STUDYING FOLKS LIKE US: EXAMINING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
OF BLACK MALE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS WITHIN A
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education—Doctor of Philosophy

2021

**ABSTRACT**

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Despite research on the educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students, limited

inquiry is specific to how they understand, perceive, and make sense of those encounters. This

qualitative study focused on the educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students at

a predominantly White institution. An Afrocentric paradigm was the study's cultural framework

for addressing how the Black men in this study made meaning of their experiences. The

Afrocentric paradigm indicates the importance of location in one's cultural center and presents

African agency as a means of understanding the authentic lived experiences and realities of

people of African descent. This study consisted of a field observation of an adult student

orientation program, focus groups, and individual interviews with eight Black male students to

address the primary research question: How do Black male nontraditional students make

meaning of their educational experiences within a predominantly White institution? The findings

suggest that adult learning theories have not adequately addressed the educational experiences of

Black male nontraditional students. Conversely, the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm are

appropriate cultural lenses for understanding the experiences unaddressed by traditional

mainstream adult learning theories. Through their narratives, the participants shared their

educational experiences in a space of presence rather than absence, thus presenting their rich

interpretations of their experiences as Black male nontraditional students. The findings showed

that companionship with faculty and fellow students had value and practice in the advocacy of

others. In addition, the participants' experiences included how they evaluated institutional support and made decisions in their best interests. This study was a foundation for using cultural theoretical frameworks to address the educational experiences of ethnically diverse nontraditional students with alternative ways of knowing not addressed by traditional adult learning theories. This study included recommendations providing more inclusive levels of institutional support and services for Black male nontraditional students.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing the doctoral program enabled me to come full circle in my higher education journey. However, this could not have occurred if not for guidance from God, the strength and resilience passed down by my ancestors, and the support of many people since the start of my program. I hope these acknowledgments show how much each of you means to me.

First, thank you, God, for your guidance and for remaining beside me before and during my doctoral journey. You gave me the strength and patience to endure during the times when I felt I could not complete the program. You helped me understand the importance of embracing my experiences and taking pride in sharing them with others, although I did not have a traditional college journey. You never left me, then or now, and I understand the path you set for me.

Second, I give thanks to my family members no longer physically present. I feel your spiritual presence around me every day. Mom and Dad, during my dissertation defense, I know and felt you looking on from heaven and smiling. You both pushed Mike and me to excel in school and always taught us to continue to be the best we could, regardless of our circumstances. You always stressed the importance of education and continuing to learn. I love you both and know that you helped provide the foundation for me to pursue and complete this dissertation.

To my brother Mike, cousins Sayeed and Kenny, aunt Cora, daughter Charla, and son Donovan: I love you all and found you inspirational during my doctoral journey. Mike, reflecting on our childhood growing up in Detroit, we did not have much, but we had each other's back and succeeded despite the odds against us. Your accomplishments within K–12 administration were an inspiration for me to continue in the program. Sayeed, you always taught me to think critically

and recognize the strength and resilience that our people have passed down from the ancestors. Kenny, rest in heaven. When you, Sayeed, Rosa, and my mom dropped me off at Tennessee State, I felt proud to follow in your footsteps of becoming an alumnus of TSU. Although I did not complete my degree there, you continued to push me to get it done and persist in my doctoral program. Aunt Cora, I will forever appreciate the support and encouragement you gave me throughout my program, especially when I felt like giving up. Charla and Donovan, I love you two so much. You will always be my babies, and I am so proud of both of you. You give me strength each day, and I am grateful that God blessed me with you two in my life. Dad is always here for you no matter what.

I would also like to thank my committee members for their guidance and support throughout this process. You helped me realize the value of my experiences for scholarship on adult education, and most importantly, how I could use my work to uplift the voices of other Black male students who did not have traditional higher education journeys. Dr. Leslie Gonzales, since our time in the advanced qualitative methods course, you have always encouraged me to give more thought to my worldview. Your support enabled me to recognize that the liberatory work I aim to do directly connects to the epistemology I use to interpret my experiences. Dr. John Dirkx, we have known each other since my master's program. Your feedback and suggestions for a deeper examination of adult learning theories enabled me to better understand the vast literature in adult education scholarship, specifically where my work fits and contributes to the adult education conversation. Dr. Vaughn Watson, I appreciate the encouragement and feedback you provided as I approached my dissertation defense. I value the conversations you had with me and your insights into rendering the presence of the brothas into my study.

doctorate, you built my confidence to apply and ultimately get accepted into the program. Without your encouragement, I would not be writing this acknowledgment, and I thank you. In addition, I would like to thank the faculty members of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE): Dr. Ramon Goings, Dr. Geleana Drew Alston, and Dr. Jaqueline McGinty. You all have been outstanding mentors, and I appreciate your support of my research and professional development in the adult education field.

To my writing accountability and doctoral colleagues, Dr. Joy Hannibal, Dr. Annabelle Estera, Dr. Sapna Naik, soon-to-be Dr. Kayon Hall, Dr. James Wright, Terrance Range, Dr. Tom Fritz, and Dr. Qiana Green. Dr. Joy Hannibal, you are my writing sister and friend. I appreciate your support, our writing days at Starbucks, and your ability to always be there to talk through my research study. You are an excellent scholar and friend. Thank you for your support. Dr. Annabelle Estera, Dr. Sapna Naik, and soon-to-be Dr. Kayon Hall, you were the best writing and accountability team with whom to go through this doctoral journey. Dr. Qiana Green, my friend and sister, you reached out to me via email to introduce yourself before we started the doctoral program. I knew then that you were an authentic, supportive, and strong Black woman who cared for others. Thank you for your encouragement and for always keeping it real with me.

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# CHAPTER 1: MY NONTRADITIONAL JOURNEY WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

I began my higher education journey at a historically Black college (HBCU). I then progressed to a community college and received my degree from a 4-year predominantly White institution (PWI). I had a different higher education experience as a 24-year-old nontraditional Black male student who had attended several institutions. Mostly younger, White, traditional-aged (18 to 22 years old) students dominated the classroom spaces at the 4-year institution where I received my undergraduate degree. As a result, I often experienced microaggressions and discrimination. For example, I heard and witnessed younger White students voice negative stereotypes about Black people (e.g., Black men as drug dealers or Black women as bad mothers) in some of my classes. Their often racially influenced rhetoric and demeaning assumptions about Black men showed me they lacked racially diverse experiences within and outside of the classroom environment.

With a lack of classroom diversity, my assigned White group partners treated me as an outsider during small group discussions and learning projects. Although they frequently spoke and interacted with each other, they rarely showed an interest in communicating with me or making me feel like part of the group. For example, on several occasions, they rescheduled group meetings without letting me know. When I questioned this, they told me they rescheduled the meetings at the last minute and would bring me up to speed during class. I realized that my group was not interested in treating me as an equal or team member. These exclusionary forms of discrimination caused me to feel disconnected in class.

I reflected on my undergraduate experiences during my doctoral program, which ultimately led me to investigate and learn more about the educational experiences of other Black male nontraditional students. A need exists to examine Black male nontraditional students, as

they have unique needs. Other Black male nontraditional students may have had similar experiences, taken different paths to higher education, and often had unmet needs for different institutional support. My position within the undergraduate education office of the institution where I work and my previous experiences as a nontraditional student provided me with the context to examine the appropriate institutional support needed by Black male nontraditional students.

**Nontraditional Students in Higher Education**

Inquiry into the topic commenced with determining the percentage of nontraditional students within higher education. Nontraditional students are a growing student population in higher education, with more than seven million students aged 25 and older attending college in Fall 2019 (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). The definitions of nontraditional students vary; however, common characteristics include part-time school attendance, full-time employment, and independent status for financial aid purposes (Brock, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

A need exists to examine the characteristics of nontraditional students. The high numbers of postsecondary nontraditional students suggest they may be vulnerable to challenges with adverse impacts on their well-being (NCES, 2015). Therefore, the increasing number of nontraditional students, their characteristics, and reflection on how to support them in higher education provided the context for this inquiry into Black male nontraditional students.

President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper and similar state, local, and higher education programs have provided foundational insights into the persistent opportunity gaps experienced by young Black men. These initiatives can also be mirrored to determine the support needed and challenges experienced by Black male nontraditional students. In my work, I focus on undergraduate student success efforts. I assess students' experiences with institutional support

services and understanding academic course policies. However, my employer typically provides institutional support services, such as academic advising and tutoring, during hours unavailable for nontraditional students. Remenick (2019) acknowledged that institutional services tend to lack the flexibility, support, and understanding that nontraditional students need from their institutions.

Nontraditional students encounter other barriers to educational success, including ageism and institutional policies and procedures that obstruct the progress of adult students (Hardin, 2008; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Research has shown that addressing such barriers requires campus transition programs to aid nontraditional students' progression in higher education institutions. For example, Karmelita (2018) found that adult learners' relationships through transition programs provided them with support systems. Furthermore, participation in the transitional program resulted in a shift in adult learners' perceptions of returning to and succeeding in college. However, the literature on nontraditional students has not included the racialized perspectives of diverse nontraditional students, particularly Black male adult learners. Therefore, this study contributed to adult education scholarship by providing a racialized theoretical perspective on how Black male nontraditional students make sense of their educational experiences at a PWI.

**Significance to Adult Education Scholarship**

This study contributed to the adult education discussion and adult learning scholarship by presenting racialized perspectives. Racialization indicates how people use their racial histories and identities to construct the worlds in which they live (Outlaw, 1996). As a field of academic study in the United States, adult education has been characterized by unproblematized Eurocentrism since its inception (Brookfield, 2014). According to Brookfield (2014),

Eurocentrism indicates the racial membership of official knowledge producers in the field (Apple, 2002), which results in invisible, unaddressed theoretical politics of race (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). However, recent adult education scholars have racialized the field by accentuating Black feminist thought in studies on the educational experiences of Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 2001, 2006; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Goings (2020e) presented a Black male adult learner success theory as a lens for examining the unique experiences of Black male adult learners in higher education. Goings acknowledged that a lack of theory within higher education specifically for Black male adult learners resulted in antideficit research on these students. Therefore, this study contributed to the scholarly work of racializing adult learning scholarship using a culturally theoretical frame to address the educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students.

