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**FOR EVERY MOUNTAIN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY  
EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION, LOW  
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, BLACK MALES EXCELLING AT  
SELECT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN LOUISIANA**

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EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION, LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, BLACK  
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LOUISIANA

A Dissertation

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Louisiana State University and  
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requirements for the degree of  
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in

The School of Education

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to God, my mother, paternal grandparents, maternal grandmother and aunts. Your undying love and support have meant the world to me and I am truly grateful for everything you have done and continue to do for me. I also dedicate this dedication to all the first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are thriving and breaking barriers daily in spite of their circumstances. To my family, friends, coworkers and students, thank you for being so understanding and caring throughout this process. Your love and support have definitely helped carry and get me to this point in my academic career. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the youth who march onward and upward towards the light. Thank you all for the role you have played as I complete this very gratifying process of earning a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Leadership and Research.

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*“Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.” – Kofi Annan*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is an attempt to examine the academic experiences among low SES, first-generation Black males who are excelling at select PWI's in Louisiana. The images created of Black men in our society often confine them to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. The path to upward mobility or economic success for African American men is often filled with obstacles and roadblocks. For a period of decades, there has been much research dedicated to African American male academic success and first-generation college students, whereas, the focus on low SES, first-generation Black males who excel at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) in Louisiana has gone unstudied. College provides a pathway for students to explore themselves and their interests, to expand their social and cultural experiences, and to build a more promising career. Hiraldo (2010) suggest that the hope is that CRT can be used as a reference for institutions striving to become more inclusive through changes in diversity initiatives, infrastructure of institutions, and analysis of hostile environments. When thinking about these possible changes it is important for administrators to ask themselves how these potential changes continue to promote a racist structure.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This dissertation comprises three articles on first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are excelling at select (research one) institutions in Louisiana. There is a reason why Black male success in higher education has become an increasingly salient topic in education circles. Though there has been a fairly concerted effort to improve outcomes for young men of color, for nearly fifteen years, there has been little progress (Harper, 2014). Contrary to popular attitudes concerning Black male success in higher education, Black men have historically demonstrated high-level interest in attending college (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). And while many have argued that Black men are virtually disappearing from colleges and universities across the country, Toldson and Lewis (2012) rightly contends that the number of Black men enrolled in college is in fact proportional to the population of Black, college-aged men in the U.S. Scott (2011) states that President Obama's resilience, success, and leadership represents everything that educational opportunities can provide young people of all races; however, his election does not negate the fact that many inner-city students, particularly of African American and Hispanic origin, are being "left behind" in educational and economical attainment (Scott, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The path to upward mobility or economic success for African American men is often filled with obstacles and roadblocks. Many first-generation African American men entering colleges and universities face limited resources and opportunities to aid in their career development and efforts to meet their career objectives (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). For a period of decades, there has been much research dedicated to African American male academic success and first-generation college students, whereas, the focus on

low SES, first-generation Black males who transcend at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) in Louisiana has gone unstudied. College provides a pathway for students to explore themselves and their interests, to expand their social and cultural experiences, and to build a more promising career. While higher education is rich in diversity and rewards, it can be particularly arduous for first-generation college students (FGCS). Historically, postsecondary education opportunities have been limited for certain ethnic and racial populations and for those of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Factors that have helped first-generation college students include school integration, government assistance programs, and a population shift that has increased minority presence in schools (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Wilkins (2014) stated that due to social and familial circumstances, first generation college students develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process on their own. First generation college students often describe themselves as hard working, goal oriented, independent, and mature. Black males from more affluent economic backgrounds generally enjoy greater educational opportunities than others within their racial group (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2010; Pais, 2011). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) hypothesized that academically successful and intellectually gifted Black students must cope with the negative implications of “acting White” by their peers (as cited in Harper, 2006; Stinson, 2011). High-achieving African American students must manage their success while maintaining their place in Black culture. Though Fordham and Ogbu described the Black educational experience across gender, it seems safe to assume that any negative shared African American experience may be exacerbated from the perspective of African American males seeking higher education. By contrast, Harper (2006) found that Black students often reject the notion that academic success is in conflict with their

cultural loyalties. Many African American students refuse to recognize any perception of inadequacy, prefer to embrace their cultural identity, and continue to achieve scholastically.

Racially-derived environmental stressors have a major effect on Black male college students (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011; Wilkins, 2012). Although Black males are capable of assimilating into the college environment, those attending PWI's report less congruency between their pre-college high school/community life and their collegiate experiences (Brock, 2010). By contrast, Black males attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU's) describe their social environment as warm and welcoming and more congruent with their pre-college environments. Thus, the institution's ability to provide an environment which encourages learning, but embraces social welfare, is paramount (Brock, 2010). Grouping all student populations together according to race or even gender will leave a large gap in understanding the unique needs of any minority or majority student group. This is particularly important when focusing on Black male college students (Hayworth, 2014). Higher education is facing greater scrutiny than ever to increase graduation rates for all students. According to higher education enrollment and persistence research, Black males are the most challenged population of all minority groups. Enrollment trends reported by gender and ethnicities in the 2005 Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac show among all races, Black males had the smallest percentage of enrollment within their race at 35.8%.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the academic experiences among low SES, first-generation Black males who are excelling at PWI's in Louisiana. The images created of Black men in our society often confine them to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. Harper (2012) suggest that Black men's dismal college enrollments, disengagement and

underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education. Amplifying the troubled status of Black male students at all levels of education has, unfortunately, yielded few solutions. Thus, educational outcomes for this population have remained stagnant or recently worsened.

The lack of postsecondary motivation and aspiration, lack of academic achievement, and three socioeconomic factors—finances, parental education, and family influence—present common barriers impeding success for African American males in higher education (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2009). There is much evidence that educational policymaking has neither increased access nor ensured equity for African American students in higher education, according to a 2009 study (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Referring to CRT—Critical Race Theory—as an analytical framework, researchers studied policies affecting African American students that produce and maintain racial disparity. They proposed that institutional policies be analyzed and further developed to address the two main issues threatening African American students: access and equity. This is attributable, at least in part, to the deficit orientation that is constantly reinforced in media, academic research journals, and educational practice (Harper, 2012).

This research study will be guided by the following research questions: (1) What does academic success mean to low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana? (2) What life experiences have affected the lives of academically successful low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana? (3) Do low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana have family support or community systems that contribute to their academic achievement?

## **Significance of the Study**

A number of studies, including a 2010 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), have documented persistence gaps between the educational attainment of White males and that of Black males and Hispanic males among other racial/ethnic groups. There is also evidence of a growing gender gap within racial/ethnic groups, as females are participating, achieving academically, and persisting at much higher rates than their male counterparts (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani 2010). This growing gender gap within racial/ethnic groups presents a unique problem for Blacks and for Black males in particular. Research shows that Black males, unlike their counterparts, are entering college at a much higher rate than they are graduating from college yet the research further shows that when formalized and well-conceived support systems and programs are put into place to engage them and to promote their achievement, Black males persist at a higher level (Bush & Bush, 2010). Previous research has indicated a number of factors, such as financial aid, socioeconomic status, lack of preparation, and lack of engagement contribute to the attrition of students in general, however, a gap remains in the current literature regarding how much of an impact these factors have on Black male students at predominantly White institutions particularly in Louisiana.

According to the dominant culture, education provides an arena of opportunities for fundamental equality among various racial groups. The pursuit of postsecondary education is paramount for a plethora of minority groups. Although the embedded belief that education is an equalizer is debatable, this belief is prevalent in institutional and educational contexts throughout society (Jackson, Jackson, Liles & Exner, 2013). Thus, many African Americans and other marginalized groups desire to be highly educated. An individual's race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and educational endeavors are seemingly intertwined; and according to statistics from



2011, less than 16% of Black males had bachelors' degrees or greater, compared to 29% of White males (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Grusky (2011) defined socioeconomic status as a combination of income, education, and social class. An individual's socioeconomic status contributes a significant role in his or her ability to progress through the educational system. Education is often seen as an indiscriminate entity, and individuals within certain racial groups are thought to have equitable options in regards to obtaining knowledge. Although there was an increase of 45% in Black student college attendance between 1980 and 2000, the increase was largely attributed to academic achievements of African American women (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2010). Dissimilarly, the U. S. Census Bureau (2010) reported that Black males only accounted for 4.25% of the population in United States colleges and universities. Studies have also shown that highly-touted recent gains in college attendance among Black students are driven in significant part by international African students, thus further masking our country's ongoing failure in attracting and retaining African American male students in higher education (Bennett & Lutz, 2009). According to researchers, few research studies look to uncover the factors that lead to minority student success (Freeman, 1997, Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson & Mugenda, 2000). There has been very little research specifically looking at the factors that influence the persistence of Black males at PWI's, particularly in Louisiana.

## **A Narrative Literature Review Addressing Black Male Academic Success in Higher Education**

Black men's dismal college enrollments, disengagement, underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education. Perhaps more troubling than the problems themselves is the way they are continually mishandled by educators, policymakers, and concerned others (Harper, 2012). For nearly a decade, Harper (2012) have argued that those who are interested in Black male student success have much to learn from Black men who have proven to be successful. Wilkins (2014) stated that due to social and familial circumstances, first generation college students develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process on their own. First generation college students often describe themselves as hard working, goal oriented, independent, and mature.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as an analytical framework throughout this study. Bell (1995) defined CRT as a "body of legal scholarship. . . ideologically committed to the struggle against racism particularly as institutionalized in and by law" (p. 898). Bell contended that critical race theorists seek to give voice to those, who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded. CRT is embedded in a model of shared knowledge, which represents inclusiveness in order to give voice to the marginalized. It is the story of the lived experience of the individual, which has become a major tenet of CRT (Delgado, 1990). The selected articles for this study used data collected from the personal stories of U.S. born Black male students at predominantly White Institutions and were guided by the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry.

### **Marching Onward and Upwards Towards the Light**

In the effort to counter the deficit perspective of existing empirical research regarding this population of students, this study serves as a platform that will allow participants to

authentically engage in dialogue and discuss their experiences at length. Most existing literature regarding African American male, first generation students that are low income examined their experiences by highlighting major deficiencies of this group's academic abilities. Studies emphasize these students' lack of preparedness, low academic achievement, and high attrition rates (Harper 2013). As a result, a dearth of information is available examining and exploring unique factors that contribute to the success of African American male, first generation students that are low income attending PWIs. Specific challenges African American students face include: racism, microaggressive attitudes from faculty and staff, stereotypes, labeling, and many other factors that have the ability to negatively influence student persistence, retention rates, graduation rates, social acceptance, and inclusivity throughout their undergraduate experiences (Kiser & Price, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, a purposive sampling method was utilized. Purposive sampling serves best appropriate due to the specific characteristics of my population of interest and my accessibility and ability to locate individuals who have those characteristics. Six participants were selected utilizing purposeful sampling techniques according to a specific participant criterion: (a) African American, (b) male, (c) Low Socioeconomic, (d) attend a PWI. Participants in this research study were purposefully chosen based on the criteria above.

### **Leveling the Playing Field: An Autoethnography**

A theme throughout the literature on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is their supportive, nurturing, and family-like environment (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008; Kim, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer, Wood & Arroyo, 2015). While many Black students who attend HBCUs may lack cultural capital (e.g., knowledge to help them navigate the institutional environment), because of their status as first-generation

college students, the supportive ethos of these institutions provides them with an abundance of social capital (e.g., social networks in the form of supportive relationships), which has been invaluable to their persistence and retention (Palmer, Wood, & Arroyo, 2015).

The findings from my previous study about first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are excelling at PWIs coupled with my personal experiences are both similar and distinctive. The one theme that seemed to ring true is the feeling of isolation in the classroom setting and feeling pressured to answer those “Black” questions. Not all Black people feel the same about every topic nor are all Black people alike. Gasman (2018), note that HBCUs award 20% of all first professional degrees to Black students. HBCUs are responsible for producing the most Black leaders in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Taken together, these studies help advance our collective understanding of students’ experiences at HBCUs.

