Socioeconomic Status	Mother's Highest Education	Father's Highest Education	High School Type	First to attend college	Undergrad College Type	First to attend graduate school	Current Status
Bob	32	small town - Southeast	Low income	high school	technical college	Public PWI	No	Public PWI	Yes	Faculty at public PWI
Carl	30	major metro city - South	Middle Class	Bachelor's Degree	high school	Public Racially Diverse	No	Public PWI	Yes	Education Policy and Research Admin.
Dale	33	large city - South	Middle Class	Master's Degree	high school (some college)	Private PWI	No	Public PWI	No	Doctoral Student
Daryl	36	town of 15,000 - South	Low income	high school	high school	Public Racially Diverse	No	Public HBCU	Yes	Doctoral Student
Glenn	35	small city - East Coast	Middle Class	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Public PWI	No	Public PWI	No	Student Affairs Admin. at Public PWI
Morgan	45	major metro - Midwest	Working Class	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Public PWI	No	Public PWI	Yes	K-12 Admin.
Rick	36	large city – Southeast	Middle Class	Doctorate	Doctorate	Public PWI	No	Public PWI	No	Doctoral Student
Tyrese	38	major metro - Midwest	Working Class	high school	high school	Public Racially Diverse	Yes	Public PWI	Yes	Student Affairs Admin. at Private PWI

**APPENDIX E**  
**GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF FACTORS**

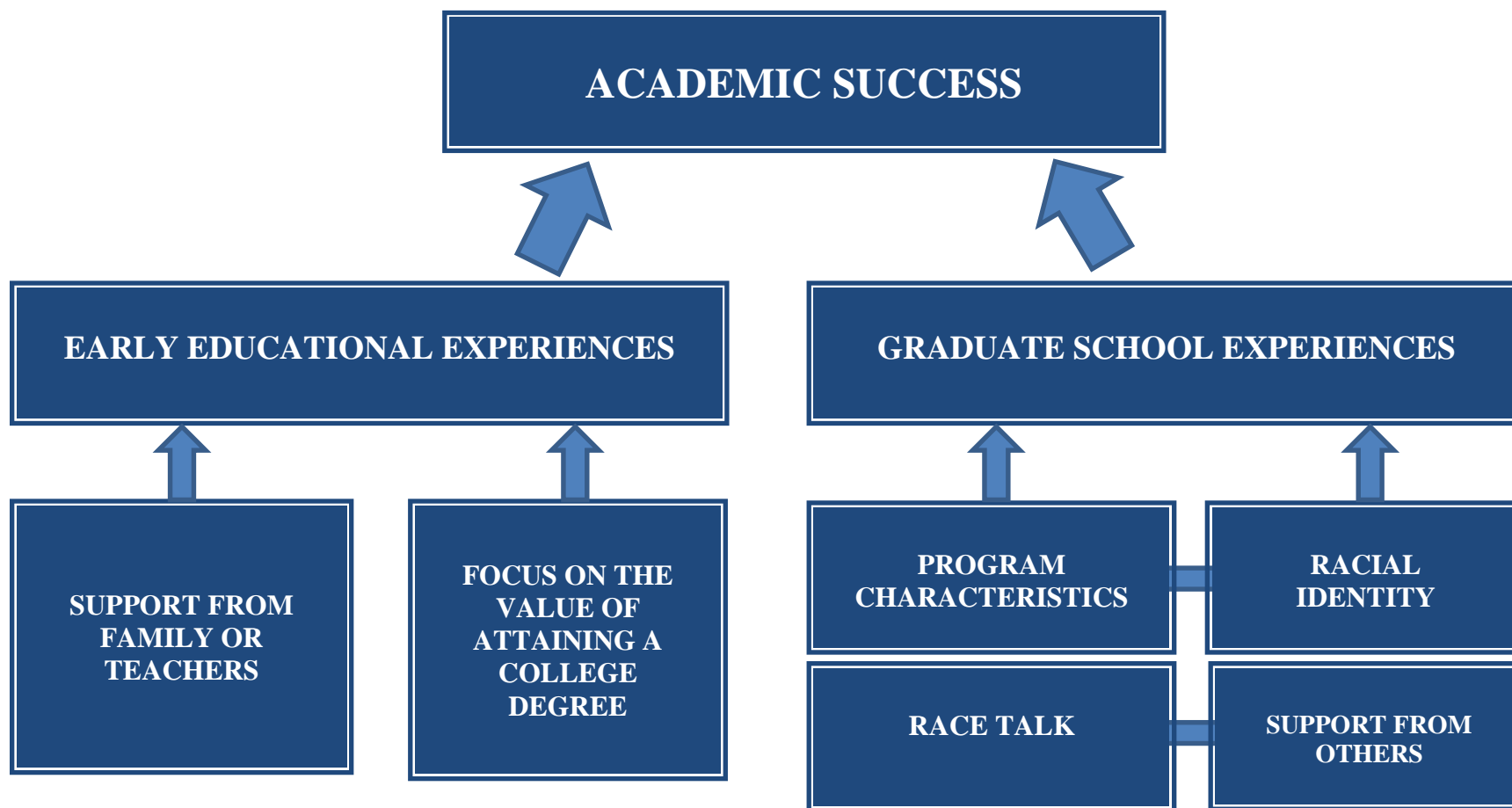


Figure 2. Graphical Representation of Factors Contributing to Success



## **VITA**

Larry Paul Manthei, Jr., is a native of Winnfield, Louisiana. He has received a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, a Juris Doctorate from Southern University Law Center, and a Master's of Education from the Secondary Holmes Program at Louisiana State University. After several years as a secondary English teacher, he entered the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Research at Louisiana State University. A candidate for graduation in August 2016, he is employed as a member of faculty in the School of Education at Louisiana State University. He plans to continue his career at Louisiana State University. His research interests include Black male academic success, critical theory, social justice issues, and teacher preparation.