A racialized approach was the means used in this study to explore the collective educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students not covered in normative adult education scholarship. In addition, a theoretical frame grounded in Afrocentric cultural principles was appropriate to show the meaning-making behind the educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students. Framing the ideas within the cultural paradigm could have been with the adult learning theories of transformative learning, adult group dynamics and motivational orientation (Houle, 1961; Mezirow, 1991; Sutherland, 1992). However, culturally appropriate theories can be a catalyst for transformative learning, as they provide the opportunity for introspection and exploration of the effects of students' personal experiences on their daily existence (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Adult education scholars have identified the gaps in transformative learning and criticized its Western perspective, which presents individuality, autonomy, and rationality as accepted cultural values. Furthermore, the development of

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transformative learning theory occurred in one cultural context, resulting in the marginalization of other global cultural contexts (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Ntseane, 2011). According to Mezirow (2000), understanding the who, what, when, where, why, and how of learning requires a specific cultural context, not one dictated exclusively by cultural interest due to human connectedness. However, culture obstructs the realization of common human interests, communication, and learning capabilities. Thus, rather than questioning which appropriate normative adult learning theories to employ, I embraced a paradigm that presents a personal and cultural worldview (Dillard, 2006).

A cultural theoretical lenses provided the opportunity to understand the individual and collective educational experiences of Black male nontraditional students. Mainstream adult learning theories have not addressed the experiences of such students, as some theories focus on individual experiences contextualized by an individual's interpretation and meaning-making of the environment (Ntseane, 2011). I used the term "nontraditional" when referencing my experiences and those of the Black men in this study. Initially, I had problems utilizing this phrase, as the term "nontradtional" is defined as different from established norms, customs, and methods. However, I reclaimed the word to, circumvent deficit language that has contributed to othering and had adverse impacts on the students who persist in educational settings (Yancey Gulley, 2016).

I determined the need to research Black male students who do not follow a traditional path to postsecondary education. Presenting their educational experiences in a space of presence rather than absence allowed me to show the rich interpretations of Black male nontraditional experiences. Therefore, illuminating their educational experiences was a way to celebrate the experiential knowledge the participants in this study possessed and their unique paths attending a

PWI. In addition, the participant's perceptions of institutional services and maintaining a utilitarian approach when attending higher education illustrates the significance of their higher educational experiences. Therefore, recognizing the relevant journeys of Black male nontraditionals students provides valuable insights into similar students who have not taken traditional paths to higher education. This study also had practical significance. Studying the meaning-making of Black male nontraditional students has important implications for institutional support. The next section of this chapter presents these implications.

**Practical Significance: Why Study Meaning-Making**

The practical significance of this study is that it could provide information for creating institutional support strategies inclusive of and specific to Black male nontraditional students. Black male nontraditional students need institutional support strategies, as the implementation of student success initiatives correlates with undergraduate retention in higher education. A literature review for the National Symposium for Post-Secondary Success showed student success to be academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, attainment of educational objectives, and postcollege performance (Kuh et al., 2006). However, student success initiatives have not had explicit support strategies for nontraditional students, specifically Black men. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) has suggested that providing adult learners with comprehensive academic and student support systems at higher education institutions could be a way to enhance their capacity to become self-directed, lifelong learners. Therefore, understanding the meaning-making of Black male nontraditional students' educational experiences could provide institutions with the insights needed to develop robust academic and support systems for their institutional needs.

Adult education scholarship on Black male nontraditional students has presented various aspects of their academic and social experiences at HBCUs and PWIs. For example, researchers have focused on the transitional experiences of Black male nontraditional students and provided an asset-based theoretical approach to studying their academic success (Goings, 2016b, 2018d, 2020e). Higher education has increased numbers of Black male nontraditional students; therefore, institutional leaders should consider these students when striving to improve academic retention and graduation rates (Goings, 2015a). Scholars have started the conversation on Black male nontraditional students, but there is a need for research on the institutional support provided to these learners. Because few such studies exist, however, it is necessary to examine the meaning behind Black male nontraditional students' evaluations of the support they would like to receive in higher education.

Investigating how the Black men in this study gave meaning to their experiences through culturally theoretical frames could be a way to change the institutional delivery of campus support programs and services based on student perceptions. Institutions with student success initiatives tend to have broad student-specific programs, with which all students receive single campus support efforts. Understanding the lenses through which Black male nontraditional students make meaning could contribute to the grounding of culturally responsive practices within institutional services. For instance, alleviating the struggles and enhancing the resilience of Black male nontraditional students as they navigate higher education could be a means of assessing their student success needs, the value that they place on academic and social relationships, and the actions they take in their best interests. Institutions that lack an understanding of the meaning-making of Black nontraditional students cannot provide the institutional resources and student success initiatives needed to assess and support these learners'

educational needs. Therefore, understanding how Black male nontraditional students make meaning of their educational experiences could provide institutions with insight into how to develop sufficient student success programs, affirm institutional spaces, and encourage students' autonomy in making educational decisions in their best interests.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how higher education institution leaders can foster and support undergraduate Black male nontraditional students with student success strategies in higher education. The goal of the study was to elevate the voices and experiences of Black male nontraditional students' interpretations of their experiences through a cultural theoretical framework. The study's guiding research question was, How do undergraduate Black male nontraditional students make meaning of their experiences attending a PWI? Answering the research question consisted of exploring how the Black men in this study made sense of their educational experiences at a PWI through the contexts of institutional programming and support, classroom interactions, and the ability to navigate the institution as nontraditional students. Mainstream adult learning theories have not provided adequate insights into the needs of Black male nontraditional students. An abundance of research has focused on Black male traditional-aged students at PWIs (Harper, 2009, 2015; Palmer & Hilton, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010, 2013; Washington, 2013); however, few studies, if any, have included Black men who are nontraditional students. Therefore, given the dearth of literature on Black male nontraditional students, this study provided additional insights into how they make sense of their educational experiences.

**Definition of Key Terms**

I refer to the participants as *brothas* throughout this study. The term brothas indicates the relationships established with the participants during the interviews and after conducting the research. In addition, referring to the Black men as brothas showed the connection that the participants and I had as Black men and nontraditional students obtaining undergraduate degrees. In this study, *Black male nontraditional students* were Black male college students over the age of 25 at a 4-year PWI. Also, in this study, *nontraditional* does not have the negative connotation of students who do not take a traditional path to higher education. Rather, I reclaimed the word by referring to Black male students in a space of presence instead of absence because of their rich interpretations of attending a PWI.

Researchers have generally presented the characteristics of nontraditional students as having an independent status for financial aid purposes, one or more dependents, delayed postsecondary enrollment, part-time school attendance, and full-time employment (Brock, 2010; Choy, 2002; Kim, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). However, the Black men in this study were students who had transferred from community colleges, had previous military status, or reentered the institution as returning students. Also, in this study, meaning-making was the mechanism whereby the Black men in this study made sense of their life experiences and gave meaning to whatever sense they had made, using the meaning in thinking, solving, and making choices and decisions (MacKeracher, 2004).

**Chapter Summary**

Conducting this study with Black men similar to me who did not experience the traditional journey of higher education was an affirming experience. The brothas demonstrated persistence and resilience when pursuing an undergraduate degree. This study contributed to

adult education scholarship by presenting a cultural theoretical framework as an appropriate means of showing how the Black men in this study made sense of their educational experiences. Chapter 2 presents the Afrocentric paradigm used to tell the stories of my and the brothas' experiences of reciprocity, advocacy, and decision-making in our best interest to successfully navigate a higher education institution. Chapter 3 includes the relevant literature, the gaps in adult and higher education scholarship, and the monolithic and limited investigation of Black male nontraditional students in postsecondary education. Chapter 4 offers a discussion of the basic interpretive methodology and data analysis methods for this study. Chapter 5 includes the brothas' perceptions of the institutional programs, services, and campus resources that do not provide for the needs of Black male nontraditional students. Chapter 6 presents an exploration of the brothas' narratives and their interpretations of their interactions with the traditional students and faculty at their institution.

Finally, Chapter 7 has a review of how the brothas navigated their institution as Black male nontraditional students—,specifically how they made decisions in their best interests. The multiple data collection strategies used to obtain the findings provided deeper insight into the brothas' narratives. As discussed in the framework section of this study, Afrocentric principles were the means used to address the brothas' narratives. Lastly, the chapter provides discussions, implications, recommendations, and concluding thoughts on how higher education institutions could provide better support for Black male nontraditional students through student success efforts. As such, this dissertation was also a means of advocating for students with voices often silenced in adult learner and higher education research and at the institutions equipped to provide them with support.

**CHAPTER 2: AFROCENTRIC PARADIGM**

**Introduction**

I used an African epistemology to inform my research journey; however, I contained the paradigm and principles within me throughout the research process. The Afrocentric paradigm emerged in my various interpretations of the findings. In retrospect, I realized how the paradigm was always informing my work through the resilience of several iterations of data analysis. Moreover, in hindsight, the Afrocentric paradigm contributed to how I organized this study via the telling of my experiences and those of other Black men with nontraditional higher education journeys. In addition, the structure of this dissertation shows the brothas' actions of reciprocity, advocacy for others, and decision-making decisions to successfully navigate a PWI. The following section of this chapter presents how the Afrocentric paradigm allowed me to show the brothas' meaning-making of their educational experiences.

**Afrocentric Paradigm**

The Afrocentric paradigm is an intellectual perspective that indicates the importance of asserting location in one's cultural center and presents African agency to understand the authentic lived experiences and realities of people of African descent (Asante, 2007). Afrocentricity addresses the need for individuals of African descent to define themselves and not be defined by the dangerous and incomplete stories of the cultural assumptions of others (Adichie, 2009). Woodson developed many of the guiding principles of the Afrocentric idea in education (Asante, 1991). In *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) asserted that the members of White society had manipulated and exploited the creativity and resilience of the Black community by controlling ideas and distorting the collective sense of identity in U.S. schools. Most traditional adult learning theories grounded in individualistic ideas contain a

universal perspective from which the members of every culture must evaluate their experiences (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004). However, an Afrocentric framework provides an individual and collective window into interactions with others to examine the self from personal perspectives and not through the agenda of others' assumptions (Tolliver, 2015).