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## **A NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW ADDRESSING BLACK MALE ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

Black men's dismal college enrollments, disengagement, underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education. Perhaps more troubling than the problems themselves is the way they are continually mishandled by educators, policymakers, and concerned others (Harper, 2012). For nearly a decade, Harper (2012) have argued that those who are interested in Black male student success have much to learn from Black men who have proven to be successful. Wilkins (2014) stated that due to social and familial circumstances, first generation college students develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process on their own. First generation college students often describe themselves as hard working, goal oriented, independent, and mature.

The path to upward mobility or economic success for African American men is often filled with obstacles and roadblocks. Many first-generation African American men entering colleges and universities face limited resources and opportunities to aid in their career development and efforts to meet their career objectives (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). For a period of decades, there has been much research dedicated to African American male academic success and first-generation college students, whereas, the focus on low SES, first-generation Black males who transcend at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) in Louisiana has gone unstudied. College provides a pathway for students to explore themselves and their interests, to expand their social and cultural experiences, and to build a more promising career. While higher education is rich in diversity and rewards, it can be particularly arduous for first-generation college students (FGCS). Historically, postsecondary



education opportunities have been limited for certain ethnic and racial populations and for those of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Factors that have helped first-generation college students include school integration, government assistance programs, and a population shift that has increased minority presence in schools (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

To increase their educational attainment, the popular one-sided emphasis on failure and low performing Black male undergraduates must be counterbalanced with insights gathered from those who somehow manage to navigate their way to and through higher education, despite all that is stacked against them—low teacher expectations, insufficient academic preparation for college-level work, racist and culturally unresponsive campus environments, and the debilitating consequences of severe underrepresentation, to name a few (Harper, 2012).

The educational plight of the Black male is often associated with underachievement and underrepresentation (Carter, 2005, Scott, 2012). Although negative in context, the association offers a profound need to understand and address why such is the case. The Black college student enrollment rate in the United States has grown to be on par with Blacks' own share of the population; however, completion rates are much less than equal in that same regard, with Blacks only making up 10.1 percent of all degree earners nationwide in 2012 (Harper, 2012; Harper & Davis, 2012). Because empirical research exists citing Black male college students that have successfully navigated the ranks of higher education, it seems quite sensible for researchers to investigate this population of students as it relates to their influences and experiences that propelled them toward degree completion.

At many predominantly White colleges and universities, Black students have been excluded longer than they have been afforded opportunities to matriculate (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). For example, in 1870 Richard T. Greener was the only Black student ever to

graduate from Harvard, 234 years after the College was founded (Sollors, Titcomb, & Underwood, 1993). Blacks at many other PWIs were not admitted to enter classrooms, but instead were forced to listen to lectures in the hallway. Furthermore, the few Black students who were allowed to attend could not live in dormitories, eat in campus dining halls, or interact socially with their White peers. Several institutional histories describe how White students, faculty, alumni, legislators, and other stakeholders resisted (sometimes violently) the admission of Black students (e.g., Goldstone, 2006; Kämmer, 2009; McCormick, 1990; Trillin, 1964; Williams, 2001; Williamson, 2003).

### **Higher Education in Louisiana**

O'Donoghue (2016) reported, "Unfortunately, our options are limited, and given the ongoing financial crisis of our state, nothing is painless anymore," said the governor John Bel Edwards. The reduction will be spread across all the higher education campuses. The LSU system is expected to absorb the biggest hit (\$8.5 million) followed by the University of Louisiana system (\$5.2 million), community and technical colleges (\$2.8 million) and the Southern University system (\$1.1 million). The Louisiana Board of Regents will also be cut by \$500,000 directly, according to legislative budget documents. Louisiana colleges and universities have already endured \$800 million worth of state funding cuts over the past decade. From 2007 to 2015, Louisiana slashed support to higher education more than any other state in the country.

Given these realities, the goal in conducting this narrative literature review is to understand and examine how first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are excelling at select Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana are successfully matriculating in their environment.

- How have researchers addressed the matriculation of first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are excelling at Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana?

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as an analytical framework throughout this study. Bell (1995) defined CRT as a “body of legal scholarship. . . ideologically committed to the struggle against racism particularly as institutionalized in and by law” (p. 898). Bell contended that critical race theorists seek to give voice to those, who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded. It is embedded in a model of shared knowledge, which represents inclusiveness in order to give voice to the marginalized. It is the story of the lived experience of the individual, which has become a major tenet of CRT (Delgado, 1990).

Although Derrick Bell initially utilized in legal studies, CRT has been extended to areas such as education (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and Women’s Studies (Wing, 1997). CRT begins with the notion that racism in America is both normal and permanent (Delgado, 1995). CRT is grounded in a sense of reality that reflects the experiences of people of color. Williams (1991) purports that CRT recognizes that the color of one’s skin profoundly affects the way one is treated and shapes how others think and feel about people of color in society. CRT offers insight, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

Six basic tenets of CRT include:

1. Racism is endemic. CRT asserts that racism is an ordinary, everyday occurrence for people of color. It is a constant that they must deal with.

2. Race is a social construction. CRT maintains that race is a contrived system of categorizing people according to observable physical attributes.
3. Differential racialization. Dominant groups and people in power can racialize people in different ways at different time, depending on historic, social, or economic need.
4. Notion of interest convergence. Racism brings material and psychic advantage to the majority race, and progressive change regarding race occurs only when the interests of the powerful (i.e., the White majority) happen to converge with those of the racially oppressed (Bell, 1995). Interest convergence means that the interest of Blacks in gaining racial equality has been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful Whites (Bell, 1980).
5. Voices of color. CRT asserts that the dominant group's accounting of history routinely excludes racial and other people of color perspectives to justify and legitimize its power.
6. Intersectionality of individuals. CRT acknowledges the intersectionality of various oppressions and suggests that a primary focus on race can eclipse other forms of exclusion.

## **Methods**

This narrative review summarizes different primary studies from which conclusions may be drawn into a holistic interpretation contributed by the reviewer's own experience, existing theories and models (Campbell Collaboration, 2001; Kirkevold, 1997). Results are of a qualitative rather than a quantitative meaning. One of its strengths is its proposal to comprehend the diversities and pluralities of understanding around scholarly research topics and the opportunity to speak with self-knowledge, reflective practice and acknowledgement of shared educational phenomena (Jones, 2004). Narrative reviews are taken best suitable for comprehensive topics (Collins & Fauser, 2005). Different qualitative techniques such as meta-

ethnography and phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997) exist to compare different studies and to interpret the results in a value-added content. Narrative reviews should make the search criteria for inclusion explicit. It critically evaluates the specific topic of research.

### **Data Collection**

The selected articles for this study used data collected from the personal stories of U.S. born Black male students at predominantly White Institutions and were guided by the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry. Phenomenological studies focus on understanding and describing the ‘lived experiences’ of people who have experienced a similar phenomenon or been exposed to a common set of conditions (Creswell, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). A phenomenological account gets inside the experiences of a person or group of people and describes what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and how they made sense of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). “Given that the master narrative on Black males focuses almost exclusively on disengagement and deficits, understanding better what it is like to achieve in higher education” (Harper, 2009, pp. 703-704).

To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of experience, the personal interview is the primary method of data collection (Merriman, 2009). In addition to personal interviews, participants were asked to complete a participant profile questionnaire before the interview. The profile included demographic information along with questions about extracurricular activities, parent’s educational status and household income. The responses to these questions assisted in guiding the in-depth interviews as well as making the limited face-to-face time more productive.

## **Data Analysis**

In a phenomenological study, data analysis procedures begin with horizontalizing the data. Horizontalizing is the process of laying out all of the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight. In other words, all pieces of data have equal weight at the initial data stage (Merriman, 2009). The data are then organized into clusters or themes and from these clusters and themes a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon is developed. The description represents the structure of the experience being studied and the reader should come away from the phenomenology with the feeling “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). Moustakas (1994) summarizes that throughout the entire phenomenological research process there is an “interweaving of person, conscious experience and phenomenon.

## **Findings**

### **Relevant Research Studies**

Cuyjet (2006) asserted studies that have produced empirical data regarding factors associated with Black college student success were focused mostly on matriculation, and it is Black women who have been the beneficiaries of targeted college programs. Meanwhile, Black male students were lagging behind in terms of their enrollment and attainment, as well as interventions that are especially targeted to address the issues they face and support their success. The issue of Black student success is compounded by a lack of research studies and academic works that could be used to inform the development of empirically based college intervention and student support programs (Harrison, 2014).

## **Institutionalized Racism**

Fisher (2015) reported that participants discussed how they responded to stereotypes in the classroom and in other academic settings. Participants noted that in K-12 they generally responded to stereotypes in one of two ways, they either did not address the stereotypes at all, or they over zealously addressed them head on. In college, however, most of the participants noted that they learned how to turn instances where they have been stereotyped into learning experiences for others. They also noted that they work diligently to combat stereotypes simply by the virtue of their academic performance. Many of the participants mentioned they felt if they did well in school, they could demonstrate to others, white peers especially, that they were competent and deserved to be in the same academic environment.

## **Campus Experiences**

### **Community Service**

Participants described campus experiences that included community service, being employed on campus, volunteering on campus and participation in campus events. Overall, participants were positive in describing their experiences. Seven participants participated in community service that ranged from Breast Cancer Walks and Haiti Relief Efforts to coaching Little League Football (Harrison, 2014). Four participants held part-time jobs on campus in areas such as the financial aid department, media services department and the library.

Volunteerism was prevalent as evidenced by seven participants who were engaged as orientation peer leaders, STEM ambassadors, campus tour guides and fitness center aides. Participants attended campus events such as the annual Christmas and Thanksgiving events and forums where community and corporate leaders were facilitators (Harrison, 2014).

## **Campus involvement**

Participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study were all extensively engaged student leaders on their campuses. Because of the well documented benefits associated with educationally purposeful engagement, having a lengthy record of leadership in multiple student organizations, developing meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, and participating in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs) were all criteria for participation in the study (Harper, 2012).

Harper (2012) also revealed that despite the participants' own high levels of leadership in student organizations and campus activities, participants almost unanimously asserted that their same-race male peers were considerably less engaged. Instead, the majority of Black undergraduate men devoted their out-of-class time to playing video games and sports, pursuing romantic relationships, and gathering socially with others in designated hangouts on campus. The achievers believed disengagement was a major factor in explaining poor academic performance and high rates of attrition among Black undergraduate men at their institutions. Many of the participants in Fisher's (2015) study specifically cited involvement in cultural groups such as Black Men's Unions, Multicultural Centers or Cultural Houses, and Black pre-professional student organizations. In fact, several of the participants were actually presidents of student organizations; they especially noted the benefit of leadership and professional development opportunities related to their status as student-leaders.

## **Student Services**

Participants described student services from which they benefitted, including tutoring, advisement, mentoring, financial aid, and student organizations. All participants received



advisement, mentorship, and financial aid. Advisement and mentorship were through different venues such as the advising office, TRIO office, staff and faculty members; however, all participants described their experiences as being important to their college experience (Harrison, 2014).

### **Student Organizations**

Sixty-five of the 219 achievers (29.7%) in the National Black Male College Achievement Study held membership in one of the five National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities—Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, or Iota Phi Theta. A few campuses, particularly the liberal arts colleges, had no Black fraternities; this partially explains why there were not more fraternity men in the sample. However, the majority of participating colleges and universities had two or more active NPHC fraternity chapters. Given their espoused purposes (scholarship, achievement, leadership, brotherhood, community service, etc.), it seems that the fraternities should have been ideal engagement venues for men such as those who participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study. But several students thought their time and talents were better invested elsewhere. Many felt that the current members' behaviors contradicted the purported principles of their fraternities (Harper, 2012).

