Successfully Navigating Through College: Voices of African American Males

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The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that facilitated college persistence and retention among African American males who were enrolled in an undergraduate program at two four-year public universities in Southern California. This research addressed the growing problem of college attrition among Black males by conducting an in-depth investigation of the factors that facilitated college persistence among a selected group of African American males. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of African American males that lead to their college retention and persistence?
2. What are the institutional practices or policies at the K-12 educational system, experienced by African American males, that facilitated their college retention and persistence?
3. What are the institutional practices or policies at the university level, experienced by African American males, that facilitated their college retention and persistence?

Background to the Problem

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012), a branch of the Unites States Department of Education, consistently indicated in their reports that African American students performed significantly below other subgroups in all areas. Nevertheless, NCES (2012) showed a positive trend in the education of African American students. The high school dropout rate has decreased from 15% in 1995 to 9% in 2010, and the rate of Black students ages 25 to 29 with a high school diploma increased from 78% in 1980 to 86% in 2011. The rate of 25- to 29-year-old African Americans who earned a bachelor's degree increased from 8% in 1980 to 20% in 2011. Most significantly, the percentage of students who completed high school and enrolled in college immediately after graduation, increased from 41% in 1975 to 52% in 2010. In addition, the percentage of graduating African American 12th graders who had definite plans to graduate from a four-year college increased from 38% in 1990 to 59% in 2010. However, college enrollment among African American males does not equal persistence and graduation from college. A review of college completion rate among African American males follows.

Completion of College Degrees

Despite their college enrollment and their plans to graduate from college with a degree, only an average of 39% of African American students graduate with a bachelor's degree after six years compared to 62% for Whites, 50% for Hispanics and 69% for Asians/Pacific Islanders. Out of the graduating 39% of African American students, when data is disaggregated by gender, only 34% of African American males graduate with a degree after six years. Keels (2013) pointed out, "Attrition is not equally distributed across races and gender, but is concentrated among Blacks and Latino men" (p. 310).

Among all student subgroups, African American males have the worst college attrition rate (Harper, 2012). They are the least likely to be enrolled in college and the least likely to persist until graduation. In addition to the racially related negative experiences they face daily in our society, African American males experience inequities of educational opportunities and lack of access to enriching educational programs in our school systems, which have culminated in inequities of educational outcome (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014). These inequities have perpetuated the widening achievement and opportunity gaps (Fergus et al., 2014; Noguera, 2008; Harper, 2012). Due to the serious nature of the issues facing young African American males in our society, in May 2014 President Obama initiated a mentoring intervention program, *My Brothers' Keeper,* designed to reverse the negative trajectory of the young African American males in our nation (Obama, 2014). Fergus et al. (2014) and Noguera (2012), pointed out that schools require assistance to address and meet the needs of students, especially Blacks and Latino males, who are most vulnerable and most at risk for failure in our school system. Most importantly, Noguera (2012) emphasized:

> We must address this issue with urgency and treat it as an *American problem*, rather than as a problem that only those who directly experience it should be concerned about. The continued failure of so many young men not only increases the likelihood that they'll end up in prison, permanently unemployed, or dead at an early age, but that our society will accept such conditions as normal. As that begins to occur, all of us are endangered. (p. 12)

To address this growing problem of college attrition among African American males, this study utilized the perspectives of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework. The theoretical framework is discussed next.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

To put the educational and cultural experiences of African American males into perspective, this research study utilized the theoretical framework of the Critical Race Theory (Orelius, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). CRT was also used to examine the experiences of African American students and the impact of these experiences on their educational outcome. In addition, Critical Race Theory was used as an analytic framework in this study to examine how policies and practices inherent in our society and our educational systems impacted the educational outcomes and experiences of African American males before their transition to college and while in college. The perspectives of the critical race theorists and their implications to the educational experiences of African American males are examined next.

Critical race theorists have analyzed the impact of race and discriminatory practices on the lives of people of color (Lynn, 2013). As Lynn (2013) explained, "…critical race theorists have looked at the manner in which race, as a social construct, has been utilized to limit the life chances of people of color through institutionalized discriminatory practices" (p. 604). In the field of education, critical race theorists focused on the inextricable correlation between educational inequity and race (Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Gillborn, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2014; Solórzano &Yosso, (2000).

The critical race theorists challenged the idea that cultural practices and poverty culminate in educational inequity. Rather, they maintained that practices in the educational system result in disparate educational outcomes. Such practices have prevented many people of color from having access to well-resourced schools with highly-trained and culturally-sensitive teachers, well-paid jobs, quality healthcare, and decent housing (De Fraja & Martinez-Mora, 2014; Dixon & Rousseau, 2014; Gillborn, 2008; Hiraldo, 2015; Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Jackson, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2014; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Rodriguez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). Ladson-Billings and Tate (2014) noted, "The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequentially, school) inequity" (p. 12).