Although Afrocentricity has multiple definitions, most scholars have constructed working versions of the original definition by Asante (Mazama, 2001). I advanced the theory of Afrocentricity by using its principles of location, twinness/complementarity, and agency to show how Black male nontraditional students made meaning of their educational experiences at a PWI. I wove Afrocentric principles between the chapters in this study. The next section presents the Afrocentric concept of location and the notions of twinness and complementarity. Lastly, the chapter has a discussion of the Afrocentric principle of agency and a visual map of how each principle contributed to the brothas' meaning-making of actions focused on their higher education experiences.

### *Location (Centeredness)*

Location consists of the psychological, cultural, historical, or personal place occupied by a person of African descent at a time in history (Asante, 2006)—for this study, Black male nontraditional students' advancement in higher education. Asante (2006) insisted that Afrocentricity is a concept focused on location, as African people have operated from the fringes of the Eurocentric experience. Blacks have learned about African history, culture, literature, linguistics, politics, and economics from the standpoint of Europe's interests. Rather than formulate Black men's experiences as nontraditional students from the perspectives of those discussed in mainstream adult learning theories, the Black men in this study established their personal frames of reference of the phenomena (Asante, 1991) in relation to institutional support

programs and services. The Afrocentric principle of location was the mechanism by which the brothas used their current and past experiences to evaluate what was absent and what ideally should exist within institutional services.

***Twinness and Complementarity***

African philosophy addresses twinness and complementarity in relation to communalism and individualistic values. Individuals of the African culture do not reject the talents and uniqueness of the individual; instead, they embrace communalism (Gyeke, 1988). Twinness is an Afrocentric perspective that humans possess a dichotomous spirit with the concept of twinness that focuses on "both, and" instead of the Western mindset of "either, or" (Ellis, 2013). Ellis (2013) suggested that instead of looking at racism as a hindrance with a dualistic perspective, one could view racism through the perspective of twinness to acknowledge the struggle while perceiving racism as a foundation for resilience and empowerment. Similarly, through the principle of twinness, one can see an apparent failure as a success to replace the apparent failure under supportive conditions (Stepteau-Watson & Tolliver, 2018). Stepteau-Watson and Tolliver (2018) argued that twinness occurs when opposites operate together; thus, where there is failure, problems, or despair, there is also the possibility for success, prosperity, and hope. As shown in this study's findings chapters, the brothas used a twinness perspective to face and reframe educational barriers to meet their academic goals and expectations.

Complementarity exists within individuals and their relationships with others (Tolliver, 2010). Ellis (2013) explained an African proverb of complementarity: "We are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are" (Wiredo & Gyekye, 2012, p. 103). The proverb correlates with the philosophy of *Ubuntu,* which provides Africans with a sense of self-identity, self-respect, and achievement for existence with others. Ubuntu means "a person is a person through other

persons" (Nabudere, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, from an Afrocentric perspective, complementarity indicates the importance of complementary—not competing—actions in communities (Ellis, 2013). Wiredo and Gyekey (2012) suggested that the communitarian features of the social structures of African societies contain communal aspects of African socioethical thought. Also, the social and ethical values of social well-being, solidarity, interdependence, cooperation, compassion, and reciprocity are characteristics of African communitarian morality. African communitarian morality indicates that each individual has a duty to the community and its members; thus, individuals should advocate for interdependence and commit to serving others (Ellis, 2013; Wiredo & Gyekey, 2012). Valuing advocacy in faculty and using reciprocity to address the needs of traditional-aged students showed how the brothas in this study operated from a complementarity perspective.

Similarly, Tolliver (2010) suggested the coexistence of the twinness and complementarity principles; their interaction is a critical component in the optimal development of individual members of a group and for the group as a whole. Therefore, the needs of the group and the individual should balance for complementarity and twinness. Ellis (2013) recommended using the concepts of twinness and complementarity to inform K–12 educators of the potential impact of a communal focus on marginalized students. The twinness and complementarity perspectives are useful frames for understanding and responding to the issues of race and racism in adult education (Tolliver, 2010) experienced by Black male nontraditional students within PWIs that mostly provide accommodations for traditional-aged students.

*Agency*

In conjunction with the principles of location and twinness and complementarity, the Afrocentric perspective of agency is a form of meaning-making. Agency was the approach used

to frame the brothas' narratives. In Afrocentric terms, agents are human beings capable of acting independently in their best interests (Asante, 2006). Agency is the ability to provide the psychological and cultural resources necessary for the advancement of one's human freedom. Moreover, agency is a people's ability, empowerment, and entitlement to control and mandate the arenas of life around them (Akoto, 1992; Astante, 1988). Therefore, through an Afrocentric agency lens, the Black men in this study made meaning of navigating a PWI by remaining detail-oriented about the institution's academic and financial requirements and maximizing their reliance on campus staff and resources. Drawing on this perspective of agency was a way to show how the brothas positioned themselves as paramount in making decisions in their best interests and behaved in ways in concert with the overall interest of improving the members of the Black community (Shockley & Frederick, 2010), in particular, other Black male nontraditional students in higher education.

Figure 1 shows the Afrocentric concepts as arms to suggest how the Black men in this study interpreted their educational experiences. Location was the Ubuntu concept with which the Black men in this study embedded their ideas and aspirations into their current and past experiences to improve institutional support for themselves and other Black male nontraditional students. Along the same lines, the brothas' agency also showed Ubuntu, as they made decisions in their best interests that they also shared to advance other Black male nontraditional students. Twinness was an Ubuntu concept in which the brothas did not harbor grudges due to negative interactions with traditional students and faculty and accepted others as they were (Tutu, 1996). Lastly, the concept of complementarity associates with the Ubuntu proverb of "We are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are" (Wiredo & Gyekye, 2010, p. 103). The brothas in this study expressed complementarity by valuing and practicing advocacy for each other and with

traditional students. I used the Afrocentric paradigm to inform the organization of this study and use storytelling to show the brothas' actions of seeing an apparent problem as an opportunity for success and reciprocity.

**Figure 1**

*Afrocentric Concepts*
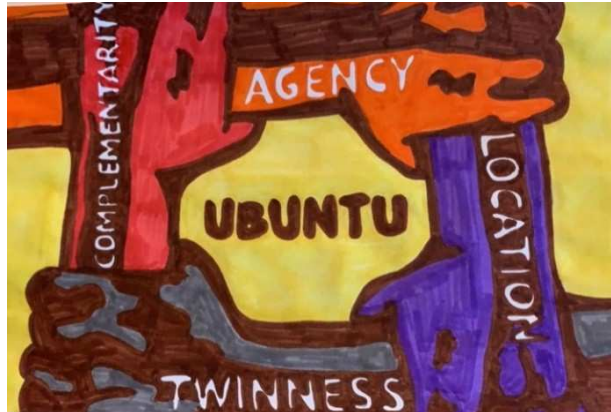


**Chapter Summary**

The Afrocentric paradigm and principles were those used to explore the brothas' narratives and show how they made sense of their educational experiences as nontraditional Black male students. Unlike mainstream adult learning theories, the Afrocentric paradigm provides the cultural foundation embodied in African epistemology that Blacks can use as a general design for living and interpreting reality (Bakari, 1997). The next chapter shows how Black male nontraditional students are situated within adult education literature.

**CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter includes a synthesis of the literature on Black male traditional students and nontraditional students. This review of the literature contributed to the rationale for diverse ways of knowing within adult education scholarship, which could provide new approaches to supporting nontraditional Black male students. Most of the studies in this review focused on Black male students of traditional college age (18 to 24 years old) and older adults transitioning to postsecondary education. However, scholars have only recently begun to examine nontraditional Black male students. Therefore, current studies have provided another opportunity to explore how Black male nontraditional students perceive, understand, and make sense of their educational experiences, specifically at a PWI. Moreover, insight into Black male nontraditional students' educational experiences could provide additional adult education scholarship. Understanding the diverse experiences of nontraditional students could be a means of examining the production of knowledge, the interests served by this knowledge, and the means of validating knowledge (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Therefore, this review of the literature commences with how Black male nontraditional students are situated within adult education scholarship.

The literature review includes studies on the educational experiences of Black male college students of traditional age (18 to 25 years) within PWIs. The review then presents literature on the educational experiences of nontraditional students transitioning to postsecondary education. This chapter also contains scholarship on academically high-achieving adult Black male learners at HBCUs, the reentry of older Black male college students into higher education, and Black female adult learners. Lastly, there is a discussion of the cultural realities and keys to academic success for Black adult learners. This study built on the research on nontraditional and

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Black male college students via intentional examination of how they interpreted their educational experiences at a PWI.

**Traditional-Aged Black Male College Students**

Scholars have indicated the need to understand the lived educational realities of Black male students in higher education (Wood et al., 2012; Wood & Turner, 2011), as these realities could result in academic disengagement. Wood (2014) found that Black male students at a predominantly White community college indicated that they disengaged in class because of faculty members' and fellow students' perceptions of their academic inferiority. Moreover, the Black male students deidentified with academics to cope with stereotypes and felt reluctant to seek help, thereby causing them to disengage from interactions with faculty and other students. Similarly, Palmer et al. (2014) suggested that Black male students disengage from academics based on their understanding of academic curriculum as culturally exclusive.

Empirical researchers have addressed Black male students' active engagement within the context of their experiences at 4-year PWIs. For example, Harper (2009) conducted a multicampus study with a counternarrative methodological approach to challenge dominant discourse about the social and educational status of Black male undergraduate students at various PWIs. The students in the study actively engaged in educational, purposeful activities and developed meaningful relationships with institutional staff. The counternarratives showed that master narratives of Black men's underachievement, disengagement, and attrition overshadowed the experiences of Black male students.

Studies have also focused on the factors in Black male students' academic disengagement. For example, researchers have indicated that mass media's negative images of Black men have contributed to their academic disengagement in college (Jackson & Moore,

2006). In addition, Strayhorn et al. (2010) found that Black male undergraduates at predominantly White campuses who identified as gay or bisexual academically disengaged because of a lack of a sense of belonging, coming out, and campus homophobia. The next section presents the studies on supportive campus relationships between campus officials and Black male students.