### **Motivation and Relationships**

#### **Self-motivation**

According to Harrison (2014), the concept of motivation, as it relates to participants' college experiences, is an important one given all participants suggested they were motivated to keep working toward their college degrees. The intrinsic motivation of all participants was ever-present throughout the narratives, and the sentiments voiced by each participant illustrate the depth of self-motivation toward making better of themselves by staying in school and completing

a degree. McCorkle (2012) reported that many of the participants in his study feel as if others have discounted them due to their background and the color of their skin, but they display that “never give up” attitude. The students set a goal to earn a college degree regardless of the obstacles and challenges in reaching the goal, they will persist until the goal is obtained.

### **Family**

Parents and family members must convey to Black boys as early as possible that college is the most reliable pathway to success. Even parents who have not experienced college firsthand should consistently articulate to their sons a non-negotiable expectation that they will enroll in a postsecondary institution immediately after completing high school. As the study participants noted, the question was never if, but where they would attend college. Hearing this repeatedly from an early age helps young men craft future aspirations that minimally include attaining a bachelor’s degree (Harper, 2012). Participants noted that family members and others in their home communities forewarned them of what they would likely experience.

“Also, my parents are Haitian, and Haitian parents make sure you know when you are growing up that you will be going to college”, stated Aaron, in reflecting parental motivation (Harrison, 2014).

Parents and family members must convey to Black boys as early as possible that college is the most reliable pathway to success. Even parents who have not experienced college firsthand should consistently articulate to their sons a non-negotiable expectation that they will enroll in a postsecondary institution immediately after completing high school. As the study participants noted, the question was never if, but where they would attend college. Hearing this repeatedly from an early age helps young men craft future aspirations that minimally include attaining a bachelor’s degree (Harper, 2012).

Cartright and Henriksen (2012) provided insight into a qualitative research study focused on Black male college students who grew up without a father presence in the household. The significance of the study was attributed by the authors to the growing number of Black male college students who grew up fatherless and the impact on their attainment potential. Research shows “the importance of familial support, particularly for Black students, in advancing their educational success” (Cartright & Henriksen, 2012, p. 30).

Fisher (2015) reported that two of the participants in his study cited that their parents had almost no impact on their education. They both commented that they saw education as a mechanism for “getting out”; recounting that they had grown up relatively poor. In every case, though, participants cited at least one family member who had given them the courage to attend college, whether they were able to give them specific knowledge about college or not. The role of family, particularly parents, in the success of participants is consistent with Harper’s (2012) findings, and is also buttressed by existing literature on Black male success in college (Palmer et al., 2014).

### **School Personnel**

K-12 teachers, high school guidance counselors, and postsecondary faculty and administrators share at least one thing in common: they graduated from college. In fact, many have completed master’s and doctoral degree programs that supposedly prepared them for their current roles. Moreover, Whites comprise the overwhelming majority of educators and administrators at all levels of education. According to Harper (2012), achievers interviewed for this study said these professionals often engaged in practices that had harmful effects on Black male students’ aspirations, college choice processes, and educational outcomes. To be fair, it is

unlikely that many of these educators were challenged by their former instructors to critically examine their assumptions about Black men and communities of color.

Overwhelmingly, Green (2017) reported the analysis of the content from participant interviews and from a review of course offerings, as published on the schools' websites, indicated access to higher quality curricula, such as: (a) honors classes, (b) Advanced Placement (AP), and (c) concurrent enrollment courses. Depending upon the school, there were between 9 to 20 AP courses available to students. In addition, concurrent/dual enrollment classes were provided at all schools. A concurrent/dual enrollment course allows for high school students to enroll in college level courses, which are typically taught by high school teachers, who have been approved by the college or university, which has academic oversight of the courses.

### **Cultural/environmental**

“It’s hard growing up in an area where you see guys from when you were five years old to when you are 20 years old and they are in the same place. I didn’t want to become that; I really couldn’t”, said Carl, reflecting the environmental push of loafers in his neighborhood (Harrison, 2014). Black males attending historically Black colleges or universities (HBCU’s) describe their social environment as warm and welcoming and more congruent with their pre-college environments. Thus, the institution’s ability to provide an environment which encourages learning, but embraces social welfare, is paramount (Brock, 2010).

### **Professor**

Several participants offered advice on how to improve the overall experience of Black male students in their respective schools. A common thread was the need for more Black faculty—actual teachers, counselors, or administrative school staff with whom Black students

could consistently interact. The four participants felt passionately that this was the most important recommendation for their schools (Coleman, 2017).

According to Green (2017), the quality of teaching engagement and teacher expectations had both positive and negative impacts on these students' self-reported educational experiences. They commented about their awareness of teacher attitudes, willingness, and commitment to teach students. Access and opportunity to engage in a variety of higher level courses was linked to teaching quality and teacher expectations.

### **Peer**

Friendship is key to survival. It became patently clear that despite the challenges that individual participants may have faced, having a strong connection to school friends was critical to the social and emotional success of young African American men who attended affluent, predominantly White, independent schools. Stories of friendship and the importance of having a tight friendship circle for these African American men were repeated across the narratives (Coleman, 2017).

Participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study did not deem themselves superior to or smarter than their less accomplished, disengaged same-race male peers. In fact, most believed lower-performing Black male students had the same potential, but had not encountered people or culturally relevant experiences that motivated them to be engaged, strive for academic success, and persist through baccalaureate degree attainment (Harper, 2012). Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) and groups like the Harvard Black Men's Forum bring students together in comfortable spaces that allow them to validate each other's experiences, seek and share advice, and talk about topics relevant to Black men on campus and

in larger social contexts. Many undergraduates also locate same-race peer mentors in these groups.

Like the graduating senior who predicted he would not have "made it" at Purdue, several others asserted that persisting from year-to-year would have been difficult (in some instances, impossible) had it not been for the instruction they received from other minoritized students. Similar statements were made about ethnic student organizations, especially the groups created expressly for Black undergraduate men. Most participants credited same-race peers for awakening their understandings of what it takes to productively respond to racism at PWIs. Accordingly, they learned the most about race neither in courses nor from professors but from peers in a multitude of spaces (Harrison, 2014). Fisher (2015) stated a few of the participants also cited the need to develop healthy and productive friendships or encouragement from upperclassmen as motivation for getting involved as well.

### **Staff/Admin**

"If I didn't meet ah Professor B then I wouldn't be as successful where I am academically right now" (Francois); "He gave me the fishing rod so I could learn how to fish, and I've been fishing ever since, and that's what's important" (Elijah); "Mr. D is kind of the one that kept me in line with school and I could always go talk to him when I need help" (Brian); "So you know I'm always in office hours and they've always been able to help me" (Carl) (Harrison, 2014).

### **Positive Emotions**

#### **Gratitude and Indebtedness**

All participants in Harrison's (2014) study shared expressions of gratitude whether it was about the tutoring or financial aid they received, and also the opportunities to engage in volunteer activities. The sense of belonging experienced and voiced by five of the participants was clearly

an important factor, as evidenced by one participant indicating that he had stopped out at one time because he felt he didn't fit in. Interestingly, apart from feeling grateful, all participants felt a sense of indebtedness to FCC and largely to the TRIO program (7 participants) for they felt if it were not for TRIO they would not have progressed as they had. "I don't know how to repay them. They were always there for me with school issues and things that had nothing to do with school when I needed advice, stated Elijah, reflecting his feelings of indebtedness (Harrison, 2014).

### **Belonging**

According to Coleman (2017), so many of the experiences that participants had at their respective schools involved the racializing perceptions that others had about participants' Blackness. As an integral part of adolescent development and cultural identity, the concept of being Black in a predominately White environment took on keen importance in the schooling experience of most of the participants and surfaced over and over again in their stories. Six of the seven participants recounted detailed memories where being Black was significant in their school experience. Experiences shared ranged from positive to negative.

Harper (2013) reported that extreme underrepresentation is usually accompanied by a set of experiences that undermine espoused institutional commitments to fostering inclusive campus climates; these are challenges from which White students at PWIs are almost always exempt. Harper et al. (2011) introduced the term *Onlyness*, which we defined as "the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group" (p. 190). McCorkle (2012) reported that the students in his study described feeling as if they wore disguises that camouflaged their true identity. This mask was not always worn intentionally but seemed to be

placed on them by the dominant culture on campus as means of maintain the status quo. Black male student leaders in our study discussed the burden they often felt to be exceptional because so few of their same-race peers had been chosen for such prominent campus leadership roles; there was a fear that falling short of perfection would foreclose possibilities for future cohorts of aspiring Black leaders (Harper, 2013). When asked, “were you ever the only Black student in a classroom—if so, what compelled you to speak up and actively participate in discussion?” most of the participants noted that they had been in a college course where they either were the only Black student or the only Black male (Fisher, 2015).

Similarly, M. Davis et al. (2004), Fries-Britt (1998), Fries-Britt and Turner (2002), and Winkle-Wagner (2009) report that professors and peers at PWIs impose this same burden on Black students in classrooms. That is, whenever a topic about race, poverty, or people of color emerges in classroom conversations, Black students are usually expected to speak—even those from rural and suburban areas are presumed to possess expertise on Black affairs in urban contexts. Participants at the PWI in Fries-Britt and Turner's (2002) study had to spend time educating White peers and professors and disrupting flawed assumptions about minoritized persons.

Aaron stated, “I have had good experiences here” when describing his satisfaction with his involvement in the Haitian Ibo Club. “Mr. D. is like a father to so many us; he’s like the father some of us never had”, said Brian when discussing why his advisor was his role model. McCorkle (2012) revealed that each student ultimately found a niche on campus, many shared how arduous the process was to find that niche. Although the students found some solace amongst other Black students on campus, they still did not feel fully supported because their fellow students could only provide a limited amount of support.



## Pride

Interestingly, the six participants who mentioned their ethnicity all expressed that it was inherent in their native countries that great importance was placed on education. Aaron stated, “My parents are Haitian, and Haitian parents make sure you know when you are growing up that you will be going to college.” “No one else in my family has a college degree, but my family always stressed the importance of an education while I was growing up (in Haiti)”, said Brian (Harrison, 2014).

Table 1. Characteristics of Identified Studies

	%	n
Experiences with institutionalized racism	36	8
Campus Experiences		
Campus involvement	72	16
Student Services		
Tutoring	9	2
Advisement	4	1
Mentoring	18	4
Student Organizations	31	7
Motivation and Relationships		
Self-motivation	68	15
Family	54	12
School personnel	22	5
Cultural/environmental	50	11
Professor	27	6
Peer	31	7
Staff/Administration	40	9
Positive Emotions		
Gratitude and Indebtedness	31	7
Belonging	40	9
Pride	4	1

*Note.* Twenty-two total articles.

## Discussion and Implications

Existing literature disproportionally focuses on the deficits of African American males. Combining the identities of first-generation and African American males is also quite rare. Research that focuses on the successes of men in this population spotlights gifted or high

achieving Black males. In this study, I explored strengths that first generation African American males who were neither gifted nor low achievers used to succeed in college. The results of this study are applicable to faculty members and student affairs professionals as well as those who work in college access programs aimed at opening access to first-generation African American males (Irby, 2012). Implications of this study can be used to empower first-generation African American males to come to college and persist toward graduation by helping them to realize and cultivate their strengths. Additionally, areas suggested for future research can continue to fill the gaps in the literature regarding this population. Irby (2012) also suggest that approaching first-generation African American males at PWIs from a strengths perspective instead of a deficit perspective can help student affairs professionals to understand how these students succeed and increase graduation rates for students with the lowest completion rate of any population in college today.