According to Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009):

This race-based epistemology is particularly useful here because it provides a lens thorough which to question, critique, and challenge the manner and methods in which race, white supremacy, supposed meritocracy, and racist ideologies have shaped and undermined policy efforts for African American student participation in higher education. (p. 390)

Historically, CRT has been interdisciplinary in nature; it has incorporated intellectual traditions and scholarly perspectives from different fields to highlight racial injustice and to advance racial justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; De Fraja & Martinez-Mora, 2014; Dixon & Rousseau, 2014; Gillborn, 2008; Hiraldo, 2015; Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, 2014; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Rodriguez, 2014). Taking the theoretical perspectives of the CRT into consideration, a review of literature on the factors that impact college retention are examined next.

Review of the Literature

Although Spady (1970) developed the first theoretical model of student retention, Tinto (1975) developed a model that has been widely used and cited among researchers for over thirty-five years. According to Tinto (1975, 1987, 2014), college retention is influenced by an interaction between background and institutional environmental factors, such as family background, pre-college experiences, individual characteristics, and social and academic integration into the institutional life.

Tinto (1975, 1987) contended that the nature of this interaction leads to institutional and goal commitment or decisions to drop out. Hence, the degree of social and academic integration and connection that a student develops with the institution determines decisions towards persistence or attrition. In his original report, Tinto (1975) failed to consider external factors that led to college retention. He only considered *traditional* college students, leaving behind adults and non-traditional students, including African American students. As a result, Tinto (1987)

addressed this omission and noted that cultural and family factors influence a student's decision to withdraw or persist in college. According to Tinto (1987), external factors could operate against the retention efforts of institutions. He emphasized that, unfortunately, "when the academic and social systems of the institution are weak, the countervailing external demands may seriously undermine the individual's ability to persist on to completion" (p. 108).

Although this model did not specifically address the issue of African American students, the model can be applied to this population. To address the critical issue facing African American male college students, Harper (2008) believed that stories of young African American college men are pivotal in developing strategies that could effectively address and improve their college success. To this effect, Cadet (2008) conducted a qualitative study to identify the impact of family, friends, mentors, academic advising and counseling, and cultural and social capital on the retention of African American males. Using a purposeful sampling procedure, the researcher identified and interviewed 10 African American men, 5 of whom recently graduated and 5 who left the institution without fulfilling graduation requirements. Cadet (2008) found that personal, institutional and external factors impacted college retention.

Fortunately, speaking about the plight of African American males, Noguera (2008) stated that schools can take actions to reverse the patterns of low achievement among African American males since there are schools that have reversed the trends. To a greater extent, therefore, our society and our schools can begin to correct the dire circumstances and realities we have created. Noguera (2008) emphasized, "the only way to change behavioral outcomes is to understand the cognitive process that influence how individuals adapt, cope, and respond" (p. 26). Noguera's (2012) statement can be extended to an analysis of the college experiences of African American males. Lack of a college education among African American males has economic implications both for African Americans and for our nation. The economic and social implications of lack of college education are examined next.

Implications of lack of college education. According to the Pew Research Center (2014) and NCES (2014), adults between 25 and 32 years old, *the millennials*, who hold a bachelor's degree are less likely to be unemployed than those who do not. In fact, the unemployment rate for this group is 1.4%, compared to 12.2% for high school graduates, and 27% for those who do not have a high school diploma. NCES (2014) reported that among 20- to 24-year-olds who do not have a high school diploma, the unemployment rate in 2012 was the highest at 29%, while for 25- to 34-year-olds with similar educational attainment, the unemployment rate in 2012 was 25%. Those who had earned a bachelor's degree, by contrast, had an unemployment rate of 7% for 20- to 24-year-olds and 4% for 25- to 34-year-olds.

According to the NCES (2014) and Pew Research Center (2014) reports, there is also a rising earning disparity between young adults who have earned a college degree and those who have not. Young adults who had earned a bachelor's degree in 2013 had an annual median income of $45,000, compared to those with only a high school diploma, whose annual median income was $28,000. Moreover, NCES (2014) reported that in 2012 young adults with a bachelor's degree earned more than twice the earnings of those who only had a high school diploma and those who did not have a diploma. Figure 1 shows the median salary per educational level of 25- to 34-year-olds and their corresponding unemployment rates in 2012.
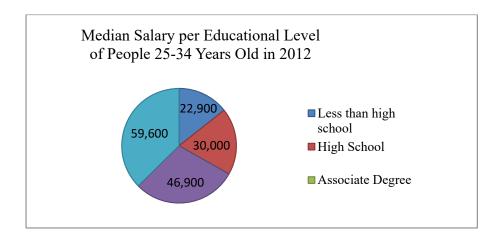
Median Salary per Educational Level
of People 25-34 Years Old in 2012

22,900

30,000

59,600

46,900

■ Less than high
　school

■ High School

■ Associate Degree

Figure 1. Median Salary of 25- to 34-year-olds in 2012.
Source: The Condition of Education (NCES, 2014).