### *Supportive Campus Relationships*

Research on traditional-aged Black male college students has focused on the importance of supportive campus relationships. For instance, Strayhorn (2008) measured the relationships between students' academic achievement (via college grades), college satisfaction, and supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. Strayhorn used Sanford's (1966) conceptual framework of *challenge* and *support* to guide the study. Therefore, using both challenge and support, Sanford posited that academic and social developments is a function of challenges (in an environment) balanced by an appropriate level of support (Strayhorn, 2008). However, researchers suggestted that Black male students at PWIs often have strained and unsupportive relationships with faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Smedley et al., 1993).

Other scholars have examined how undergraduate Black male college students construct meaning from their collegiate experiences. For example, Brooms and Davis (2017) used the phenomenological methodology to analyze how Black men made meaning of their race and gender on campus and the factors they attributed to their academic development. The Black male students described peer-to-peer bonding, associations with other Black males, and mentoring from Black faculty as positive contributors to their academic persistence. Brooms and Davis found that "there is an expressed need by some Black male students on predominantly White campuses to see and connect with role models who are members of their own racial and ethnic

group" (p. 319). The Black male students who lacked these relationships and role models expressed experiences of alienation, racial hostility, and animus on campus primarily due to their racialized and gendered identities.

Similarly, Palmer et al. (2014) suggested that peer networks are means of enhancing Black male students' learning and performance in and out of class because they provide academic support, study groups, accountability partners, and peer-to-peer mentoring or tutoring. However, the success of peer-to-peer relationships and faculty mentoring in these studies correlated with the academic success of traditional-aged Black male students. Little research exists on the academic success of nontraditional-aged Black male students. Thus, this study contributed to the extant literature by indicating how nontraditional Black male students build relationships and support networks with peers and faculty.

### *Attrition of Black Male College Students*

Scholars have also studied the attrition of undergraduate Black male students. For example, Washington (2013) examined the phenomenon of attrition for Black male college students at PWIs in California from a psychological perspective and the theoretical frameworks of resiliency theory and social network theory. The frameworks focused on the factors related to overcoming learned helplessness, developing learned resourcefulness, and adapting to adversity on a consistent basis. Washington emphasized the need for relationships and their strengths as a means of support when facing significant challenges. The findings showed that the Black male students who developed support groups in combination with faculty had more academic success and ultimately improved graduation rates.

In sum, the extant literature on traditional-aged Black male college students has not focused on the perspectives and experiences of nontraditional Black male adult learners,

specifically their educational experiences at PWIs. Thus, a need exists to examine how undergraduate Black male adult learners make meaning of their transitional experiences at PWIs. On the one hand, investigating this group of Black male adult learners complicates the view that Black male college students are monolithic and have the same educational experiences.

**Challenges Nontraditional Students Experience in Higher Education**

This section of the literature review addresses the barriers that adult learners face when transitioning to postsecondary education and the programs that support their transition to higher education. This section includes studies on classroom experiences and how adult learners experience White privilege in the classroom to show that nontraditional students have different challenges than traditional students when transitioning to higher education. Furthermore, few scholars have differentiated between the race and socioeconomic status of adult learners.

*Educational and Institutional Barriers for Nontraditional Aged Students*

Nontraditional students transitioning to higher education face many barriers to their success, including distance and e-learning (De Vito, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Morris et al., 2005; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Some scholars have shown how nontraditional students in higher education perceive faculty as barriers. For example, Villarruel et al. (2001) found that nontraditional students identified educators as barriers if the educators lacked the skills required to meet the adult learners' needs.

Similarly, scholars have argued that higher education institutions themselves are barriers to nontraditional students. Cross (1981) explained that institutions might present the barriers of practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in educational activities. Similarly, Fairchild (2003) suggested that institutions may provide office and class hours inaccessible to students who work and care for families and that institutional leaders

sometimes ignore or discredit the civic and school involvement important to students. However, assumptions about the barriers experienced by adult learners have not addressed how these students' social identities are factors in the obstacles they encounter as they transition to become part of higher education communities.

### Transition Programs

Nontraditional students experience barriers in college; however, the goal of campus programs is to aid these students' transitions to these institutions. For example, Karmelita (2018) found that the goal of transition programs for adult learners was to help them avoid taking remedial courses that they could not use for their degree requirements. Moreover, Karmelita found that the relationships students formed in a transition program provided them with a support system that positively shifted their self-perception. Transition programs are also means of mitigating or limiting the barriers that adult learners encounter during the admission and matriculation processes (Kallison, 2017). Alamprese (2005) argued that transition programs enable prospective adult learners to assess whether or not college is a good fit for their needs. Interestingly, other scholars have insisted that participation in transition programs should occur before the first semester of classes (Valentine et al., 2009). However, an examination into transition programs has not included the programs specifically designed for ethnically diverse nontraditional students, specifically undergraduate Black male students.

### Nontraditional Students' Classroom Experiences

Important to the discussion of the issues that adult learners face in higher education is how institutions do not provide for these students. In a paper on ageism against older U.S. college students, Simi and Matusitz (2016) found that adult undergraduate students encountered significant neglect at universities due to a visible and central focus on traditional-aged students.

Using social closure theory, Simi and Matusitz explained how the members of specific in-groups (i.e., traditional-aged students) benefited by closing off favorable circumstances to the members of out-groups (i.e., nontraditional students). Social closure occurs in the classroom when a university provides catalogs, websites, guidelines, procedures, and curricula preparation catered toward full-time young students at the expense of other groups.

Nontraditional students transitioning to higher education also encounter different classroom experiences than traditional-aged students in postsecondary education. For example, Panacci (2015) argued that adults often have dissimilar classroom experiences and needs than traditional full-time students who enroll immediately after high school. According to Panacci, traditional full-time students do not usually have other competing responsibilities and roles in their studies and involvement in on-campus activities and interactions outside the classroom. As such, the experiences and needs of adult students in the classroom often relate to the nature of their on-campus experiences and career-related roles and goals. Moreover, adult students' on-campus interactions with other students and career-related goals affect the classroom approaches effective for supporting their academic development. Although Panacci shed light on the unique experiences of nontraditional students, the researcher overlooked their multiple and, at times, conflicting social identities and how they contribute to campus and classroom interactions.

Scholars have used constructivist worldviews to investigate how adult learners make meaning of their classroom experiences. For example, Kasworm (2003) conducted qualitative interviews to explore adult learners' construction of knowledge in the classroom and the relationships between this knowledge and their adult roles outside of the classroom. Most of the students found their meaning-making enhanced by instructors who integrated adult-identified prior knowledge into course content via interpersonal classroom engagements and applied

learning activities. Similarly, Day et al. (2011) examined the meaning of teaching adult students in the college classroom constructed by faculty with experience teaching both traditional-aged and nontraditional-aged college students. The faculty indicated that using nontraditional students' real-life stories to teach particular classroom topics was an effective way to build on their experiences in the classroom. Both Kasworm and Day et al. used constructivist approaches to research how undergraduate Black male adult learners made meaning in the classroom based on their real-life experiences.

Some researchers have focused on how to create inclusive learning environments for nontraditional students with intersecting social identities. Tisdell (1995) argued that meeting the needs of diverse learners requires educators to consider the power dynamics in the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Tisdell (1993) examined how power relations based on gender and including race, ethnicity, and class presented in a major research university classroom with nontraditional-aged adult students. The study showed that the instructor's gender was a significant factor in classroom power relations and the reason for choosing two master's-level counseling classes. Tisdell found power relations in classrooms and society challenged only to the extent that teachers and students proactively do so.

Researchers have also focused on the privilege adult learners possess in classroom settings. For example, Logan (2002) examined how 12 racially diverse adult learners experienced White privilege in higher education classrooms. According to Logan, an intersection of class and race caused White adult learners of the lower class to claim power from Whiteness. Furthermore, adult learners of color from higher and lower socioeconomic classes drew on their class backgrounds to negotiate issues of race in the classroom. White privilege is a significant factor in classroom dynamics and White domination of authorship in the subject, content, and

instructional resources in classrooms. However, other scholars have argued that the positionality of the professors has a significant effect on classroom dynamics (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). As a result, this study was a way to explore the experiences of undergraduate Black male adult learners at a PWI.

**African American Adult Learners**

This section includes studies on Black adult learners. First, the section presents the keys to success for Black adult learners. Next, there is a discussion of the educational experiences of Black female adult learners in higher education. Lastly, the chapter includes individuals who have started the scholarly conversation on nontraditional Black male college students. These studies have focused on Black male college students who reenter college at an older age and the academic and social experiences of high-achieving nontraditional-aged Black male students. These few studies indicate the limited research on undergraduate Black male adult learners and provide a rationale for further examination into their experiences at PWIs.

*African American Adult Learners' Keys to Success*

Scholars have examined the indicators key to the academic success of Black adult learners. For instance, Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) investigated the 18 factors that Black adult learners consider important to academic success. The participating students cited the following as ways for ethnic minorities to succeed in PWIs: incorporating the historical and cultural experiences of Blacks in curricula, faculty and staff development opportunities for diversity, and coping strategies. Previous research has indicated supportive interactions with faculty and administrators (Arnold et al., 1993; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Saul, 1992), family members (Harrington, 1993; Kasworm, 1998), and employers (Kasworm, 1998) as factors in

adult student success. Moreover, among ethnically diverse nontraditional students, Blacks face the most barriers when entering or finishing college (Simi & Matusitz, 2016).

### African American Female Adult Learners

Scholars have used similar theoretical and methodological lenses to investigate the educational narratives of Black female adult learners returning to higher education. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) examined the educational narratives of three graduate and five college reentry Black women and the dynamics of the larger society impacting their lives in higher education institutions. A narrative analysis approach and theoretical framework of Black feminist thought were the means used to show how the Black women developed strategies of silence, negotiation, and resistance to combat systems of oppression based on race, gender, class, and color (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996).

Similarly, Coker (2003) used Black feminist theory as a theoretical paradigm to confirm the natural activity of racism, classism, and sexism in higher education given the sociopolitical history of race and gender relations in the United States. Coker explored the participants' experiences of pursuing their academic goals through the themes of motivations, challenges, and sources of strength. According to Coker, the participants felt motivated to enhance their intellectual development, acknowledged the challenges of pursuing their education as Black female adult learners, and developed strength due to their spiritual faith and connection with other Black women. In addition, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) examined how 15 Black female adult learners responded to a culturally relevant curriculum in a higher education classroom. Utilizing a culturally relevant curriculum perspective and Black feminist thought, Sealey-Ruiz found that integrating students' experiences in the learning agenda enabled them to participate in their

education. These studies provided an opportunity for investigating the impact of social identities and culturally relevant curriculum on Black male adult learners.