Amongst the several articles in this study, not one focused on Louisiana and it's higher education plight. Because of my work with African American males, I am aware of barriers and difficulties these men must overcome in order to get to and succeed in college. Because social and personal isolation and lack of belonging appear to be central factors in many African Americans' satisfaction and success on predominantly White campuses, school personnel must understand how these issues operate and develop effective interventions for these individuals. In order for Black males to succeed at PWIs, schools need to promote and nurture supportive environments. According to Sinanan (2012), one of the ways to achieve this goal is by employing more Black male and female professors in a variety of disciplines and by educating existing faculty and staff about the specific issues of concerns that have been raised by young

Black male students. Having the availability of more Black professors to serve as mentors can enhance the students' access to a supportive relationship in their educational experience.

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## **MARCHING ONWARD AND UPWARD TOWARDS THE LIGHT**

### **Introduction**

The image of inclusiveness and diversity displayed on the marketing literature for universities is a misrepresentation of the pluralism of graduates assembled during commencement dates (Thomas & Wingert, 2010). The most diverse place on campus is a shiny, happy spot that exists in two dimensions: the brochures, view books and annual reports that colleges and universities produce for public consumption (Paul, 2014). Among the many faces displayed on college and university brochures are African American students, and other students of color. Though university published pictures illustrate for most African American students an embracing and warming climate, the reality is that most campuses—specifically Predominately White Institutions (PWI's), present this population of students with memorable challenges and difficult experiences during their undergraduate tenure (Zhang & Smith, 2011).

Images that present a misleading vision of diversity and inclusion are common in college publications, finds Timothy Pippert, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Augsburg College in Minnesota (Wiggan, 2014). The primary purpose of this study is to examine the authentic experiences of African American; First Generation, low-socioeconomic male students that attend select PWI's. This topic will be examined and analytically discussed, with implications targeting faculty, staff, and students at PWI's (Townsend, 2012). Moreover, the article will explicitly detail participants' experiences as it relates to their operational definition of academic success. While researching student's experiences at select PWI's, it is also essential to consider participants life experiences in regards to their academic success (Steitha, 2010). Lastly, this study serves as a platform for silenced African American students that are socioeconomically challenged; yet persist through higher education with impressive academic achievements and

accomplishments. Through utilizing the Anti-Deficit Theory, participants' experiences will be discussed as it relates to their experiences at PWI's, with the intent to clearly and genuinely illustrate students' academic success while navigating such unfamiliar terrain.

### **Anti-Deficit 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. 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.

Throughout the past few decades, many African American students have managed to actively enroll and successfully matriculate through America's top colleges and universities across the United States (Mutua, 2013). For most African American students, attending a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) has no longer remained their first option of interest, due to the highly competitive marketing and recruitment strategies employed by institutions of higher education—namely PWI's (Morris, 2014). While this may appear as a positive effort, it is equally important to note that increasing the effectiveness of predominately white post-secondary is extremely vital to the success of African American students. Historically, the challenges that African Americans face on college campuses have been well



documented (Strayhorn, 2008, Harper, 2013, Chatters, 2018, Hall, 2017, Hunn; 2014; Hannon, Woodside, & Pollard, 2016). Through their compilation of research, findings suggest that predominately white institutions prove to be less inviting, less supportive, and less sympathetic to the needs of African American students. Specific challenges African American students face include: racism, microaggressive attitudes from faculty and staff, stereotypes, labeling, and many other factors that have the ability to negatively influence student persistence, retention rates, graduation rates, social acceptance, and inclusivity throughout their undergraduate experiences (Kiser & Price, 2008).

Researchers have indicated that African American students often face some of the most critical obstacles when attending PWI's (Laird, Bridges, Holmes, Morelon, & Williams, 2004). Strayhorn (2008) explained that negative labels about African American men create obstacles for these students to find the necessary faculty and staff support. Negative perceptions from faculty and staff, and peers alike, may negatively influence their scholastic and co-curricular engagement within the university (Laird et al., 2004). Numerous researchers have explicated the importance of "fitting in" (Salinitri, 2005; Sorrentino, 2007; Strayhorn 2008) and its relationship to student success on university campuses. However, in the effort to counter such narrative, this research article will describe students' experiences as they actively resist negative stereotypes and demystify myths that contribute to the deficit approach as it relates to this population of students academic success. Bonner (2011) suggested that African American students must consider themselves as academically gifted in order to change their university experience and perception. Positive interactions with a pluralistic group of peers, along with engagement in academic assistance programs, improved the enculturation process for a group of students attending a PWI (Swail, Cabrera, Lee & Williams, 2005). Further, Harper (2013) indicated that

most research published on undergraduate African American students at PWIs negatively focuses on the academic and non-academic elements, which severely undermine academic achievement and social engagement of these students.

Despite the fact that colleges and universities have been racially integrated for decades, there continues to remain a dearth of literature addressing and critically examining the academic and social experiences of African American First Generation college, low socioeconomic college students that attend predominately white colleges and universities (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015). This population of students are tasked with the burden of being successful, while attending colleges and universities that were once closed to African Americans fifty years ago, with the expectation to graduate with skills requisite in the professional work realm. These expectations create unique challenges for African American students (Furr, 2002; Strayhorn 2013; Harper 2013).

### **First Generation, Black, & Socioeconomically Challenged**

When interviewing First Generation African American male students as it relates to their decision to attend college, many students stated that their choice was closely connected with their parent's decision or oppositional attitude toward college. Specifically, students mentioned their parents' disdain toward his choice of attending college, instead of immediately seeking employment in the workforce—post-secondary education. A student stated during his interview “My parents were very unhappy when I made the choice to go to college. I explained to them that this was an opportunity that I could not pass up, and I explained to them what impact it would be on our family as a First Generation college student” (A. Bailey, personal communication, September 10, 2018). While many parents of First Generation African American males students may not understand the importance of college attendance, the reality is that the

idea of entering the workforce after graduation has not proven to be as successful at alarming rates. About 6 in 10 recent high school graduates enrolled in college attended 4-year institutions. Of these students, 30.8 percent participated in the labor force, compared with 47.9 percent of recent graduates enrolled in 2-year colleges” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016, p. 12). Some participants stated their guilt toward attending college and abandoning their parents’ blueprint for their career in technical fields. When speaking with Timothy Slaughter, a participant in this study, he mentioned, “I remember telling my parents that I could no longer work to pay bills and that college would be my best bet. My dad looked at me and told me I was crazy and that I had a responsibility to help pay bills”. Because many First Generation African American male students families struggle financially, the expectation has become that they assume duties in order to make profit for the household. Equally disturbing, black youth that are not enrolled in college had an unemployment rate of 29.2 percent in October 2015, higher than the rates of their white (14.1 percent), Asian (13.9 percent), and Hispanic (17.8 percent) counterparts (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016, p. 12). If our nation’s current demographic and educational attainment trends, exacerbated by these trends for minority males, continue, the general educational levels of Americans will decline, and the United States will be unable to attain our shared goals of leading the world with the highest proportion of students obtaining postsecondary degrees.

### **First Generation Students**

First Generation African American students—namely males, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, face myriad financial, academic and social barriers to entering and completing college as the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid and post-secondary coursework (PNPI, 2018). Research finds varying definitions of “first generation” resulting in how these students are counted—but however they are defined, they lag behind their

peers. First-generation students are defined as those whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Cataldi & Bennett, 2018). Although the percentage of Blacks earning college degrees has nearly doubled over the past 20 years, there is still much research that should be conducted with the intention to uncover barriers and challenges that hinder academic success.

Historically, education has been perceived as the great equalizer to establish a pathway to the middle class (Naylor, Wyatt-Nichol, & Brown, 2015). However, the education system in America perpetuates inequality. Tuition is too expensive, and most African American families do not have the appropriate financial means to fund college. From 1980 to 2011, college tuition increased by 244% (Mettler, 2014), reducing college opportunity for middle and low-income students. Therefore, current college tuition rates often force low-income families, specifically African American students, into enormous amounts of debt, or the option to enter the workforce. Despite the inordinate amount of federal dollars spent on higher education, core groups of American society are underserved or left out of the college experience: low-income and minority students (Carnevale, 2015).

While first generation college students have been labeled and categorized over the past few decades, these students not only feel pressure from peers regarding their decision to attend college, but they also feel pressure from family and loved ones. First generation college students, or students whose parents have not earned a four-year degree not only face barriers towards admissions criteria, etc., but, they too face isolation and psychological challenges during the process. Although perhaps supportive of higher education, their parents and family members may view their entry into college as a break in the family system rather than a continuation of their schooling (Banks-Santilli, 2015). In families, role assignments about work, family, religion

and community are passed down through the generations creating “intergenerational continuity.” When a family member disrupts this system by choosing to attend college, he or she experiences a shift in identity, leading to a sense of loss. Not prepared for this loss, many first-generation students may come to develop two different identities—one for home and another for college (Toutkoushian, Stollberg & Slaton, 2018).

### **Inequality & Underrepresentation**

Students attending colleges and universities across the world, to some degree experience inequality. However, African American males are more heavily scrutinized, and often, fall victim to various forms of inequality. Mettler (2014) has identified degrees of inequality resulting in two separate systems: one for privileged White students, and one for low-income and minority students. According to Mettler (2014), “our system of higher education contributes, increasingly to rising inequality, as it stratifies Americans by income group rather than providing them with ladders of opportunity” (p.8). At the center of this problem are access, affordability, and attainment. Often times, African American males do not have within reach equal access, and affordable options for college; consequently, decreasing attainment. In fact, Naylor et al., (2015) conducted a study confirming that low-income minorities are more likely to attend less-prestigious colleges and are less likely to graduate college, and these results lower minorities’ social and economic mobility. Due to the practice of institutional racism, procedural rules and policies set up in areas of college access and admissions, affordability, and attainment lower the chances of success for African American males, and students from low-income families.

### **Institutional Racism**

The concept of institutional racism is most often credited to Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton’s 1967 work *Black Power: The politics of Liberation*, in

which they discuss examples of overt and covert forms of racism at the institutional level. While interviewing a participant for this study, Jeremiah Williams added “The real reason why I dropped out of school the first time is because it seemed as if everyone here had a problem with me as a black male.” Jeremiah later explained that the overall campus climate included a cold feeling; almost like a sense of not belonging. When examined through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), the achievement gap and school dropout rates for Black males can be explained as a disparate impact of institutional racism manifested in the form of tracking and similar ability-group practices within Predominately White Institutions (Collins, 2016). Scholars at the forefront of developing CRT: Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Mari, Matsuda, Kimberle Crenshaw, Charles Lawrence, Neil Gotanda, Patricia James, and Angela Harris all contend that critical race theory asks us to consider how we can transform the relationship between race, racism, and power and work toward the liberation of People of Color. This framework emerged in response to the failure of traditional legal remedies to address the perpetuation of racial discrimination and the need for a language than can articulate the contemporary nature of institutional discrimination (Tatum, 2017).

### **Low Socioeconomic: College Access & Affordability**

When discussing African American First Generation college students financial concerns regarding the affordability of college, certain cost-related factors were more important to this population of students than non-first generation students in selecting an institution (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Consistent with their lower incomes, participants in this study reported that obtaining an adequate amount of financial aid was a challenge—100% stated. More than half of the participants interviewed stated their primary reason in attending their respective institutions related to their ability to complete degree programs in a short period of time.

The affordability of college across the world has been the ultimate challenge for African American first generation college students—especially those from low socioeconomic neighborhoods and families. Compared to their White male counterparts, Blacks earn fewer baccalaureate and graduate degrees compared to their White peers (Carnevale & Strohl, 2014). Meanwhile, attaining a college degree dramatically increases low-income students' chances of moving into higher income levels. In contrast, the chances of a child making it out of the bottom fifth of the income distribution increases with a college degree (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008). Over the past few years, public universities—mainly PWIs have increased their tuition fees, placing the burden on the middle-income and low-income students who can least afford it. In addition, many participants in this study mentioned their lack of Pell Grant funds. Specifically, they stated, “Pell Grant amounts awarded to low-income students do not fairly correlate with tuition increases.” Consequently, for some African American first generation students that are low income, likely enroll at HBCUs or less-selective PWIs (Dietz, 2010).