Hence, increased educational attainment implies increased earning potential. Correspondingly,
lower educational attainment increases the chances of unemployment. Among the same cohort,
the unemployment rate differed according to educational level. Figure 2 shows the rate of
unemployment according to the educational level of 25- to 34-year-olds (NCES 2014).
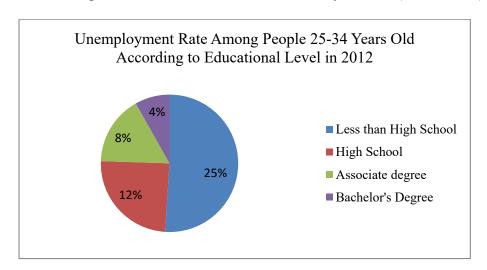
Unemployment Rate Among People 25-34 Years Old
According to Educational Level in 2012

4%

8%

25%

12%

■ Less than High School

■ High School

■ Associate degree

■ Bachelor's Degree

Figure 2. 2012 Unemployment Rate Among 25- to 34-year-olds by Educational Level.
Source: The Condition of Education, (NCES, 2014).

Since the unemployment rate decreased as the level of educational attainment increases,
educational attainment minimized the economic impact of unemployment in our nation (Pew
Research Center, 2014).
　　　In 2013, although the household income figures from the Pew Research Center (2014)
research findings indicated that the millennials (25- to 32-year-olds) earned more than people in
the same age range in the previous generations, poverty figures showed that 6% of college-
educated adults between 25 and 32 years old are living in poverty. By contrast, among those
with only high school education, 22% were living in poverty in 2013. Based on these findings,

without a college education in 2013, at least 22% of African American males between ages of 25 to 32 were living in poverty and at least 12.2 % of them were unemployed. In fact, the Pew Research Center (2014) findings show, "college graduates outpace those with less education on virtually every measure of job satisfaction and career success" (p. 29). The question at this point is why are African American males lagging behind their peers in college degree attainment and overall educational outcome? To respond to this question, an examination of the school experiences and negative influences experienced by African American males follow.

School experiences and negative influences. Adams (2014) conducted an interview with Daria Hall, director of K-12 policy development for the Education Trust, on the impact of educational opportunity of African American students in our school system. Adams (2014) emphasized that African American students experience educational opportunity gaps that impact their educational outcomes. Specifically, Adams (2014) noted, "Across the board, we are providing African-American students less of everything we know contributes to achievement in schools" (p. 1). Hence, she observed that opportunity gaps lead to achievement gaps. Among African American students, their negative experiences in the school system lead to opportunity and achievement gaps. In terms of negative influences, a brief look at the academic preparation and school experiences of African American students, the impact of tracking practices in the K-12 educational system, and the school discipline experiences of African American students are examined.

Fergus et al. (2014) and Noguera (2008) posited that minority students, especially African American students and Latinos, encountered significant negative influences in our society. These negative influences become exacerbated as these students enter our school system. African American students, especially males, experience lower expectations, marginalization into non-challenging or non-college bound tracks, disproportionate suspensions and expulsion rates, and special education referrals, as they navigate daily through our school system (Noguera, 2008).

Writing about the negative experiences of African American students in our nation, Noguera and Akom (2000) commented, "Given the history of racism in the United States, it would actually be more surprising if a racial achievement gap did not exist" (p. 31). However, since there are instances in which African American students have closed the achievement gap, there is some evidence that it is possible to replicate such successes with the implementation of programs that show a genuine commitment to equity and high quality education for all (Noguera & Patton, 2000). Reversing the effects of racial and economic inequity, therefore, requires comprehensive efforts (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Tracking practices, unfortunately, have been a subtractive process (Valenzuela, 1999).

Tracking. Although Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine and removed barriers to educational equity, Donelan, Neal, and Jones (1994) noted subsequent policies that permit academic tracking and ability grouping instituted inequitable practices that "stifle African Americans as they sought to realize their full potential in school and in life" (p. 376). Tracking or ability grouping is the practice of placing students in classes based on the assessment of their academic ability as determined by their performance on standardized testing (Braddock, 1993; Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Goodlad, 1984). Rubin and Noguera (2004) proposed de-tracking as a means of eradicating the educational inequities created by tracking practices.