### *Reentry Black Male College Students*

Scholars have investigated the educational experiences of nontraditional Black male college students. For example, Rosser-Mims et al. (2014) explored the reentry experiences for Black male adult learners in postsecondary education and how colleges provided support for reentry for increased retention and graduation rates. The research questions for the qualitative interpretive study focused on significant barriers to Black adult male students' reentry to college, the challenges to the reentry process, and their major sources of support. Moreover, among ethnically diverse nontraditional students, Blacks face the most barriers when entering college (Simi & Matusitz, 2016). According to Simi and Matuzitz (2016), the admission process can be challenging for nontraditional Black male students attempting to reenter college with no or little educational experience. Spradley (2001) suggested providing Black male adult learners with accessible options for academic pursuit responsive to their expectations, needs, and interests. In addition, peer support in classes, faculty-student relationships, and extracurricular activities are strategies for effectively empowering and educating adult Black males returning to college (Spradley, 2001).

In addition, Black male adult students may find themselves back in the college setting to pick up whey they left of due to job loss, status as returning military veterans, promotion aspirations, and dissatisfaction with status in life (Kasworm, 2002, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Scholars developed a two-part series focused on adult Black male students' educational experiences in GED programs, digital spaces, and learning

contexts in corporate America and the Black church (Drayton et al., 2016; Rosser-Mims et al., 2014).

### *Black Male Adult Learner Scholarship*

In addition to the reentry of Black male nontraditional students, researchers have focused on high-achieving Black male adult learners. In two phenomenological studies, Goings (2016b, 2017c) examined the academic and social experiences of nontraditional Black male students at an HBCU and investigated the strategies that nontraditional Black male students used when interacting with faculty. Goings (2016b) found the students intrinsically motivated to succeed, thus redefining the negative narratives about Black men and the benefits of family and peer support. Furthermore, Black male nontraditional students expressed appreciation for "tough love" from their professors, an appreciation grounded in the belief that instructors have the responsibility to prepare their students for success in a world that may provide limited assistance (Goings, 2017c).

Beyond the aforementioned studies, Goings (2018d) also examined the academic, social experiences, and life events of 13 Black male nontraditional students who transitioned to community colleges and public and private universities. Although the participants utilized faculty and staff to support their transition, their institutions provided few campus-wide resources specifically for nontraditional Black male students. This study addressed the gap in the literature by contributing to the research on the nontraditional Black students attending PWIs. This review showed the need to focus on PWIs because Black students conquer and face various daily issues with an impact on their academic and nonacademic lives (Jones & Williams, 2006).

**Chapter Summary**

  This literature review focused on the three key areas of scholarship. First, the review presented the research on the educational experiences of traditional-aged Black male college students. Second, the review showed the barriers, transition programs, and classroom experiences of nontraditional students. Finally, there was a discussion of the educational experiences of Black adult learners. Some researchers have addressed adult learners' educational experiences, Black students, reentering nontraditional Black male students, and high-achieving Black students. However, there is a need for more inquiry, specifically into how to use cultural theoretical lenses to examine the educational experiences of Black male adult nontraditional students.

# CHAPTER 4: STUDYING FOLKS LIKE US (METHODS)

Determining the appropriate methodology and methods for this study was a challenge difficult in the data collection process. I initially decided to use participatory action research (PAR) to partner with the participants to design the study. After all, answering the research question of how Black male nontraditional students make sense of their educational experiences required their inclusion in the study's development. In addition, few empirical studies exist on Black male adult learners (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014). Thus, having Black male adult learners as active collaborators in the research design could be a way to substantiate how they perceive, understand, and make sense of their educational experiences. Along the same lines, my assessment work within the undergraduate education office allowed me to bring my institutional research experience to this study.

I presented at my institution's student success conference on conducting research with a marginalized student population. The information that I shared focused on keeping underrepresented students engaged in research surveys and focus groups. Although the population included in this presentation was traditional-aged students, I expected to use the same strategies for my study of Black male nontraditional students. However, after conducting several pilot study projects with the same research approaches in my institutional assessment work, I found they would not resonate with the Black male nontraditional students with whom I planned to collaborate in the study.

This chapter presents the pilot study used to inform the change in methodology from a PAR approach to an interpretive study. Next, the chapter presents my positionality to the research, participant selection, and rationale for selecting the institution where I conducted my study. The chapter also indicates the rationale for building relationships with key informants and

cultural insiders of the institution to provide the study with credibility. Finally, the chapter addresses the data collection and analysis strategies and the cultural theoretical framework used to guide the study and focus on the needs unaddressed by mainstream adult learning theories.

**Pilot Study**

I planned a pilot study at my institution to include the participants in the design of the larger study. I chose this institution to determine if current older Black male adult learners experienced issues similar to what I had encountered as an older undergraduate student. The institution where the pilot study occurred did not have specific programs for Black male nontraditional students; however, it had a large population of Black male students. The Black males who matched the study's demographic requirements received invitations to participate. However, only two of the seven attended both studies. During the interviews, the participants focused on the issues impacting their educational experiences after transferring from a community college. For example, one participant openly discussed the lack of financial support from the university, the need for scholarships to fund undergraduate studies, and the importance of transitional programs for older students coming from community colleges. The second interviewee described going to the tutoring office as a daunting experience due to the size of the campus and his physical disability. Consideration of the feedback from the interviews indicated the need to shift the study's inquiry into Black male adult learners' experiences beyond the classroom to understand how institutions can provide them with better support.

I decided to implement a basic interpretive qualitative research design due to the low participation in the pilot studies. I realized that Black male nontraditional students might not have the time to actively participate as collaborators in a study. Therefore, I considered the basic interpretive qualitative approach appropriate for exploring how the participants made meaning of

the situation or phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2002). The next sections of this chapter present my positionality within the research, the institutional setting where the study occurred, and my intentionality in building relationships with key informants and cultural insiders. The sections present these topics to show the process taken to conduct this study. This study's process differed from traditional approaches to researching the nontraditional students who do not get addressed in adult education scholarship.

**Researcher Positionality**

In Spring 2019, I discussed the study with a professor I met at a past adult education conference. I shared my attendance at the adult education conference and interaction with the faculty member to provide context and justification for my selection of the institution where I conducted the study. I attend yearly conferences as a member of an adult educational association. After an initial meeting at the October 2018 conference, I met with the faculty member after my dissertation proposal. We discussed my experiences as a nontraditional student and my connection to researching others with nontraditional higher education journeys.

The professor was a faculty member of an institution that provides programs and services for nontraditional students. At the time, the institution had a significant enrollment of nontraditional students and provided a flexible and specialized curriculum that enabled students to customize their degree programs. The institution where the pilot study occurred and where I matriculated as an undergraduate student did not have specific programs and services for nontraditional students. During a phone conversation, the faculty member suggested connecting with the director of an on-campus Black male student initiative. She believed that reaching out to the program director could enable me to recruit interview participants and share how my research could contribute to the advancement of Black male college students. An important takeaway

from the phone conversation was her deliberate suggestion of reciprocating services to others. She insisted that sharing the best practices and resources to which I had access within the undergraduate education office at my institution would show actions parallel with the study. The faculty member said, "If you're going to write about it, then you need to live that life." Therefore, I chose the institution where she worked due to the lack of programs and services and the low attendance of pilot study participants at the institution where I conducted the study.

I conducted research at the institution as an outsider, as the study site had a location opposite of the Midwest region where I attended university as a nontraditional student and work as an employee. However, I also had an insider position due to my educational experience as a Black male nontraditional student. An extension of the notion of insider/outsider status is the issue of a researcher's positionality concerning race, gender, social background, and sexual orientation, particularly with respect to the study's purposes (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). As a Black male researcher and former nontraditional student interviewing other Black men, I had the insider position of feeling incorporated within the collective identity of the research participants. The insider position could have also caused me to provide a limited amount of information because of assumed knowledge. Obasi (2014) acknowledged that researchers operating from within could experience more complications because of their exposure to more breadth of information of the topic; they must decipher when and how to probe deeper to compensate for their assumed knowledge. However, the responses from the pilot study participants indicated the need to avoid the assumption that Black male nontraditional students have a monolithic experience. For example, the majors of the Black men in this study vastly differed from mine. I majored in public policy as an undergraduate student, but the brothas' majors ranged from engineering, education, nursing, and business to liberal arts.

**Participant Selection and Institutional Setting**

The participant selection process for this study was homogeneous sampling. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), homogeneous sampling involves sampling individuals, groups, or settings because they have similar characteristics or attributes. The participants met the demographic requirements for the study as Black male students 25 years and older. In addition, after considering the lack of studies within adult education scholarship on Black male nontraditional students, I chose not to have specific characteristics as requirements for participation to avoid silencing their voices in the discussion of this study. Therefore, some participants were transfer students from community colleges, and others attended the institution at some point but stopped and entered again. At the time of the study, the participants had different majors, and three were in general studies programs.

**Table 1**

*Focus Group and Individual Interview Participants*

| Name (pseudonym) | Undergraduate degree level | Major | Attended community college | Attended focus group interview | Follow-up individual interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Curt P. | Junior | Engineering | Yes | Yes (f2) | No |
| Isiah | Senior | Liberal Arts & Sciences | Did not divulge | Yes (f2) | No |
| Mike D. | Senior | Liberal Arts & Sciences | Yes | Yes (f2) | No |
| Tray D | Junior (veteran student) | Nursing | Did not divulge | Yes (f1) | Yes |
| Miles C. | Senior (veteran student) | Liberal Arts & Sciences | Yes | Yes (f1) | Yes |
| Jack S. | Junior | Business | Yes | Yes (f1) | Yes |

Table 1 (cont'd)

| Name (pseudonym) | Undergraduate degree level | Major | Attended community college | Attended focus group interview | Follow-up individual interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K-Dub | Senior | English | No, stopped out but started again at the same institution in this study | Yes (f1) | Yes |
| Tye | Senior | Education | No, stopped out but started again at the same institution in this study | No | Yes |

*Note*. f(1) = Focus Group 1; f(2) = Focus Group 2.