Though African American First Generation students continue to prove that financial assistance and affordability are major concerns, some students have begun to realize the effects of being cost-efficient early on (Dugan & Komives, (2010). For example, more than half of the participants in this study noted that lodging with parents afforded them best in terms of financial circumstances. Additionally, some students stated that in addition to their academic responsibilities, they work long hours, which is suitable with their class schedule. Participant Rahim Coleman stated, “I chose my institution because it has a good reputation, and it’s close to my house. That’s better than paying out of state fees.” Though students risk the lack of academic and social integration by opting out of campus housing, most participants stated that their

concerns and priorities revolved around responsible financial management and degree attainment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

African American male students, for many years, have been at the forefront of many researcher's agenda, with the intent to examine and explore students' experiences, both academically, and socially (Cummins & Griffin, 2012). The daunting reality is that many African American males, particularly from urban and low socioeconomic backgrounds, possess no aspiration to further their education beyond high school (Bonner, 2010). The lack of postsecondary motivation and aspiration for this population of students, added to their lack of academic achievement, and various socioeconomic factors: finances, parental education, and family influence—present common barriers impeding success for African American males in higher education (Griffin, Jayakumar, Jones, & Allen, 2009). Though the deficit perspective regarding such notion for some African American males may be widely published, there too exists a phenomenon—students who actually aspire to attend college, achieve at high rates—academically, and are socioeconomically challenged (Strayhorn, 2008, Harper, 2013, Chatters, 2018, Hall, 2017, Hunn; 2014; Hannon, Woodside, & Pollard, 2016).

### **Research Questions**

This study was an attempt to examine the experiences of African American, First Generation, and Low Socioeconomic male students that attend select Predominately White Institutions. In the effort to counter the deficit perspective of existing empirical research regarding this population of students, this study serves as a platform that will allow participants to authentically engage in dialogue and discuss their experiences at length. Most existing literature regarding African American male, first generation students that are low income



examined their experiences by highlighting major deficiencies of this group's academic abilities. Studies emphasize these students' lack of preparedness, low academic achievement, and high attrition rates (Harper 2013). As a result, a dearth of information is available examining and exploring unique factors that contribute to the success of African American male, first generation students that are low income attending PWIs.

Particular attention was given to the students' conceptual understanding and interpretation of their experiences and academic success at select PWI's in Louisiana—given their status of: African American, first generation, and low economic. The research study was guided by the following research questions:

**(RQ1):** What does academic success mean to low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana?

**(RQ2):** What life experiences have affected the lives of academically successful low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana?

**(RQ3):** Do low SES, first-generation Black male students at PWI's in Louisiana have family support or community systems that contribute to their academic achievement?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

For the purpose of this study, I utilized a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling serves best appropriate due to the specific characteristics of my population of interest and my accessibility and ability to locate individuals who have those characteristics. Six participants were selected utilizing purposeful sampling techniques according to a specific participant criterion: (a) African American, (b) male, (c) Low Socioeconomic, (d) attend a PWI. Participants in this research study were purposefully chosen based on the criteria above.

Participant demographics of age, race, major, academic classification, and GPA were assessed when conducting participant selection. Due to the confidentiality of this study, participant names and sites are presented in the form of pseudonyms.

This study utilized a qualitative methodology approach to explore the presented research questions in depth. This study was conducted to investigate the experiences of African American male, first generation; low socioeconomic students that attend select (research one) Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana. In the effort to explore and understand intersections between race, class, gender and institution type, the qualitative methodology, is most effective as it relates to the language and discourse of students' experiences. This research study design was based on the premise that African American male, first generation; low socioeconomic students possess unique experiences that present significant implications and areas of improvement for faculty and staff at higher education institutions across the world.

Table 2. Overview of Participants

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>MAJOR</b>	<b>CLASS</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>UNIVERSITY</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP POSITION</b>
Anthony Bailey	22	Business Management	Senior	3.5	University of Southwestern	Mr. College of Business
Rahim Coleman	21	Social Work	Junior	3.7	Nova East University	Junior Class Vice President
Kevin Hamilton	21	Elementary Education	Junior	3.4	Nova East University	Men's Federation President
Timothy Slaughter	22	Public Health	Senior	3.3	University of Southwestern	Senior Class President
Corey Taylor	21	Business Management	Junior	3.5	University of Southwestern	SGA Vice President
Jeremiah Williams	21	Nursing	Junior	3.2	Nova East University	Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. President

## **Data Collection**

An interview design was utilized for the collection of data for this study. The interviews obtained responses that were an authentic representation of the participants' experiences. Each interview lasted up to 60 minutes, though participants were encouraged to speak freely and openly regarding their experiences at their respective institutions. Interviews for this study were held within a one-month time frame specifically designed for the recruiting, screening, interviewing, and transcribing of the interviews. Additionally, participants were allowed the opportunity to speak with me prior to the interview to ask clarifying questions. Finally, interviews were conducted in person, by videoconference, Skype, Oovoo, Google hangout, or FaceTime. Participants were given this array of options due to travel constraints and the limited number of participants available that fit the study criteria.

## **Data Analysis**

The overall purpose of this study is to capture participants' experiences in a way that is dependable, accurate, and reliable. Additionally, it is the goal of this study to present findings in a manner that has an air of undeniability. Therefore, I prepared the data in an organized fashion, and essentially reduced the data into themes through a process of coding. This process was proven methodically appropriate, as consistent with data derived from interviews and small focus groups. Because interviews are narrative, descriptive, and nonnumeric, it is impossible to number crunch and quickly reduce the data to a manageable and succinct form.

Following the interview process, I transcribed all participants' interviews in order to make sense of the collected data. Next, I coded participant's statements using a thematic approach and grouped each theme based on similar language and phrases. At the end of the coding and theming process, I later interpreted the data so that I can generate a larger illustration

of the participants' responses. By abstracting data through following the above process, I was able to identify direct quotes from participants that connected to the themes of the study. The trends and identified phenomena's uncovered through this analysis was later compared and analyzed in search of broader trends.

## **Results**

Findings from six semi-structured interviews with African American male, first generation, low socioeconomic backgrounds are presented in this section. While analyzing the participants' data, it was very obvious that most shared similar experiences. Essentially, this study resulted in three major findings. Each of the findings is one intersectional aspect of a student's experience which in conjunction, may help provide a context by which we might better understand students' experiences holistically and their understanding of academic success during while attending their respective institutions. The findings, which will be explored in turn, include 1) the nature of engagement with campus experiences (involvement, student services, and organization), 2) the nature of social networks and support (family, mentors, peers, and opportunities for social engagement), as well as 3) faith, spirituality, and inspiration (the role of higher power, mission to serve, gratitude, and indebtedness.)

### **Campus Experiences**

Central to the conceptualization of a campus climate for diversity is the concept that students are educated in distinct racial contexts. These contexts in higher education are shaped by external and internal (institutional) forces. We represent the external components of climate as two domains: (a) the impact of governmental policy, programs, and initiatives and (b) the impact of sociohistorical forces on campus racial climate (Bridges, 2010). Indeed, experiences with diverse peers may result in attitudinal or developmental shifts that subsequently affect sense

of belonging. As policies designed to create more diverse learning environments have come under increased scrutiny due to the Supreme Court decisions in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003)

The first major finding related to participants' experiences on campus—particularly their academic and social experiences while attending their respective PWI. While most students stated that their experiences consisted of isolation, negative classroom encounters, and subtle microaggressive behavior, almost all participants in the study reported some degree of involvement at their campus. Most importantly, participants added that their campus involvement has been critical in their college experience, often leading to their academic success. While interviewing a participant in regards to his campus experience, Timothy recounts:

I benefitted from being involved more than I ever imagined. I have made connections not only on campus, but in the community. I have learned to conduct myself better in professional settings, and overall, I learned how to put others needs above my own.

Though participants discussed their involvement at length, it appeared as though they felt a sense of relief to share both their academic and social experiences—with no details spared. Specifically, participants shared how their personal lives shaped their outlook on education, and how the lack of regard in terms of education infiltrated their homes and communities. Participant Anthony Bailey added “Honestly, I had no intentions on going to college. My mom didn’t go to college, and neither did my dad. They doing pretty alright”. Participants correlated their parents’ lack of postsecondary education with a lifestyle that presents a comfortable style of living. Though Anthony was able to thoroughly understand that college is not an option for everyone, he too understood that a college degree would afford him a lifestyle much better than what he dreamt for himself and his family.

In addition to students' experiences as it relates to their academic success, three participants discussed at length their difficulties in adjusting to the college curriculum and professors at their respective institutions. Participants stated that there were many instances where they felt as though they did not belong. Adjusting to a new style of learning, as compared to their high school experiences, participants mentioned their disdain for large lecture halls and seminar structured classroom settings. Kevin Hamilton, a student at University of Southwestern stated "In high school, we had at most 20 people in one class. I got to college and it's over 200 people in one big lecture hall. I couldn't learn that way". Due to Kevin's unfamiliarity with managing and learning in an environment that demands his focus in order to be academically successful, his primary challenge was adjusting to the actual environment and teaching style of the professor. This was also the case for Corey Taylor, a Business Management major also attending University of Southwestern. Corey added "It's no way to focus in those large classrooms. I never sat next to the same person, and it's always a new face every day. I can barely understand my professors." Similar to Kevin, Corey's experience adjusting academically impeded on his overall experience while attending his university.

Uniquely adding to the significance of this study is Rahim Coleman's experience while attending Nova East University. Rahim is a Junior Social Work major and also serves as the Vice President of his Junior class. Rahim can be described as a student that is a "go-getter", and his grade point average of 3.7 suggests that he is high achieving and academically advanced. However, being an African American male, first generation student attending a PWI, he faced challenges comparable to other participants. Though Rahim did not struggle academically as it relates to adjusting to his university, he did encounter financial issues that hindered his academic

success. Rahim described a situation detailing his experience with a professor in regards to a mandatory fee necessary to be successful in his course. Rahim explain:

I don't think it's fair that we have to pay high tuition rates and individual miscellaneous fees for things we'll use only once or twice. Professors don't even use LiveText, so why should we have to buy it. I'm already broke and barely have enough money for lunch sometimes. I think it's all a scam and the university is getting over on us.

The frustration expressed by Rahim is in response to his feelings as it relates to the mandatory fee for a service required by professors at his institution. The LiveText service Rahim referred to is a resource used by professors to provide feedback and grade students' assignments. He feels as though a simple email with an attachment should suffice. Instead, he pays 500 dollars that he feels can be better used for bills. Similar to Rahim, Kevin Hamilton, a student also attending Nova East University mentioned his disregard for the extra miscellaneous fees charged by the University. He claimed "I almost didn't have enough money to cover my entire balance because of unnecessary fees like building maintenance, or technology fees. That should come with the tuition." Participants thought back to their initial reason as it relates to their institution choice. One participant stated "I only came here because I saw the ads and the waivers and thought it'd be a good fit. Now I know it was a scam." Corey added "Sometimes I wonder if they came to my high school all those times to recruit the black people. It is fun here, but sometimes I feel like I'm in a world of my own." The emotions expressed during interviews with participants echoed each other, and it is evident that more empirical research should be conducted on this population of students, as it relates to their academic experiences, social adjustments, and financial challenges.

In addition to students often negative experiences—financially, participants also discussed their involvement in student services and campus organizations. Three students are

members of fraternities and two others are part of other clubs at their respective institutions. Participants discussed very positive experiences regarding their involvement in university organizations. Particularly, those that mentioned their involvement in their organization only mentioned so in isolation of White counterparts. For example, Anthony stated “I really have fun at my school. I’m in a fraternity and every now and then we have parties. It’s all black people and we turn up.” Corey added “White students never come to our parties, they have their own kickbacks and we go our separate ways.” Their explicit mention of other white students as it relates to both parties’ intentional avoidance of interaction suggests that race influences students’ perception as it relates to their understanding of positive experiences. Moreover, most students concluded that their involvement in organizations and clubs while attending their respective institutions has proven beneficial toward their academic success and social experience.