Writing on the subject of tracking, Donelan et al. (1994) stated that in most schools, students are classified based on the perceived ability so that their "entire schedule of classes can be determined" (p. 378). The researchers further emphasized that tracking practices have severe limitations on the potentials of many capable students who experience early frustration, resignation to inferior curriculum, and low expectations. Thus, tracking creates and maintains gaps in students' abilities and their educational outcomes impacting students' aspirations and chances to excel.

Several indicators have been used to identify high school students' college potentials such as high school grades, performance on achievement tests such as Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or ACT. However, for minorities and students who are first generation college students, pre-college academic preparation is not as predictive as it is for White students (Keels, 2013). Research findings showed that while minorities and first generation college students are underrepresented in the honors and advanced placement classes, African American students are overrepresented in the special education classes (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; Goodlad 1984; Braddock & Slavin, 1993). Several researchers have found that this is the impact of tracking in our school system, a practice that results in systemic educational inequity (Oakes, 1985; Rubin, 2006).

Finally, the review of the literature identified gaps in the educational attainment of African American males due to factors inherent in the educational policies and practices that created and maintained opportunity and achievement gaps among student subgroups. A look at how this study addresses the issue of college persistence of African American males follows.

Methodology

In order to obtain the perspectives of African American males on the issue of college persistence and to gain a deeper understanding on this issue, a qualitative research design provides an opportunity to hear the voice of the participants on an issue that concerns them. In a qualitative design, "an existing social or human problem is explored in a natural setting through the analysis of words and the detailed perspectives of the participants for the purposes of gaining a clear understanding on the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 249). In this study, qualitative research design was used because the research questions could only be answered descriptively.

Participants

The participants for this study were African American males who were first in their family to pursue a college education. The participants were current students who had successfully completed at least two years of college at the same public four-year university in California. The researcher chose to study this subgroup of the African American males because they are the most at risk for negative educational outcome and, consequently, college attrition (Ogbu, 2004; Tinto, 1993). As a result, obtaining the perspectives of students from this subgroup, who were experiencing successes in college, could be essential in improving the overall college outcome for the African American students who need the most intervention and support.

To identify eligible participants for this study, this researcher used purposeful sampling technique. Merriam (2009) and Litchman (2014), purposeful sampling is a distinguishing characteristic of qualitative inquiry which enables the researcher to select cases that would yield important information regarding the research inquiry. Such cases provide relevant information

and an in-depth understanding about the phenomenon being studied rather than empirical generalizations. Snowball sampling, identifying initial participants, interviewing them, and requesting references for more contacts (Merriam, 2009) were used in this research to identify and recruit participants.

Data Sources

The researcher used in-depth semi-structured three-part interviews, observations, field notes, and the researcher's introspective accounts to gather qualitative data. To protect the participants' identities, the researcher used pseudonyms in place of their real names. In addition, all identifying markers were redacted from all the documents that were used in the study. The researcher stored all data collected at a safe location at the researcher's home, of which she has sole access.

Observations, field notes, and researcher's introspective accounts. During the interviews, this researcher took field notes, also known as reflective notes (Finlay, 2013) to capture the experiences the participants shared during the interview. Similarly, the researcher maintained an introspective account of each in-depth interview through a journal entry of each experience. Observations were also used to gather data for the research. These methods to gather data formed the basis for data analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained during this study were analyzed using the transcendental approach (Moustakas, 1994), a systematic approach to data analysis, reductionist process, and data emersion (Finlay, 2013). The researcher analytically and systematically read the transcripts, followed by a descriptive analysis of structures and recurrent themes (Finlay, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This researcher used the narrative approach to code qualitative data to identify key themes or concepts that emerged (Lichtman, 2014).

Before commencing with coding, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings from each interview session and returned the transcriptions to each participant to review for accuracy and to make additions or corrections. After receiving the feedback from the participants, the researcher analyzed the transcripts with a peer de-briefer and commenced with coding and identifying themes that emerged from the analysis. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts and listened to the interviews to become immersed in the data. During each reading, the researcher highlighted key words and phrases that appeared to be common among the participants. Then, the researcher used color coding to organize the data into themes and categories. Next, the researcher used Microsoft Word to organize the prevailing themes into a table with accompanying supporting statements. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher compared her coding with that of the peer de-briefer and arrived at the final themes that emerged. This progressed to textual and structural descriptions of the factors that led to college persistence of these African American males. Finally, the researcher employed the process of dwelling, analyzing minute data in order to understand the essence of the experience. It forced the researcher to slow down and re-examine assumptions in order to gain new understanding and meaning (Finlay, 2013).