The research setting for this study was a public 4-year research university in the Southern United States that provided support programs and services. The institution gave nontraditional students the opportunity to create specialized degrees. The institution has a location in a highly populated urban area within the state. At the time of the field observation, the institution had an undergraduate student population of 17,394, of whom 4,051 were nontraditional students 25 years of age and older. The institution has the same categorization for nontraditional and adult students. For example, the institution indicated students as aged 25 or older or having children. There were 12 colleges and schools for students to choose various majors. Three participants majored in the College of Professional & Liberal Studies, formerly named University College, which allowed traditional and nontraditional students to choose from 20 distinct concentrations of Bachelor of Professional Studies and Bachelor of Liberal Studies degrees. The students could also create individualized programs of study through a Baccalaureate Contract Program.

Other colleges at the selected institution did not traditionally allow students to create specialized degrees. Nontraditional students can complete courses on campus, online, or with a

combination of both methods to accommodate their schedules both on and off campus. The College of Professional and Liberal Studies also requires students to meet with an academic advisor before each semester to choose a degree plan, determine coursework, and discuss other student needs. Nontraditional students enrolled in the College of Professional and Liberal Studies can accelerate their degree completion. Students earn credit through prior learning assessment credits, including experiential learning credits earned from nationally recognized credit-by-exam programs. The exams provide college students an opportunity to obtain college credits for learning outside the classroom (e.g., on-the-job training, independent study, work, or military experience) to accomplish their educational goals. Therefore, conducting research at this institution allowed me to determine how Black male nontraditional students structured their academic programs according to their desired career paths. In addition, investigating college resources and other institutional services provided the opportunity to document the support provided to the Black men in this study. However, a need also existed to determine the people within the institution who could assist in recruiting Black men for this study. Sharing my position in the research and reciprocating the sharing of educational resources with people at the institution enhanced my credibility in this study on Black male nontraditional students.

**Relationships With Key Informants and Cultural Insiders**

*Key Informants*

Building relationships with people at the study site was a key component of the data collection process, particularly as a Black researcher. The faculty member I met at the adult education conference helped me realize the importance of communicating who I was and where I was situated in the study with the institutional staff members helpful to the research. The faculty member also recommended reaching out to the director of the institution's Black male initiative.

Therefore, the data collection process included establishing connections with and seeking insight into institutional support from the key informants and cultural insiders to build sustainable relationships (Matsuda et al., 2016). The term "key informant" originated from the discipline of anthropology and indicates a person with a formal role within a community who can communicate information about the community to researchers (Poggie, 1972; Tremblay, 1957). Key informants have essential functions, such as providing expert knowledge about specific populations within research, identifying community priorities, and introducing potential study participants (McKenna et al., 2011). The meeting with the director of the Black male initiative was valuable for understanding the interview participants.

A phone meeting with the director commenced to explain the study and its connection to my experiences as a Black male nontraditional student. The director discussed the institution's commitment to increasing Black male students' graduation rates through supportive programs and its Black male campus initiative. She acknowledged that most of the Black men who participated in the initiative were traditional-aged students; however, previous Black male participants had been nontraditional-aged students. For example, the director recalled a 65-year-old student as the oldest person who took part in activities. She also mentioned a 26-year-old transfer student from a historically Black college. The director's insights aligned with those associated with key informants. Speciccially, her ability to identify prospective research participants who met the required demographics of this study.

I reciprocated by sharing a copy of the recent American Council on Education (Taylor et al., 2020) report with the director of the Black male initiative. The report provided details of the higher education institution's efforts to close persistent equity gaps. The report also presented a snapshot of the educational pathways of students, particularly students of color, and their

educators. The director appreciated the report and suggested that I connect with a Black male program coordinator who directed the services for the institution's Completion Academy for Black male junior and senior college students. The program coordinator was a traditional student who served in a leadership position within the degree completion academy and interacted with both traditional and nontraditional Black male students. Similar to the Black male initiative program, the Completion Academy provided services from a menu of institutional activities to positively impact the student success and completion of Black male students.

### *Cultural Insiders*

The program coordinator provided insight into the potential Black male nontraditional student participants. Scholars have acknowledged cultural insiders as individuals accepted and trusted by community members who have significant involvement with their communities (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Kahan & Al-Tamimi, 2009). In addition, although a traditional-aged student, the program coordinator possessed cultural insider characteristics similar to the Black men in the study. Cultural insiders have cultural commonalities with the local people, as they share the same social backgrounds, principles, and languages as those in their communities (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Ramji, 2008; Song & Parker, 1995).

The Completion Academy program coordinator discussed the services provided by the academy to Black male students and the active participants. The services included academic coaching, financial literacy, peer mentoring, and tutoring. I informed the coordinator of the nearby HBCU where I began my educational journey as an undergraduate. The program coordinator offered to introduce and set up a video conference with me and a nontraditional Black male student who was part of the academy and had a son who attended the HBCU where I had attended. I realized that building a relationship with the program coordinator would enable

me to connect directly with a potential participant who had a background similar to mine. In addition, the coordinator informed me of a faculty member with whom he did undergraduate research who would have an interest in sponsoring my research at the institution. After our discussion, I shared copies of my institution's academic success initiatives for further aiding the program coordinator in supporting Black male students at his institution. As an outsider of the institution, I utilized relationship-building with a key informant and cultural insider at the beginning stages of the data collection process.

A video conference meeting commenced with the Black male nontraditional student recommended by the program coordinator. The student indicated his willingness to participate after receiving communication of a designated date, time, and location for an interview. The rapport that I developed with the student indicated the importance of building relationships with dignity and care for both the researcher and participant (Paris, 2011). According to Paris (2011), "Only through such relationships can researchers and participants share and reflect upon the issues of interest in genuine dialogue" (p. 140). Thus, meeting with the student enabled me to conduct an authentic exchange of the issues with an impact on undergraduate Black male nontraditional students.

I also conducted a phone conference with the recommended faculty member after the academy program coordinator confirmed his interest in sponsoring the study. During the meeting with the professor, I shared my educational journey as a nontraditional student and my goal of examining the experiences of other Black male nontraditional students. He was impressed with my research and offered to sponsor my Institutional Research Board (IRB). The faculty member created an institutional data report of students matching my study's demographics and allowed me to use his signature line to email research invitations to potential participants.

I volunteered to assist the professor with his community-based barbershop talk project. The goal of the barbershop talk project was to create safe spaces for Black men in the local area to share strengths, success, and strategies for mental healing. The exchange of resources and time between me, the key informants, and cultural insiders of the institution was fieldwork that did not occur in a neatly linear fashion of gaining entry, negotiating access, maintaining field relations, collecting and analyzing data, and existing in the field (Schwandt, 2001). Conversely, the research approach in this study consisted of building relationships and disclosing my research intentions. Building relationships and remaining transparent about my interests enabled me to gain the trust of key informants and cultural insiders at the institution. The next section presents the rationale for conducting a field observation in conjunction with the focus group interview. In addition, the section presents the low participation of the focus group attendees its impact on my decision to conduct additional interviews.

**Data Collection**

I decided to conduct a field observation in addition to the focus group interview. The field observation included my review of the Summer 2019 adult and transfer student orientation program. Observing the orientation program and conducting the focus group interview during the summer provided me with the flexibility needed to attend to my work commitments and travel to do research. Observations of the summer orientation event and a focus group interview occurred over 4 days, which provided sufficient time to manage data collection.

*Field Observation*

Conducting a field observation of the orientation program in conjunction with the focus group interview allowed me to understand the introduction and perceptions of institutional resources. The observation of the orientation program incorporated viewing the institutional

support officers who attended the event. The observation included the informational fair and meeting with other campus representatives leading up to the orientation program. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) acknowledged that triangulation via multiple data sources is a powerful strategy for improving the credibility or internal validity of a study. Incorporating the notes from the observation of the orientation program with the interviews allowed me to corroborate the participants' insights of their educational experiences.

***Focus Group Interview and Individual Interviews***

I decided that the best approach to conducting interviews was focus groups and individual follow-up interviews. Two focus groups occurred. A focus group is a nondirective style of interviewing where the prime concern is to encourage a variety of viewpoints of a topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Hennik (2014) acknowledged that focus group research consists of interactive discussions to produce data, which results in a different type of data inaccessible via individual interviews. Scholars have suggested conducting focus groups with between six and 10 participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Seven individuals confirmed their attendance via the emailed focus group invitation; however, only four attended the first focus group. A second focus group commenced, with three out of six invited individuals attending. The low participation from both focus groups indicated the need to follow up with individual interviews. Ultimately, two focus groups and four individual interviews occurred for the study.

Acquiring diverse perspectives from the brothas occurred with conceptual interviews in the focus groups and in-person individual interviews. A conceptual interview structure was the means used to explore the meaning and the conceptual dimensions of central terms (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested that the goal of conceptual

interviews is to uncover respondents' discourse models, or their taken-for-granted assumptions about the typical, normal, or appropriate (Gee, 2005). Therefore, conceptual interviews were a suitable approach for gaining concrete descriptions of the brothas' assumptions of the institutional support available for Black male nontraditional students, as well as their faculty and student interactions and means of navigating higher education.

Conceptual interview questions were an opportunity to capture various insights from the brothas' narratives to find the meaning behind and their understanding of their educational experiences. The audio-recording of the first focus group underwent professional transcription. Subsequently, each focus group participant received a copy of the transcript with the questions asked and their individual responses highlighted in color. Via email, I asked each brotha to review the highlighted questions and responses for accuracy and confirm the information.

An insufficient number of participants attended the first focus group, which indicated the need to conduct another focus group at the institution. The second focus group occurred a month after the start of the fall semester due to the high number of Black male nontraditional students enrolled then who might have an interest in participating in the study. Upon contact, the institution's IRB indicated that I could extend the study without submitting another research request because I already had a study on file. However, getting participants to attend the second focus group was a challenge. Three individuals out of six confirmed attendees attended the second focus group.

Similar to the first focus group, I conducted conceptual interview questions in the second focus group. Through conceptual interview questions, the brothas disclosed similar perceptions as the first focus group participants of institutional services, strategies for navigating the institution, and student and faculty relationships. However, the brothas' insights in the second

focus group indicated the need to support others and how they received support from other students. Like the first focus group, each brotha in the second focus group received a copy of the complete transcript via email to verify for accuracy.