### **Social Network and Support**

Despite African American male, first generation, low income students’ challenges in regards to access and adequate funds to pay for college, the reality is that some families encourage their children to attend college. Counter the argument that this population of students’ families pressure them into the workforce, this study found that support among family, friends, church, and community members do exist. The deficit perspective suggests that students that typically are low income and first generation, have little to no support when pursuing postsecondary education. However, participants included in this study mentioned their decision to attend college, and included narratives about how loved ones depended on them to “make it out”, despite obstacles that commonly add to their attrition.

For some, staying at home and not attending college was not afforded as an option. Kevin Hamilton stated “My mom told me that I had to get out when I graduated and do better than what



she did. I knew at that moment that I had a responsibility.” While Kevin’s mother expressed what many refer to as “tough-love”, her intent was to instill in her son the concept of doing better than what has been modeled. Some students believe that it is their obligation and responsibility to attend and complete college based on their perception of family members’ expectations (Strayhorn, 2013, Harper 2008). Anthony Bailey—Business Management major at University of Southwestern provided a perspective not often mentioned in empirical literature and studies. Anthony added “My parents really didn’t know if I was going to college or not. I don’t think they cared. But I knew I had to go to college because growing up my life was a living hell.” Truly and authentically expressing his feelings and emotions regarding his upbringing and life experiences, it was his own decision to attend college—having experienced a life with parents that did not.

Interestingly, though some participants live in single homes and are low income, their support systems range from church members, mentors, and close peers, all which provide positive influences in the lives of the participants. When describing individuals that are influential toward their success, participants commonly referred to as role-models. Role modeling can be a critical asset to formulating positive outcomes for this population of students. Kevin serves as the Men’s Federation President at his university and he mentioned his leadership experience and his relationship with his mentors. He stated:

With the help of my two mentors, I have been able to successfully navigate almost every obstacle in my path. My mentors are literally my backbone and I do not know what I would do without them. They are literally another father figure for me. They’re the reason I’m the President of my organization. They helped me learn how to be a man. That’s invaluable, and for that I’ll always be grateful. I never thought I could be President of such a prestigious organization, especially here at this school. But with their mentorship, they helped me realize that my motivation and potential are my keys to success.

Some of the participants recounted times when an opportunity presented itself and they took advantage and seized the moment. There were accounts of instants when some of the

participants were selected or nominated for trips or school-related events without prior knowledge. Being selected to attend such elite events opened up a plethora of opportunities that would not have otherwise been granted. Corey expressed sincere gratitude for such opportunities:

I have overcome a lot of obstacles to get to where I am now, but I am grateful for all the opportunities that I have had. My mother was a single parent; my dad died when I was seven years old, so my mom pretty much had to work two, three jobs my whole life just to make ends meet for me and my other two siblings. I know for sure, I'm only here by the sweat and determination of my mother, and I realized early on that I must take advantage of whatever resources it'll take to be successful.

Timothy recalled similar gratitude for some of his high school teachers and his guidance counselor for placing him in certain elite positions:

My high school guidance counselor was truly the best. The woman saw something in me that I did not see in myself. Every time I looked up, she was nominating me for an award or some exclusive scholarly trip. Not only did she nominate me, but when I was selected, she ensured I had what I needed in order to attend such events.

### **Faith, Spirituality and Inspiration**

Mostly all the respondents referenced a belief in something greater than themselves as the impetus to succeed and serve others. Some referenced the institution of church as a motivating factor. Others referenced their personal beliefs in a high power. While some simply referenced the need to give back to the communities that have invested in their success. Overall, their belief that becoming a more educated citizen would transmute to more opportunities to serve.

When Timothy joined his church family and began to be mentored by his pastor, he was inspired to serve others through his faith and love of Jesus Christ. His goal is to simply work hard and make his family and community proud. His pastor convinced him to pursue a higher education and even helped him financially:

I am truly grateful for my pastor and my church family. They have been extremely helpful and resourceful with my matriculation in college and are one of the main reasons I have made it this far. My pastor has two daughters and early on took me under his wing because he said he saw something in me. Initially I was scared and did not know what to think because no one had ever been that nice to me before. As time progressed, our relationship has blossomed very nicely.

Anthony also mentioned that his faith in God helped him attain higher educational success, for his family and his community. When asked about his ability to overcome various hardships, Anthony responded, “Having faith in God will see you through” (personal communication, July 14, 2018). Rahim said that the major factor to his success was the scripture from Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*.

Feeling grateful can give us a warm glow of happiness, increase our trust, and make us want to help others in return. But when we receive something from others, we don’t always feel grateful. In fact, we may feel indebted instead. Culture also seems to play a role in whether or not we feel indebted. Research suggest gratitude rather than indebtedness is a more powerful motivator for building and maintaining social relationships. Rahim stated “just remembering that I don’t have to do it, but I want to, and remembering to enjoy the act of giving itself,” he says. “To me that’s the key.”

Anthony also stated that his church community and his faith were “a rock in his life to serve as a compass for me morally and spiritually” and helped him “stay grounded and rooted”. Jeremiah said that the church provided a basis for his values and helped him develop his faith and concept of family. He also felt that the church had given him a separate purpose to help others less fortunate.

### **Implications for Practice**

The participants in this study provided an array of implications that should be practiced widespread at colleges and universities across the nation. The findings included above provides insight into the experiences of African American male, first generation, low income college students at Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana. This study has potential to influence

multiple groups of individuals that aid in the experiences and academic success of these students. The findings explored included: 1) the nature of engagement with campus experiences (involvement, student services, and organization), 2) the nature of social networks and support (family, mentors, peers, and opportunities for social engagement), as well as 3) faith, spirituality, and inspiration (the role of higher power, mission to serve, gratitude, and indebtedness.) The following recommendations are offered to assist parents, college and university faculty and staff, family members, mentors, and peers.

### **Parents**

Commonly mentioned in this study were testimonials from students in regards to their parents' influence as it relates to their decision to attend college. While most participants responded that their parents did have some impact on their overall decision, some stated that the feeling of an ultimatum between work and college existed. This study suggests to parents that their position toward their children's' education should not be authoritative; rather, a conversation that acknowledges the desires and aspirations of the student. Additionally, parents should serve as motivators instead of counselors. Participants in the study mentioned their quest to seek parental counseling, which some felt pressure when making a decision opposite of what their parents advised.

### **Faculty & Staff**

Faculty and staff were also mentioned quite often by participants. While making adjustments to the university, some students felt as though some faculty and staff members had no regard for their success, nor did they feel authenticity when communicating. First-generation students that attend Predominately White Institutions already feel as though they do not belong. It should be the goal of the university and faculty/staff employed to ensure these students enjoy

their experience while enrolled at their respective institutions. Lastly, faculty and staff should be aware of most first generation students, especially those that are African American and low income. Typically, these students are attending college by use of federal dollars such as grants and loans. Some participants discussed their fear of exhausting all of their financial aid before graduation, due to the large amounts requested in order to be successful financially, and in some students' case, academically as well.

### **Family Members, Mentors, & Peers**

When asked about individuals that are influential and supportive towards their success, first generation participants described at length their positive relationships with family members, mentors, and peers. Almost all participants mentioned a family member as being influential in their decision to attend college. Additionally, more than half of the participants admitted that mentors were their support system in navigating the college selection process, and throughout their academic experiences. While these students know their own struggle all too well, they too served as support systems to others that shared experiences similar to their own. Some participants mentioned meeting peers/friends that were also generation and navigating the unknown terrain of college—especially being low income and first generation. Students expressed at that length their grit to survive, despite the odds that were not in their favor. Implications for family members, mentors, and peers suggest that the positive relationships are vital to the success of this population of students. The ability to rely and depend on someone who is credible and trustworthy is invaluable—as expressed by participants.

### **Conclusion**

The image illustrated and often written about in regards to African American male, first generation, low income students has saturated higher education literature in a negative manner.

The findings in this study provide a counter narrative to the prevailing research that has guided the discourse around this population of students' experiences and academic performance at PWIs. However, results from this study indicate that some students do successfully navigate the ranks of higher education, with the support of a host of individuals and the adversity and courage to persist beyond defeat. The idea of being academically successful and achieving greater than their future generation of family members is both exciting and a priority in the lives of the interviewed participants. I am grateful to have interacted with and gained the knowledge necessary to help create a better experience for African American male, first generation, low socioeconomic students that are attending Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana.

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## **LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

### **Introduction**

A theme throughout the literature on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is their supportive, nurturing, and family-like environment (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008; Kim, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Palmer, Wood & Arroyo, 2015). While many Black students who attend HBCUs may lack cultural capital (e.g., knowledge to help them navigate the institutional environment), because of their status as first-generation college students, the supportive ethos of these institutions provides them with an abundance of social capital (e.g., social networks in the form of supportive relationships), which has been invaluable to their persistence and retention (Palmer et al., 2015). More recently, another theme in the literature on HBCUs has come to the fore: the high attrition rate of Black men. In fact, researchers have reported a gender disparity among Black men and women enrolling and persisting to graduation at HBCUs (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer & Wood, 2012; Roach, 2001; Palmer et al., 2015). While such disparities exist among racial and ethnic groups, they are more pronounced among Black students (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). According to an analysis of government data from 83 four-year HBCUs, while 37% of all Black HBCU students graduate within six years, which is 4% lower than the national graduation rate for Black students, only 29% of Black men at Black colleges persist to degree completion within six years (Palmer & Wood, 2012).

What we know about Black male collegians can be organized around three major categories: (a) environmental, (b) social and (c) psychological. Environmental factors refer to issues that either promote or impinge upon their success, or as Strayhorn (2013b) notes, “aspects of the campus ecology that either affirm Black male collegians’ sense of belonging, facilitate

their involvement in the academic and social life of campus, or marginalize them in ways that deny access to supportive networks that are critical for success” (p. 2). The literature is replete with accounts of Black male collegians that perceive their environment at PWIs as chilly and at times hostile (Bonner & Bailey, 2007; Davis, 1994; Fleming, 1984; Flowers, 2002; Flowers, 2003). The negative environmental cues Black men experience on campus can be internalized, thus interrupting their desire to engage on campus (Berger & Heath, 2005). Bonner and Bailey (2006) explained, “To create academic climates that foster the success of African American men, higher education institutions must focus on a number of issues that defy solutions of a singular nature” (p. 38). These factors include, peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self-esteem, and institutional environment.

### **History and Purpose of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were established to serve the educational needs of Black Americans. Prior to the time of their establishment, and for many years afterwards, Blacks were generally denied admission to traditionally white institutions. As a result, HBCUs became the principle means for providing postsecondary education to Black Americans. Prior to the Civil War, there was no structured higher education system for Black students (Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2017). Public policy and certain statutory provisions prohibited the education of blacks in various parts of the nation. The Institute for Colored Youth, the first higher education institution for Blacks, was founded in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, in 1837 then followed by two other black institutions--Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania (1854), and Wilberforce University, in Ohio (1856). Many people are not aware that HBCUs were founded, not only for free and newly freed Blacks, but also for

low socioeconomic populations. These populations included whites not able to attend state supported schools. HBCU mission statements show their ability and desire to educate those that were denied higher education, both by law and by practice. Hamilton (2018), states that HBCUs have been dying since they were first born. Founded by various combinations of the formerly enslaved, abolitionists, and white philanthropists, HBCUs were tasked with “uplifting the Negro” through education. From the start, the task was monumental, the rhetoric lofty, and the funding paltry. Their noble mission has been hobbled by institutional racism since the beginning (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton 2017).