Results

For the first research question, the prevailing themes that described the factors that facilitated the retention of African American males identified by the participants were the need for support, the critical nature of establishing networks and connections, time management, staying focused, and self-determination. The second research question focused on identifying the practices and policies at the K-12 educational system that facilitated college retention of African American males. The participants identified participation in college preparatory programs, taking advanced placement courses, having caring teachers, and early exposure to college, as key factors that prepared them for college. In addition, they proposed a transformation of the current K-12 educational system to reflect the changing society and to better prepare students for college.

The themes identified by the participants that addressed research question three, policies and practices at the tertiary institutions that facilitated the retention of African American students, were financial support, supportive professors and peers, small class sizes to facilitate discussion and class participation, access to resources, and a positive and interactive institutional environment.

The essential question at this point is: What was the essence of the experiences of African American males that facilitated their college persistence? This question was answered by synthesizing the findings from this study.

The Essence of the Experiences of African American Males

To arrive at the essence of the experiences of the eight participants in this study that facilitated their college persistence, the researcher examined the themes that emerged from this study, the context of the experiences of the participants as well as their prevailing voices. All the eight participants emphasized that college success was a group effort, not an individualized phenomenon. To persist in college, the participants emphasized the pivotal nature of building connections and networks of support systems. Based on their experiences, as they benefited from the positive impacts of systems of networks, they began to develop the spirit of service and benevolence for their peers. In turn, the participants engaged in providing highly needed support to their peers and other students who came after them. The level of support and services they were providing ranged from mentoring to assistance on how to acquire available resources.

Among the participants, there was a clear sense of service to others, a need to positively impact the educational experiences of other students. They developed a desire to lend a helping hand to their peers to facilitate their success. There was a resounding sense of being a role model, a leader, and a mentor among the participants. As the participants were succeeding, they were facilitating the success of their peers. Being the minority group in their academic major, the participants in engineering had a strong bond among them. This bond arose from a common cultural heritage and enabled them to develop a sense of guardianship for one another and to ensure the success of everyone within their group.

The prevailing theme that emerged from the structural and textual descriptions voiced by the participants—particularly the essence of experiences of African American male students who persisted through college—was a sense of service through networks of support systems. As the participants facilitated the successes of their peers, they were enhancing their own successes and college persistence.

Among African American males, success in college was a group process. Through networks of support systems, the participants successfully navigated the college environment. The participants described support to encompass socioemotional, academic, and financial. Importantly, they discussed different types of support including family and institutional support. According to the participants, the support of their family members and friends were pivotal to their college persistence. Specifically, verbal motivation and encouragement from family members and friends were central to their college success. Although their family members lacked college education, they cared about the college education of the participants and supported them in the process by encouraging them to persist. Sarcedo (2014) recorded similar findings among Latino male college graduates. However, this conclusion was contrary to research findings that family members and friends could hinder college persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1988). The students' family history and experiences were important for the students to remain focused on attaining their goal of obtaining a college education.

Similarly, support from peers and professors was vital for academic integration and connectedness with the institution. According to the participants, support from different sources enabled them to stay focused and connected with the institution. This conclusion paralleled findings from existing research, including seminal studies on college retention. In his seminal study, Tinto (1975) found that students' interactions with peers and faculty members led to institutional connectedness and retention. The importance of peer and faculty relationships continued to be true in Tinto's (2014) findings. Similarly, Engstorm and Tinto (2008) and Tinto (2014) stressed the need for institutions to address the academic needs of students through providing specific academic support based on identified needs. A participant in this study referred to this as "targeted academic stimulus," and stressed that universities should identify the needs of their students and provide support specific to the needs.

Peers and faculty influences were pivotal in college persistence and achievements of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Harper, 2012; Tinto, 2014). Participants described peer support within and outside the classroom settings as important factors that contributed to academic achievements and social integration. The impacts of supportive professors towards academic achievements of African American males were highlighted by the participants. This conclusion aligned with seminal studies conducted by Astin (1984) and Pascarella (1980) who found that students and faculty interactions positively impacted students' educational achievements and outcomes. Similarly, building relationships and making connections were other means of accessing support and achieving academic and social successes. This theme is discussed next.

Establishing Relationships and Building Connections

According to the participants in this study, establishing relationships and building connections with key stakeholders were critical factors that facilitated their successful navigation through college. The respondents unanimously observed and stressed that college was difficult and that successful navigation required connections with others, both socially and academically. Participation in organizations, clubs, fraternities, and religious affiliation were identified as avenues to establish vital relationships and make connections.