The low participant attendance in both focus groups indicated the need to conduct individual follow-up interviews with participants from both groups. Individual follow-up interviews commenced with all the members of the first focus group. Unfortunately, no one from the second focus group could participate in the individual interviews. However, one person who could not attend the second focus group took part in an interview. Conceptual interview questions guided the one-on-one interviews.

I developed the conceptual interview questions for the individual interviews based on the responses received from both focus groups. The individual interview questions had a flexible and conversational nature so the participants could explore issues they considered important (Longhurst, 2010). The lack of participant attendance could have been the result of the fluctuating availability of Black male nontraditional students, as they tend to have competing personal and academic commitments. Moreover, the lack of attendance for both pilot studies indicates the assumptions of others and the effects of certain times on students' experiences (Bennett & Burke, 2017). The following section presents the data analysis and the discovery of the Afrocentric paradigm and principles used to show how the brothas made meaning of their educational experiences.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis approach used was thematic analysis. Inductive and deductive coding commenced to identify reoccurring patterns and common themes across the data (Merriam, 2002). Thematic analysis is a means to identify, organize, and provide insight into the patterns of

meaning (themes) across data sets (Clarke & Braun , 2014). The inductive coding process allowed me to gather data, moving from raw data to abstract categories and concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After reviewing the transcripts, I performed coding according to short and long statements. A review of the statements showed their parallel nature, which allowed me to confirm the credibility of the interpretations of the brothas' meaning. Validating consistency in the coding process is a way to enhance the trustworthiness of a study's findings via patterns that show habits and importance in people's daily lives (Saldaña, 2016).

Next, association of the codes created with the field observation notes occurred to uncover and substantiate the brothas' narrations of how they made sense of their experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) acknowledged that researchers could combine bits and pieces of information from interviews and observations into larger themes to work from the particular to the general in the data analysis stage. Combining the interviews with the observation field notes was the means used to triangulate the data for a robust data analysis process. Triangulation is a validity procedure for achieving convergence among multiple and different sources of information and is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility of research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Three categories emerged after correlating the codes with the field notes. However, each category did not provide an appropriate theoretical framing to answer the research question of how the brothas made sense of their educational experiences.

Qualitative inquiry requires meticulous attention to language, images, and the emergent patterns and meanings of human experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) insisted that validating consistency in the coding process is a way to enhance the trustworthiness of a study's findings, as patterns show habits and importance in people's daily lives. Thus, another examination of the interview transcripts and field notes commenced to find richer aspects of the

codes behind the categories via deductive coding. The deductive approach indicated the need to return to the adult education literature to make sense of the brothas' narrations through a cultural theoretical lens. This step paralleled earlier interpretive studies that have included rich, descriptive accounts of data combined with the literature framing the data (Merriam, 2002). A second review of the literature returned a chapter in *The Handbook of Race and Adult Education* that presented how to use an African-centered paradigm and principles to understand race and racism in adult education (Sheared et al., 2010).

The principles of the African-centered paradigm provided a detailed context applicable to the brothas' narrations. The next chapter presents the study's findings and how the brothas interpreted their experiences via the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm. First, Chapter 4 shows the triangulation of the field observation notes of the adult orientation program and the interview data and how the brothas' narratives suggest their interpretation of institutional support through the Afrocentric concept of location. The chapter includes the brothas' perspectives of their institutional relationships with traditional students and faculty through the Afrocentric ideas of twinness and complementarity. Last, the chapter addresses the brothas' understanding of how they made decisions in their best interests to benefit other Black male nontraditional students via the Afrocentric paradigm.

**CHAPTER 5: CENTERING OUR EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES**

This study commenced at the beginning of the summer June 2019 semester with a field observation and a focus group interview. Another focus group occurred at the institution in September 2019. Zoom individual follow-up interviews occurred with the participants in October 2019. The field observation of the adult and transfer students was an opportunity to inform and substantiate the questions about institutional services in the first focus group. For example, attending the informational fair with various campus services staff and the presentation during the orientation program provided insight into how the brothas interpreted their experiences to assess the availability, utilization, and structure of institutional resources.

My participation in the orientation program at the institution where I received my undergraduate degree was similar to the participants'. My orientation consisted of a 2-hour presentation of the university with campus representatives, but I mostly received documentation of on-campus student support offices. As a student who transitioned from an HBCU to a community college to a 4-year institution, I felt the university should have provided a more interactive program suitable for older transfer students. Unlike my first-year HBCU experience, the 4-year university orientation did not include activities to enable meaningful engagement at the institution. I wondered what the participants' narratives would show about their thoughts of their orientation at the institution.

The first focus group with the four participants commenced by reiterating the study's purpose. I referred to the interview recruitment email invite and explained who I was, my connection to the research as a previous Black male nontraditional student, and my experiences during the pilot study. I needed to reaffirm who I was and the research goal to indicate the appropriateness of the study, as I was a visiting researcher who did not work at the institution

and had no direct connection to the participants. I also explained my purpose in the second focus group. The insights from the brothas who attended all the interviews suggested they interpreted the institutional support programs through the Afrocentric idea of location. The Afrocentric idea of location emerged in the brothas narratives of how they used their experiences to evaluate what was absent and what they wanted to see in the following areas of institutional support and resources: affirming spaces, presence within campus communications, and modification of institutional temporality.

**Affirming Spaces for Social and Academic Engagement**

The Afrocentric concept of location was the process of meaning-making used to explore the brothas' experiences and realities as nontraditional students within higher education. Therefore, location was the concept used to ground the brothas' narratives of communal knowledge and how they refused to be "others" within majority traditional-aged student institutional spaces. Furthermore, location was the concept of meaning-making used to show how the brothas interpreted their educational experiences to evaluate what was absent and what they wanted from institutional resources.

I started the first focus group discussion with the brothas by explaining my connection to the research. I shared how I began my higher education journey at an HBCU, transferring to a community college and then a 4-year institution where I obtained my undergraduate degree. I explained how the participants could provide their experiences to inform future research on supporting brothas like us who did not have traditional higher education journeys. As the discussions on support services commenced, I felt amazed but not entirely surprised by how the brothas viewed and experienced institutional campus resources.

The first focus group participants learned about the field observation of the summer orientation program for adult and transfer students and a meeting with the coordinator of the adult student association. The executive board members and coordinator plan events and activities for nontraditional students, and that the program had a low attendance of Black male nontraditional students. The brothas did not remember specific details about their orientation programs; however, some indicated that the campus support programs did not include the opportunity for Black male adult learners to interact and share experiences with campus resources.

For example, Jack, an undergraduate student majoring in computer science, felt the support programs lacked the opportunity to interact with other Black male adult learners to discuss helpful support programs, as Black male nontraditional students do not tend to proactively seek academic assistance when they need it. Jack said, "There needs to be a group that allows and focuses on networking opportunities for Black male adult learners because we don't particularly ask for help as often as we should." Jack also stated,

> If somebody gave me the money and the means to set up an organization for nontraditional African American males, I would definitely set up something like a group that [could] help [them] find the resources [they] need if [they] are struggling in class.

Jack's observation indicates his understanding that campus support programs lack the networking opportunities he would like to see for Black male nontraditional students at the institution.

Along the same lines, Jack noted the fluctuating availability of Black male adult learners on campus and how the lack of networking opportunities resulted in missed opportunities to meet other older Black men with knowledge of and direct involvement with institutional resources.

Jack confirmed that the focus group meeting was the first time he had met other older Black

male students and expressed the need for a networking opportunity:

> I would definitely say there needs to be a group focused strictly on Black male adult
>
> learners to get them to the resources that they need and start networking. I've never seen
>
> these guys before this focus group. We're all in different programs. Maybe if I would
>
> have met Miles [another brotha in the focus group], I could have networked with him and
>
> gotten some information. He could have been like, "Hey, so, this is such and such. This is
>
> the way to go and get the resources you need." [A network] could also have a mixer for
>
> us later on in the day. We could meet at a pizza place or TGI Fridays and all hang out.
>
> Like I smoke cigars, and I go to cigar lounges. So, me, personally, if I saw older guys like
>
> me, I would say, "Let's grab a stick and smoke whiskey," and [that could make] people's
>
> walls come down. You could do things to kind of get people together [in a networking
>
> group]. The main thing [is that] everybody has a lot of stuff going on, and the main thing
>
> is to get people together and bring those people to the resources they need. It could be
>
> people [who] need resources on how to get their financial aid situation straight or figure
>
> out exactly which path they want to go on.

Jack also expressed the importance of other undergraduate nontraditional Black male

students conducting proactive outreach to those in need of academic assistance. Jack said, "Black

male mentors can approach students, like, 'Hey man, I see you struggling, but I want to see what

I can do to get you through the class and the help you need to get you to the next level.'" Jack

also acknowledged that older Black male students with good academic records could still benefit

from a support program to combat the academic rigor of their topics. Jack said, "I [wish] I had an

organization that [could] say, 'Hey, we see you have a perfect GPA, but you are struggling in this class. What do you need?'"

Jack's narrative showed that he used a location perspective to center his evaluation of what the support programs lacked and what they should include for Black male nontraditional students. Jack's suggestion of peer mentors for academic outreach aligned with discussions on how to enhance nontraditional students' experiences and engagement in campus environments (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Similarly, Frankfort et al. (2015) confirmed the connection and positive impact of pairing students with near-aged peers and academic behavioral nudges on their social development. However, these scholars referenced institutional services for a generalized population of higher education students.

Therefore, attending to the scholars who have indicated the importance of centering the educational experiences of adult men and women with an Afrocentric lens (Asante, 2006; Merriweather-Hunn, 2004; Tolliver, 2015) is a more appropriate framework for understanding Black men's experiences as nontraditional students. The communal principle of the Afrocentric paradigm enabled the brothas to articulate their experiences as nontraditional students without viewing them through generalized assumptions of adult learners. Through a location perspective, Jack interpreted the need for support programs that provide community-building opportunities with other Black male nontraditional students. In addition, Jack indicated that support programs should provide opportunities for Black male nontraditional students to meet similar students who could provide academic support. Jack based his recommendations on his attendance at cigar lounges to socialize with other Black men. Therefore, Jack's insights through a location perspective indicated the need to avoid binding Black male nontraditional students to a single approach to participating in meaningful engagement in adult student programs.