Today, there are 107 HBCUs with more than 228,000 students enrolled. Fifty-six institutions are under private control, and 51 are public colleges and universities. The public institutions account for more than two-thirds of the students in historically Black institutions (Hamilton, 2018). Most (87) of the institutions are four-year colleges or universities, and 20 are two-year institutions. In the past, more than 80 percent of all Black college graduates have been trained at these HBCUs. Today, HBCUs enroll 20 percent of Black undergraduates. However, HBCUs award 40 percent of baccalaureate degrees earned by Black college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Rather than promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy of anticipated failure by black students, HBCUs offer Black students the potential of a “stereotype safe” environment. Marybeth Gasman, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, writes that HBCUs provide Black students with “an empowering, family-like environment of small classes, close faculty-student relationships, and life without the daily racial tensions experienced off campus” (Hamilton, 2015). Along my educational journey, I have obtained my bachelors of science degree in Public Health with a concentration in Health Systems Management and my Masters of Social Work, both from HBCUs. I am currently a Doctor of

Philosophy (PhD) candidate in the Educational Leadership and Research program pursuing my doctorate degree at Louisiana State University - a PWI.

### **Critical Race Theory**

My experiences at my Universities draw on the theoretical perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the methodology of autoethnography. Given the importance of race and racism on the lived experiences of Black male college students at PWIs, I draw upon CRT as a useful analytic tool for the present study. CRT is a form of oppositional scholarship originating from critical legal studies. The CRT movement involves a collection of activists and scholars interested in investigating and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 2000). “Unlike the traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, CRT questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning” (Delgado, p. 3). Specifically, experiential knowledge of people of color, and the permanence of racism will be explored.

Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination (Bell, 1987; Palmer & Wood, 2012). In fact, critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios and parables (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996). The permanence of racism suggests that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society. In CRT, racism is seen as an inherent part of American civilization, privileging White individuals over people of color in most areas of life, including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-

Billings & Tate, 1995). In higher education, racism may be analyzed through a lens that examines the structural impact. When higher education ignores the existence of systematic racism, diversity action plans become ineffective (Iverson, 2007). Racism is persistent, permanent, and omnipresent in U.S. society and consequently education. Because issues of race and racism are deeply rooted in U.S. society, they also are ingrained and deeply embedded in the policies, practices, procedures, and institutionalized systems of education. Racism can manifest both intentionally and unintentionally (Gillborn, 2015).

During my first semester as a graduate student at my PWI, I experienced *the permanence of racism*. I was a full-time student enrolled in nine credit hours, while working a full-time job. I have always been a hard worker and intentional in doing my absolute best in all things that I commit myself to. As I recall my experiences in my program, I am reminded of an instance where my professor subtly questioned my belonging in the PhD program. She made me feel inadequate and incapable of completing my coursework. In her class, I received subpar grades - B's and C's on every paper that I submitted. Immediately following class one evening, I stopped her in the hallway and politely inquired about my latest grades, and her grading style. Because I was a first year PhD student, it was my goal to seek clarity so that I will avoid further mistakes that resulted in the inconsistent grades in her class, as compared to other courses that I had taken. Her response to me was, "Oh really, you have A's in your other two courses? Are those courses taught by adjunct professors? Taken aback by her disparaging comment, which I never experienced, I responded, "Yes ma'am, that's correct. And no, my other professors are not adjunct professors, they are both full professors and one is the Dean of the School of Education. She was startled and shifted the conversation by saying, "Okay, well maybe I was being biased and need to look over your assignments once again." She also had a way with saying certain

racial slurs and with condensing undertones. For example, at her previous school of employment, she mentioned that the President of the University set aside a place on campus for Katrina “refugees” and she thought that was very nice of him. That was very nice of him, however, the people who were displaced by the effects of hurricane Katrina were not refugees, we were evacuees. There were about three of us in class who were affected by hurricane Katrina and we all took offense to it and immediately expressed of concern regarding her comment. The professor did not see an issue with it, refused to apologize, then quickly changed the subject.

### **Campus Experiences**

Encouraging Black males to engage in activities, such as Black Male Initiatives and other programs that help to engender a positive masculine identity, HBCUs should use this culture of engagement to encourage Black men to participate in activities inside and outside the classroom that help to develop other non-cognitive elements, such as a positive racial identity, positive self-concept, motivation, and perseverance (Palmer et al., 2015). While the supportive, family-like ethos of HBCUs have been shown to enhance Black males’ self-concept (Berger & Milem, 2000; Fleming, 1984) as well as their racial identity (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009), it is important that HBCUs be more intentional about providing programming that helps Black males further the development of these non-cognitive factors.

During my matriculation as an undergraduate student, who attended a small liberal arts private HBCU, I was encouraged to take advantage of all the University resources offered upon my arrival. I was a Black, first-generation student coming from a low socioeconomic status background lacking concrete guidance. I was always very proactive and a “go getter”, so if I did not understand or know how to go about getting or doing something, I would definitely ask someone who could assist me. As I reflect, my University did not have any Black male initiatives



to cater to the men of color on campus. Looking back, I am thinking is it maybe because the University was an HBCU? There were several other organizations that sparked my interests which caused me to join. I became heavily involved on campus, evolved into a social butterfly, and turn out to be very popular on campus. Being involved in a variety of organizations at my HBCU opened several doors for me that may not otherwise had occurred.

In my previous 2018 study about Black males exceling at PWIs, almost all participants in the study reported some degree of involvement at their campus. They all mentioned positive experiences on their respective PWI campus. Once of the participants described their experience as such:

I benefitted from being involved more than I ever imagined. I have made connections not only on campus, but in the community. I have learned to conduct myself better in professional settings, and overall, I learned how to put others needs above my own.

Similar to my HBCU experience, it shows how being involved can really help and shape you as student. It allows you to be actively involved while changing the lives of others and ultimately changing yours simultaneously.

### **Social Network and Support**

Despite African American male, first generation, low income students' challenges in regards to access and adequate funds to pay for college, the reality is that some families encourage their children to attend college. Counter the argument that this population of students' families pressure them into the workforce, this study found that support among family, friends, church, and community members do exist. The deficit perspective suggests that students that typically are low income and first generation, have little to no support when pursuing postsecondary education. However, myself and participants included in my previous study mentioned their decision to attend college, and included narratives about how loved ones and the

community in general helped in some way.

Initially, it was my intention to attend an HBCU other than my chosen institution. It was not until I attended Open House in March of 2002 that I changed my mind to attend my particular HBCU. The love that my family and I received was overwhelming and it felt as though it would be the perfect University for me. Everyone was so positive and seemed very genuine; like it was a big, happy, small-knit family. I also had two friends from high school who were in their freshmen year at the University that talked me into attending as well. It was my senior year at the University and I was living in the upperclassmen apartments on campus when all the residents were told that we had to evacuate for the hurricane. I was like okay and began to pack only my dirty clothes to take back home with me to wash because I just knew we would be back at the University within the next 3-5 days. Boy was I so wrong that time. After seeing what had happened to the city shortly after Katrina had died down was unbelievable. I had never seen anything like that before in my life; I could not believe it. I was lost and confused, uncertain as to what would be my next move regarding my undergraduate education. My classmates and I were constantly calling one another checking to see how everyone were doing; even staying in touch with some professors. The students who decided to return to the University would have to stay in a hotel; how cool is that right? The hotel became our new home, classrooms and cafeteria from January 2006-June 2006. The administration devised a plan to have both semesters (fall & spring) combined into one so that every senior had an opportunity to graduate on time. After much hard work and an undying spirit, the first graduation after Katrina took place. We, the students refused to graduate anywhere but on the campus of our great University, as this has been the tradition for many years. The class of 2006 assisted with the efforts to bring the University back to being the beautiful campus she has always been. Sod was laid down, scaffolding built

and buildings painted just to name a few. Although many of us lost everything due to Katrina, she could not destroy our spirit.

I was not as involved at my PWI as I was during my HBCU experience. I was fortunate to get introduced to the Black Graduate and Professional Student Association (BGPSA) on campus through my brother who was currently a student at the University. The mission of BGPSA is to aid in the recruitment, retention and support of Black graduate and professional students and mentor undergraduate students with support of faculty at LSU. After the first outing with the current members of the organization, I immediately got involved and felt a sense of belonging. Everyone seemed so genuine and up until that point, I had never experienced that from another organization before. They offered a variety of resources and really made me feel like I belonged there. I became the Vice President of BGPSA the following year which was awesome. Had it not been for my interaction with the members of BGPSA, I do not think my experience would have been as great as it was. I do feel as though organizations such as BGPSA are very vital to the retention of Black students and an excellent catalyst for networking at the University.

All of the participants from my previous study recounted times when an opportunity presented itself and they took advantage and seized the moment. There were accounts of instances when some of the participants were selected or nominated for trips or school-related events without prior knowledge. One of the participants stated:

I have overcome a lot of obstacles to get to where I am now, but I am grateful for all the opportunities that I have had. My mother was a single parent; my dad died when I was seven years old, so my mom pretty much had to work two, three jobs my whole life just to make ends meet for me and my other two siblings. I know for sure, I'm only here by the sweat and determination of my mother, and I realized early on that I must take advantage of whatever resources it'll take to be successful.

One of my professors at the HBCU I attended, recommended me for a summer internship in Costa Rica that I was totally unaware of until she called me into her office. I was shocked and overwhelmed with joy. A Black male like myself was not used to going anywhere outside of Louisiana, let alone travel abroad outside the United States. I was truly grateful and blessed for that opportunity my professor bestowed upon me.

### **Faith, Spirituality and Inspiration**

I have always been a very spiritual person who grew up in the church from infancy. My grandmother and great-aunt would make sure my siblings and I was up early on a Sunday morning to attend Sunday School before the pastor preached his sermon. At my HBCU, we had to attend Convocation every Tuesday which was a part of our curriculum both semesters our freshman year. During Convocation, there was an opening prayer, a motivational speaker, and a closing prayer. I learned a lot about myself and people in general while attending my beloved HBCU. I learned that I am actually stronger and wiser than I thought I was. I learned that nothing was going to be given to me and if I wanted something, I had to work really hard to obtain it. I also learned that the feeling I felt during Open House in 2002 was the exact same feeling that showed up and showed out during 2006 by everyone coming together as one big happy family to bring the University back after hurricane Katrina. My HBCU prepared me for my graduate school studies. During my interview for graduate school, the professor told me that he knew I would do exceptionally well in their program because I come from the best. That statement gave me confidence and reassurance that I had made the right decision and was ready to take on any and everything that came along. My experience at the University was simply AMAZING; it was the best 4 years of my life thus far. Most importantly, I developed life-long friendships that are still strong to this day.

I was fortunate to carry the same morals and spiritual beliefs into my PWI experience as well. I have also developed friendships that are strong and I believe wholeheartedly that the relationships will be for a lifetime. Mostly all the participants from my previous study referenced a belief in something greater than themselves as the impetus to succeed and serve others. Some referenced the institution of church as a motivating factor. Others referenced their personal beliefs in a high power. While some simply referenced the need to give back to the communities that have invested in their success. Overall, their belief that becoming a more educated citizen would transmute to more opportunities to serve. One of my participants recounted:

My church community and my faith were “a rock in my life to serve as a compass for me morally and spiritually” and helped him “stay grounded and rooted”. The church provided a basis for his values and helped him develop his faith and concept of family.

He also felt that the church had given him a separate purpose to help others less fortunate. I too was fortunate enough to have a strong church community who kept me grounded and supported me every step of way. Whether it was financially, provided encouragement, or said prayers for my well-being, I’m thoroughly grateful for their undying love and unconditional support.