Participation in academic major-related organizations such as National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) for engineering majors, national law association, and Year Up was classified as very significant in academic achievement. Through such organizations, the participants received vital information about their majors, as well as tutoring and mentoring from

professionals in the field. This conclusion supported previous research studies that students' involvement in student organizations and extracurricular activities enhanced the college retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cadet, 2008; Donahoo & Caffey, 2010; Harper, 2012; McClure, 2006; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Tinto, 2014).

Through participation in associations and campus clubs, participants developed group affinity and a sense of maintaining the ideals of the group. This affinity has positive impacts in the participants' academic achievements and social developments. All the participants stated that due to their involvements in students' organizations, their academic achievements improved. One participant attributed his academic success to his membership in the *Omega Psi Phi* fraternity. The fraternity required a minimum GPA requirement for membership.

Campus organizations fostered a supportive system of a support network that enhanced the academic achievement and social integration of their members. The organizations provided enrichment programs and opportunities, which the participants identified as critical factors that enhanced successful navigation through college. The impacts of involvement in enrichment programs at the K-12 and institutions of higher education are discussed next.

Opportunities to Participate in College Enrichment Programs

At the K-12 educational level, for economically underprivileged students, the participants stressed the importance of early exposure to the concept of attending college. To them, college exposure can be accomplished through participation in college field trips, interaction with guest speakers, especially college students, participation in school and or community-based college preparatory programs, enrollment in honors and AP courses, and access to college-like courses. At the tertiary institutions, enrichment programs were described as participation in major- or discipline-related organizations, clubs, and other campus associations.

According to the participants, schools must bridge opportunity and accessibility gaps by providing strategic access and opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversations about college, within the inner cities and among people who were economically underprivileged and in the working class, were not commonplace in these households (Noguera, 2008, 2012). Based on the critical race theoretical perspectives, African American students who come from these backgrounds, especially the males, should be targeted for support by providing them access and opportunities to enrichment programs. Such programs could be community- or school-based.

Enrollment in school or community-based college preparatory programs enabled the participants to obtain necessary academic support and guidance that were pivotal in their decisions to attend college. Through such programs, the participants received assistance with college preparation, application, and admission. The participants explained that through their involvement in the enrichment programs, they gained social and cultural capital needed for college admission and scholarships. Enrollment in college enrichment programs and AP courses enabled them to learn vital college success skills such as critical thinking, focus, and time management. These were often lacking in non-rigorous high school classes. This conclusion validated existing research findings on the impact of AP and honors courses towards college persistence (Donelan et al., 1994; Fergus et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Oakes, 2008). Over twenty-five years ago, Valenzuela (1999), stressed that providing students with academically enrichment opportunities was necessary to avoid schooling as a subtractive process.

To ensure that the K-12 educational system adequately prepared students for college, the participants advocated for the transformation of the K-12 educational system to be redesigned to meet the needs of the changing global society. Respondents commented that the K-12 system they experienced failed to teach critical thinking, study habits, and basic college survival skills. One participant posited that the educational system he experienced stunted students' growth and stifled opportunities for accelerated growth and development needed to compete in the 21st century global learning environment. For African American students, the participants stressed that access and opportunity to educational and social enrichment opportunities were critical for their development and success in college. The importance of access and opportunities for students' success was validated by findings from existing research (Fergus et al., 2014; Harper, 2010, 2012).

Within the institutions of higher education, participation in enrichment programs included involvement in academic and social organizations, clubs, and extracurricular activities as well as participation in student leadership activities. Through participation in organizations and student associations, participants built vital connections and networks that led to institutional connectedness and persistence (Harper, 2012; Tinto, 2014; Veenstra, 2013). Participants in this study stressed the pivotal nature of academic and social involvement towards their ability to surmount obstacles and resolve difficulties. This involvement led to improved academic achievement.

External motivation from group networks and support systems facilitated college success. Self-motivation was another factor the participants identified as an element that facilitated successful navigation through college.

Self-motivation. Although group motivation was a pivotal factor to college success, self-motivation was an added facet. According to the voices of African American males who participated in this study, self-motivation was internal and important for college persistence. Despite the experiences of college life, self-motivation influenced the individual's response to the environmental stimuli and the outcome of the experience. This conclusion validated previous research findings by Harper (2012) and Tinto (2014).

According to the participants, the decision to attend college, remain focused on goal attainment, and work diligently towards success was influenced by the degree of individual motivation. This conclusion was instrumental in avoiding distractions prevalent in college. For example, self-determination and motivation enabled one participant to return to college after initially dropping out due to financial difficulties. Self-determination motivated him to join an association that led him to discover his passion to be a role model. Due to self-motivation, the participants remained focused on their educational goals when their peers were engaged in social activities that distracted students from focusing on academics.

Finally, networks of support from family members, peers, teachers, and institutions were central in the success of the participants. Establishing positive relationships and making connections through associations in campus- and major-related organizations provided opportunities to access academic and social enrichment resources. Nestled within networks of support systems, the participants were successfully navigating through college. The implications of these conclusions are discussed next.

Discussion

Establishing networks of support systems yielded social and cultural capital that were critical to the college persistence of African American males. In addition to the support of family members, support from peers, teachers, and members of the college community were instrumental in acquiring highly needed capital for African American males that enabled them to successfully navigate through college.

The family was identified as a crucial source of support and encouragement for college persistence, especially during difficult times. The family unit served as a source of motivation to stay focused on goal achievement. Applying Critical Race Theory to the concept of support and network, since motivation to pursue college education were often lacking within marginalized households, is critical for the members of the K-12 school system to bridge the opportunity and access gaps for students from these backgrounds, especially African American students. Support and intervention services motivated them to succeed and aspire to pursue college education. Therefore, teachers, and members of the college community should be mindful of the needs of African American males as they plan and deliver services and interventions specifically designed to meet their needs.

Academic and social support from peers through classroom interactions and involvement in extracurricular activities enhanced successful navigation through college. Such support systems and networks provided socioemotional support and cultural capital needed to successfully navigate through college. Previous research findings on the impact of peers and involvement in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, and fraternities showed that peers and social networks positively impacted college persistence (Keels, 2013; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Tinto, 2014). Consequently, it is pivotal to ensure that African American males have access to and involvement in extracurricular activities.

Supportive teachers and professors played a significant role in the educational outcomes of African American males. Establishing positive relationships with teachers, professors, and faculty members was pivotal for the success of these students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is very crucial for teachers, professors, and the members of K-12 and institutions of higher learning to understand the impact of the differences in experiential backgrounds between students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and their peers from more affluent backgrounds. This knowledge is necessary to design support systems targeted for specific groups of students, a phenomenon a participant called *targeted academic stimulus*. These support systems would ensure equitable opportunities and access to services that could potentially lead to targeted and positive educational outcomes for students.

Since financial constraint was a major source of college attrition among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially African American males (Fergus et al., 2014; Harper, 2008), it is crucial for institutions to specifically target this population for financial support by ensuring equitable access to resources. Knowing that lack of knowledge on how to access available financial resources was prevalent within low income households (Fergus et al., 2014), it was pertinent for educators at all educational levels to specifically provide financial information and make resources available for African American students. Simply expecting marginalized students and students from low income households to locate and access available financial resources is ineffective because the students lack the navigational capital necessary to successfully obtain college financial resources. As one participant in the study said, "available resources must be made explicit to the disadvantaged students to ensure that they have access to

them." Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to review their means of disseminating resources to students to ensure that the needs of African American students are strategically met.

The crucial nature of access to academic enrichment programs for the college persistence of disadvantaged students implies that African American students must be given access and opportunity to such programs. Academic enrichment programs include school- and community-based college preparatory programs and enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses. Access to and participation in college preparatory programs provided enrichment opportunities that enhanced college enrollment and persistence for African American males. Since African American males were generally few in enrichment programs (Harper, 2008, 2012; Fergus et al., 2014; Noguera, 2008; Oakes, 2008), it is very critical that institutions purposefully enroll African American students in school- and community-based programs that could enhance their success. Specifically, it is critical for school staff to identify the programs that address the needs of African American students and ensure that the students have access to them. Such programs could be school- and community-based.

Similarly, African American males should be targeted for enrollment in honors and AP courses where they could prepare for and acquire the skills needed to succeed in the rigorous academic requirements of college. Historically, African American students, especially males, do not have equal access to rigorous classes due to tracking. Valenzuela (1999) noted, "tracking is a subtractive process. It divests students of important social, and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure" (p. 3). De-tracking practices therefore are pivotal to ensure that Black males have access to enriching educational opportunities.

The importance of ethnic culture in the college persistence of African American males was clearly articulated by the students who participated in the study. To the students, ethnicity was a source of strength and an avenue for collective accountability and support. Students felt at home at the African American Center. This center provided an environment where students who shared a common ethnicity developed a bond that united them under a common purpose. In the same space, students provided academic and social support for their peers. It was in this space that students developed a sense of leadership and mentorship for others.

Considering the benefits that accrued from students' involvement with the members of their ethnic cultures, institutions should capitalize on this as a resource to enhance the college experiences of students. It was therefore the institutional responsibility to provide the facility, respect, and support for ethnic cultures. Valenzuela (1999) posited that institutions should avoid "practices and policies that subtract resources from students and hinder the acquisition of social and cultural capital" (p. 29). Rather, schools should embrace practices and put policies in place that enhance students' success. Teachers, professors, and administrators at the tertiary institutions should provide opportunities for students from similar ethnic backgrounds to network with one another. In the classroom setting, professors and teachers need to be aware of the impact of ethnic cultures to specifically design their instruction to reflect commonality as well as diversity among cultures. In the same way, institutional administrators should take the impact of ethnic cultures into consideration as they make policies and implement practices that impact each student's wellbeing.