## **Discussion**

The findings from my previous study about first-generation, low socioeconomic status, Black males who are excelling at PWIs coupled with my personal experiences are both similar and distinctive. The one theme that seemed to ring true is the feeling of isolation in the classroom setting and feeling pressured to answer those “Black” questions. Not all Black people feel the same about every topic nor are all Black people alike. CRT can play a key role in revealing the social inequities that exist within the structure of higher education. Although many scholars like

Villalpando and Delgado have subscribed to the framework of analysis of CRT, the academy still approaches it with apprehension. One could argue that this criticism is due to the perspective that CRT takes on racism (Hiraldo, 2010). Thinking about racism as a fundamental part of U.S. societal structure is unsettling when many people are trying to dismantle and work against it. However, doing so is a necessary step that society needs to take in order for society to progress. By acknowledging racism, members of American society could recognize initiatives made by the government as improving the lives of people of color, but still benefiting the dominant (Patton et al., 2017).

Despite the promise of integration, Black students frequently report feelings of isolation and the burden of representing their race in alien spaces. Some spaces are not only alien, but explicitly hostile. In December 2014, members of the Clemson chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity threw a gang-themed “Cripmas” party. The university placed SAE on probation in April 2015 for two years. This same fraternity also made national headlines in March 2015 after video surfaced of University of Oklahoma SAE chapter members singing, “There will never be a nigger at SAE. You can hang him from a tree, but he’ll never sign with me. There will never be a nigger at SAE.” The chapter was immediately shut down, but the damage from this egregious case, which just happened to be caught on video, is done. Such hostility suggests that traditionally White institutions should not be the only option for Black students. HBCUs provide options for students whose academic development might benefit from being in less-hostile environments (Hamilton, 2015).

Academic rigors can be found at an HBCU and students’ degrees are just as important as anyone else’s who does not attend an HBCU. Students can expect to be pushed and mentored by some of the best minds around. Collegiate education is under the microscope and students want

return on investment in our current economic environment. Despite being named historically Black colleges and universities, it's actually incorrect to assume that only Black students attend these schools. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, non-Black enrollments in 2016 were 23 percent, up from 15 percent in 1976. Although HBCUs don't necessarily have the same endowments as predominantly white institutions, it does not mean these schools do not have the resources needed to support students. On average, these schools receive \$27.7 million in federal Title IV funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Students who graduate from HBCUs are thriving. According to a survey conducted by Gallup-Purdue University, 55 percent of Black students who completed their degrees at HBCUs reported that the school prepared them for life after graduation, as compared to 30 percent of students who did not attend HBCUs. Similarly, 51 percent of Black HBCU graduates surveyed said they were doing well financially, while only 29 percent of their non-HBCU counterparts could say the same.

The struggle many students have is they don't understand that college is really about two things: networking and resources. Taking advantage of resources is pivotal when attending these colleges and universities. Students must be diligent in using every resource from computers, labs, and specialized equipment. The second thing is networking and not just with each other. Your professors' network is your network. Students should maximize office hours and focus on fostering relationships with faculty. Many faculty members are known in your specialized industry or major, which in turn helps the students have success after graduation. I decided to attend an HBCU because of the rich tradition that has produced Black superheroes like my idol W.E.B. Dubois, who attended Fisk University. Additionally, I was encouraged by my high school friends who were freshmen at their respective HBCUs. I was more than intrigued, so I

attended, and it transformed my very life.

## **Conclusion**

Patton et al. (2017) recommended incorporating critical race perspectives in daily practices within education. Doing so brings awareness about the role of race in producing racial inequities. As a result, faculty, student affairs professionals, and institutional administrators should be aware of the rooted racism in educational settings and acknowledge the systemic complexities that further disadvantage students of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Reflecting on how campus leaders incorporate racial perspectives in the academy through the construction of the curriculum, diversity initiatives, and institutional policies is essential to the progress of higher education's relationship with racial equality. Hiraldo (2010) suggest that the hope is that CRT can be used as a reference for institutions striving to become more inclusive through changes in diversity initiatives, infrastructure of institutions, and analysis of hostile environments. When thinking about these possible changes it is important for administrators to ask themselves how these potential changes continue to promote a racist structure. More than 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregation is still the norm in elementary education, and Du Bois's words still resonate. There is an important place for Black colleges and universities, as nurturing environments of inspiration and affirmation, and curriculum relevant to the students they serve. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, "I knew I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurston's, all of the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks who had come before" (Hamilton, 2015).



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APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

## **Informed Consent Form**

Title: *“For Every Mountain: A Three Article Exploration of First-Generation, Low Socioeconomic Status, Black Males who are Excelling at Select Predominately White Institutions in Louisiana”*

Researcher(s): Jovan T. Thomas, College of Education, [tjovan1@lsu.edu](mailto:tjovan1@lsu.edu), (985) 713-6575

Supervisor(s): Dr. Kenneth Fasching-Varner, College of Education, [varner@lsu.edu](mailto:varner@lsu.edu), (225) 578-2918

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled, *“For Every Mountain: A Phenomenological Study Examining the Experiences of First Generation, Low Socioeconomic Status, Black Males Who are Excelling at Select Predominantly White Institutions in Louisiana.”*

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to reach this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact researcher, *Jovan T. Thomas*, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

### **Introduction:**

Hello, my name is *Jovan T. Thomas* and I am a doctoral student in Louisiana State University's College of Education. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Kenneth Fasching-Varner, Shirley B. Barton Endowed Associate Professor in the College of Education.

### **Purpose of Study:**

This study is an attempt to examine the academic experiences among low SES, first-generation Black males who are transcending at PWI's in Louisiana. The images created of Black men in our society often confine them to environments shaped by drugs, crime, athletics, and academic failure. Black men's dismal college enrollments, disengagement and underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education. Amplifying the troubled status of Black male students at all levels of education has, unfortunately, yielded few solutions. Thus, educational outcomes for this population have remained stagnant or worsened in recent years.

### **Subject Inclusion:** *Black Undergraduate Males*

### **Participation Obligation and Possible Risks:**

I would like for you to share your educational experience with me. Where did you grow up? Where did you attend school? Demographics of your school and your teachers? Post-secondary opportunities and choices? This study will require you to reflect on your experiences and choices

you have made. This study may require you to relive some unpleasant experiences and may cause you to experience some resentment of the choices you have made or was not given the opportunity to make due to your personal experience.

**Data Collection Process:**

Data collection for this research study will consist of the distribution of a pilot survey with intentions of utilizing the responses from a series of open-ended questions to identify trends that will later develop into questions that will be used during individual participant interviews. The pilot survey will be used to test reliability of the study by testing participants in the study. The interviews conducted by the researcher will capture the narrative of the participant, which will provide clarity as it relates to the research questions being posed in the study. Additionally, it will provide participants the opportunity to add or clarify responses submitted in the pilot study. The researcher will conduct an interview up to 60 minutes with each participant, but will allow opportunities for the participants to speak freely and openly about their experiences. The researcher will use an audio voice recorder, and typewritten notes in order to accurately record participants' responses. Also, the students' GPA will be self-reported.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

Participants can withdraw from this study at any time. Participant will just need to notify the researcher, *Jovan T Thomas*, in writing at [tjovan1@lsu.edu](mailto:tjovan1@lsu.edu)

- Participant has the right to withdraw from the study and request that the data already collected from that participant be removed throughout the data collection process. Once the data collected is in the analyzation stage, data cannot be removed.
- Due date to withdraw from study – Anytime.
- Due date to withdraw data collected from the study – July 15, 2018.

**Confidentiality Statements:**

The data from this research project will be kept confidential. Although I will report direct quotations from the interview, those participants who do not want to be identified and those participants who withdrew after the data collection process timeframe has ended, will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information and materials will be removed and stored separately from the report.

**Benefits:**

As a researcher and Black male who comes from a low socioeconomic background, a first-generation college student, and one who is transcending at a PWI in Louisiana, I feel obligated to expose and highlight the academic successes and capabilities of students who work extremely hard daily and are continuously breaking barriers and stereotypes. I expect this research to explore the perceptions and motivation of Black males who comes from a low socioeconomic background, who are a first-generation college student while transcending at a PWI in Louisiana.

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Researcher: *Jovan T. Thomas*, College of Education, [tjovan1@lsu.edu](mailto:tjovan1@lsu.edu), (985) 713-6575

Supervisor: *Dr. Kenneth Fasching-Varner, College of Education, [varner@lsu.edu](mailto:varner@lsu.edu), (225) 578-2918*

**Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities. This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Dr. Dennis Landin, (225) 578-8692 or [irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANTS PROFILE INFORMATION



### Participant Profile Information

<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>MAJOR</b>	<b>CLASS</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>UNIVERSITY</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP POSITION</b>
Anthony Bailey	22	Business Management	Senior	3.5	University of Southwestern	Mr. College of Business
Rahim Coleman	21	Social Work	Junior	3.7	Nova East University	Junior Class Vice President
Kevin Hamilton	21	Elementary Education	Junior	3.4	Nova East University	Men's Federation President
Timothy Slaughter	22	Public Health	Senior	3.3	University of Southwestern	Senior Class President
Corey Taylor	21	Business Management	Junior	3.5	University of Southwestern	SGA Vice President
Jeremiah Williams	21	Nursing	Junior	3.2	Nova East University	Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. President

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

## Demographic Questionnaire

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship Status: Married \_\_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_  
Partnered \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any children?

If yes, how many children do you have and what are their ages?

How do you self-identify:

African-American \_\_\_\_\_

Afro-American \_\_\_\_\_

Black \_\_\_\_\_

Negro \_\_\_\_\_

What type of track did you have while in high school: independent, special education, regular, or advanced coursework? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you diagnosed with a learning disability? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the first generation to attend college? (neither of your parents/guardians obtained a college education)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What was the highest grade of education that your caregiver(s) completed?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Father \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

What leadership position(s) do you currently hold on campus and what organization(s)?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What was your socioeconomic status while in high school?

\$0.00-\$20,000

\$20,001-\$40,000

\$40,001-\$60,000

\$60,000-\$80,000

\$80,000-\$100,000

\$100,000-more

Who was the person or people that most influenced you in setting your educational and career goals?

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APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Research Protocol

1. How do you define academic success for yourself?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Tell me about some of the challenges you faced on your road to academic success.

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Who were positive educational mentors in your life and how have they contributed to your desire to reach high academic attainment?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. How have former and current community outreach groups been influential in your educational attainment such as churches, school organizations, or other for/nonprofit organizations?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What role does your family constellation play in the achievement of your academic success?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. How much of an influence did your parents' educational levels have on your choice to pursue higher learning, graduation from college, or choice of profession?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. How does your peer groups and interaction style influence your educational choices and attainment?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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8. What are some factors that contributed to your academic success?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

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9. What were some of the obstacles you overcame to become successful academically?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

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10. What recommendations could you give to help other Black males on their pursuit of high educational attainment?

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

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APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FORM

## ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



**TO:** Jovan Thomas  
Education

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

**DATE:** September 19, 2018

**RE:** IRB# E11082

**TITLE:** For Every Mountain: A Phenomenological Study Examining the Experiences of First-Generation, Low Socioeconomic Status, Black Males Who are Excelling at Select Predominantly White Institutions in Louisiana

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/research](http://lsu.edu/research)

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

**Brief Modification Description:** Title change

**Review date:** 9/18/2018

**Approved**   X   **Disapproved** \_\_\_\_\_

**Approval Date:** 9/19/2018 **Approval Expiration Date:** 5/21/2021

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

**LSU Proposal Number** (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: Make sure you use bcc when emailing more than one recipient. 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>*

## **VITA**

Jovan T. Thomas is a native of Thibodaux, Louisiana. Jovan received a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Health with a concentration in Health Systems Management in 2006 from Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana. He continued his education at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) by earning a Master's Degree in Social Work in 2011. Jovan then pursued his Education Specialist Degree (Ed.S.) focusing on Educational Leadership, which he earned in August of 2017 at Louisiana State University (LSU). Upon graduating from LSU with his Ph.D., Jovan hopes to engage in critical research at the collegiate level, and earn tenure at a Research I institution.