Significance

The problem of attrition facing African American students in college deserves the collective attention of educational institutions at all levels. It is our society's moral obligation to reverse the trend of educational inequity for African American males. Disregarding the legacies of racism and the impact of other factors on the education of African American males would only exacerbate the problem. Realistically examining the status quo, beliefs, practices and challenging hegemony could potentially lead to new social political actions that could be beneficial to these students as well as for those who experience similar educational outcomes in our school system (Brookfield, 2005). Therefore, this societal problem calls for the use of critical thinking as we collectively seek to reverse the trend of inequity of educational outcome among these members of our society.

Although specific research findings addressed the issues of college retention among African American males, the predominant studies tended to be generalized in nature. As a result, more research studies are needed to specifically identify factors that facilitate college persistent among African American males. Harper (2012) strongly emphasized that in order to mitigate the problem of college attrition among African American men, it is important to learn from those who have been successful. Hearing the voices of African American students who are persisting in college is significant in addressing the problem of attrition among this population. This research study obtained the perspectives of African American students who are successfully navigating through college. Their voices could be part of the solution to this societal problem.

The findings from this research indicated that teachers have strong and lasting impacts on students' achievements. According to the participants, K-12 teachers and college professors play significant roles in the participants' education and school experiences. Building relationships with students, connecting students to available resources, and providing support networks could enhance students' educational success.

In addition, teachers make educational decisions that determine the students' educational outcomes. Starting from recommendations for students' placements in educational programs to daily instructional practices, the daily actions of the teachers play a significant part in the educational experiences and outcomes students receive. Participants in the study discussed the impact of the support and motivation they received from teachers and the opportunities they desired from their teachers. To facilitate a positive educational outcome for African American males, teachers as instructional leaders could advocate for these students to ensure that they have access and opportunity to programs, resources, and services that could enhance their educational experiences. For instance, at the K-12 system, teachers could make purposeful efforts to include African American males in college enrichment pathways such as enrollment in the school-based college enrichment programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Bright Prospects, Upward Bound, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). In addition, teachers could connect students to community-based programs that enhance college preparation and success. Findings from this study indicated that students who were involved in college enrichment programs while in high school received significant cultural capital and networks of support systems that positively impacted their abilities to persist and succeed in college.

Similarly, the impact of early exposure to the idea of attending college was identified by the participants in this study as a very important factor for college attendance and persistence. According to these students, the K-12 system should provide college visits and develop a

college-going as a culture within the system. Teachers as educational leaders could play a significant role in establishing a college-going culture within their classroom and within the school community. This study supported that when teachers promote college attendance early in students' educational experiences, transition to college becomes a natural process.

Finally, to reverse the trend of educational inequities within our educational system, educational policies and practices must reflect how to address the needs of the students who are adversely impacted by the current policies and practices. African American males can be successful in college when networks of support systems and resources are available for them within the school systems. Teachers at all levels of the educational system play a critical role in this process. Collectively, the tertiary institutions and the K-12 system can reverse the trend of educational inequities and facilitate a successful navigation through college for African American males. Teacher leadership is vital in attaining this goal.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Family Background
1. What inspired you to get a college education?
2. Describe how friends, family members or others motivated you to attend college.

K-12 Experience
1. Describe the kind of support and preparation you received from teachers and other school staff in high school that were helpful to you in getting a college admission.
2. What high school programs did you find helpful in preparing you for college? Please describe.
3. In your opinion, what ways could the K-12 system prepare students more effectively for college?

College Engagement
1. Describe your transition to this institution. What was it like for you?
2. What is your classroom participation like?
3. Explain the type of teaching that you find most helpful.
4. Describe your interaction with your professors.
5. Describe your interaction with other students in your classes or in the school?

Social and Academic Integration
1. Describe your activities outside the classroom. In what ways are they impacting your persistence at this school? How are they helping you to stay in school?
2. Describe the campus resources you know about. Do you have access to them? Describe how you use them.

Challenges
1. Please explain the kinds of challenges you have faced since your enrollment in this school. How have you overcome them?
2. Describe the stereotypes you have encountered in the school system. Describe a typical one. How did you respond to it?

Persistence
1. Describe the factors that have helped you to remain at this school when most have left.
2. What do you believe will foster the retention of African American males at this institution?
3. Is there anything you would like to discuss that we have not discussed?