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Participant K-Dubb used his experience to make sense of the campus support program during a discussion about networking opportunities. K-Dubb was a graduation coach at a campus program that provided academic and outreach support to Black men in the program to recognize their academic accomplishments. The program focused on improving the retention and graduation rates of Black male students at the institution. K-Dubb said, "As a graduation coach, I contact fellas to make sure they are registered and enrolled in courses, help them address any academic issues they are experiencing, and inform them of various types of campus resources that can help them graduate." K-Dubb's response suggests that he used his graduation coach experience to make meaning of the support programs at the institution. K-Dubb indicated the following about the ideal support program events for undergraduate Black male adult learners:

> Having an event program to meet other older Black male students that's small in numbers works for me. I look at the hundreds and hundreds of names on the email thread invite, and I don't know how that would work. How would you have all these people together and [have] them interact [although they] don't know each other? [With that], you may have small groups of cliques within the events. I don't know what kind of program would help all students to get to know each other when that happens. So, you [could] have smaller events or meetings and people [would] be open to talk.

K-Dubb's perspective suggests a location perspective. K-Dubb viewed his experience as a graduation coach with the location lens and saw the need for institutional support programs to provide reasonably sized events for meaningful interactions between Black male nontraditional students instead of large social events.

Both Jack and K-Dubb interpreted institutional support through a location perspective. Through the concept of location, Jack's personal activity of attending cigar lounges to build

community and K-Dubb's position as a graduation coach showed how the brothas used their experiences to evaluate what they lacked and what they wanted to see in support programs for Black male nontraditional students. Adult learning theories focus on individual and autonomous learning as a cognitive process with adaption to and engagement with one's environment (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990). However, the Afrocentric paradigm was an appropriate lens for understanding how the Black men in this study drew on their experiences to argue for support programs that provided small intimate gatherings and off-campus events for academic and personal socialization with other Black male nontraditional students. The next subsection presents the brothas' observations of institutional communications that further show their assessments of what institutional support programs lack and what they would like to see in institutional support.

**Presence Within Campus Communications**

The brothas discussed the subject of campus communication during the focus groups and individual interviews. Campus communication was a topic that showed their beliefs of what they lacked and needed from institutional resources. The brothas shared their understanding of the institution's dissemination of information for campus events and activities. Similar to the campus support programs, the brothas discussed what campus communication lacked and what it should include so that Black male nontraditional students can remain aware of and engaged in campus information. For example, in the focus group, K-Dubb described how campus activities occurred during times when he had class or family obligations that did not allow him to participate.

K-Dubb recalled an email communication he received from the adult student association about an event occurring later in the day. K-Dubb indicated that the email contained such vague

information that he was not interested in taking the time to read the rest of the content and attend the event. K-Dubb also stated,

> Yes, I [have] received the information about the adult student association meeting, but I'm either working or with family. Plus, there were no topics that are going to be discussed other than we are meeting at 11:30 a.m., and that's the last thing you get about it, so I really wasn't motivated to go.

Similar to K-Dubb's suggestion of follow-up communication about campus events, Tray-D suggested improving the institution's campus communication for Black male nontraditional students with meetings and a calendar of events:

> The best way for the university to communicate [with] us is an actual meeting or a forum of some sort to roll out an event calendar. [They should] put something in someone's hands, like for the month of December, [and say], "These are the things we have going on, and these are the dates."

Print media is a useful form of communication for engaging with nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). Similarly, Tray-D noted that although the institution's adult student organization presents campus activities in the office, it lacks communication about the replacement of new student leaders of the organization. Tray D said, "I've known the adult student association, but the person over it graduated, and I don't know who oversees it now." Tray-D recalled an adult student function but only knew about it because of frequent visits to the student veterans' office and seeing a flyer about the event. Tray-D said,

> I remember there was one adult mixer that was at 7 p.m., but the only reason I knew about that is because I saw a flier in that office where I spend a lot of time in, but the adult student activities are not adequately advertised.

Tray-D indicated that he could rely on the staff in the office to provide him the campus information that he needed because of his veteran status, stating,

I have access to the veteran side of being [a] nontraditional student, and MJ, there's nothing I can't go and ask her for. If she doesn't have the answer, she will by the end of the day and will contact me.

The perspectives of K-Dubb and Tray-D suggest they made sense of their experiences through the location perspective. Using a location perspective, Tray-D's experience of receiving campus information from the Veteran Affairs Office staff enabled him to suggest an appropriate means of disseminating information about adult student activities. Similarly, with a location perspective, K-Dubb's position as a graduation coach who communicated essential academic and outreach enabled him to suggest suitable timing for sending institutional messages about campus activities.

Miles, a veteran student and senior majoring in social work, acknowledged that his involvement in various student organizations provided him with awareness of various on-campus events. Miles said, "Like Tray-D and K-Dubb, I'm privy to additional information that [the] other students don't know [about] because of some of the organizations that I'm part of and [the] places [where] I happen to be." Miles confirmed that he never received communication about campus events until he became part of student groups, such as Black Scholars Unlimited and the student social work organization. He said, "I'm a seeker of everything, of every opportunity that is available to me, and I will literally fight for my opportunity to participate." Miles' response suggests he made meaning of campus communication through his experiences of participating in student organizations.

Moreover, Miles' response indicates that he made sense of his experiences through a location perspective and drew on his experiences of participating in student organizations to devote himself to intellectual pursuits (Asante, 2006). Miles showed his commitment and willingness to obtain beneficial campus information by participating in various student organizations. Miles' insights also indicate how he made meaning through an Afrocentric agency lens, as his participation in student organizations enabled him to remain aware of campus activities and utilize camp resources in his best interest. Miles stated, "I'm a seeker of everything, of every opportunity that is available to me, and I will literally fight for my opportunity to participate." A later chapter in this study presents the Afrocentric agency perspective, which was another means by which the brothas in this study made sense of their educational experiences.

Jack also expressed a lack of campus communication specific to Black male nontraditional students, despite his desire to receive emails about networking opportunities. Wyatt (2011) suggested that effective campus communication and networking opportunities contribute to nontraditional students' institutional engagement. Jack explained in the focus group how campus communications do not provide for students like him adequate information on degree requirements for graduation: "I just think communication is bad in general. They look at you like you're just here to get a degree." However, Jack expressed ambitions beyond obtaining a college degree, saying, "I'm also here to network and do stuff [and] to get to know people once I graduate." Jack explained how the campus communication focuses on providing traditional-aged students with information in preparation for life after graduation, saying, "I feel like the institution accommodates younger students because they need to help them prepare for life." Jack's insights suggest he made meaning through a location perspective, in which his

participation in various student organizations that provided information enabled him to evaluate how campus communication lacked opportunities for meaningful campus engagement and provided messages focused on traditional students.

Similarly, Tye, a full-time employee within the institution's IT department who was a returning student and graduating senior majoring in education, shared his insights of email communication of campus activities specific to traditional-aged students. During an individual interview, Tye indicated that he had never received emails focused on Black male nontraditional students. He said, "I can't think of any emails or anything on campus I've ever received that was specifically [for] African American nontraditional male students." Tye continued, "I'd be more willing to participate in events on campus if they were specific to Black male nontraditional students, but most of the emails that I have received from campus activities [are] more targeted towards traditional students." Tye's response also suggests an Afrocentric location perspective. From a location perspective, Tye drew on his experiences as a graduating senior and employee of the institution's IT department to assess the neglect of campus events for Black male nontraditional students. The next section of this chapter includes the brothas' insights into other institutional services intended for traditional-aged students having different institutional temporality from theirs.

**Modification of Institutional Temporality**

The brothas continued to identify areas absent at their institution and what they would have liked to see from institutional resources. Their insights included notions of being "others" within normative White campus resource spaces. The brothas said they lacked tutoring services available after they went to campus for classes. For example, Jack indicated needing academic assistance after office hours but that there were no services for adult learners like him who

frequented campus in the evening. Jack said, "Where is the help that I need at 6 p.m. at night. When I get out of class, there's nobody there." Tray-D agreed with Jack's sentiments about inadequate hours for tutoring and advising services. Tray-D expressed the following in response to Jack's statement and the need for the institution to have service hours that corresponded to Black male adult learners:

> Well, I'm fairly certain that the campus services shut down at like 5, 5:30 p.m. at the latest. So, there's no place for us to go to get that help, the tutoring that we may need, or just that general sort of extra push. So, I think, I want to say, personal interaction [is needed]. [We need] an organization that says, "Hey, we understand you're a nontraditional student [and] you don't have the traditional needs, but we are here," and actually mean that. Because you have people that say, "Hey, come to me if you need anything," but their door is closed. They're never in their office. They never answer their phone, never return your calls. So, having a tutoring department with better hours, rotating staff schedules, or [who are] on-call would work.

Jack's and Tray-D's insights showed how they interpreted tutoring services through a location perspective, as they perceived that the timing of institutional services did not provide for their needs. Moreover, both Jack's and Tray-D's assessments of tutoring services suggest the disconnect between the timing of their temporal rhythms and those of the institution. Scholars have researched temporality rhythms within higher education to understand how individuals manage, organize, and regulate social affairs related to time and their effects on how individuals live and make sense of life, including institutional life (Ylijoki, 2014). In the context of Jack's and Tray-D's meaning-making, the temporal rhythms of the institutional tutoring aligned with traditional-aged students. Ultimately, the institution's temporal rhythms produced a form of

othering for the Black male adult learners. Other participants expressed similar sentiments about advising services. Isaiah, a senior majoring in criminal justice who took part in the second focus group interview, discussed interactions with his academic advisor. Isaiah divulged a meeting when his advisor lacked an understanding of the external obligations of Black male adult learners outside of academics.

Isaiah indicated that advisors do not often consider the other commitments that Black male nontraditional students have while trying to balance school and work and plan academic course requirements. Isaiah said, "[The advisors] just get you in and out, trying to get people their schedule of classes. I wish their advising techniques would change." The advising techniques Isaiah described suggests, a recognition of the institution's temporal rhythmic protocol of time in relation to time as productivity and efficiency (Ylijoki, 2014). Hence, the Afrocentric location perspective is a suitable approach for interpreting Isaiah's narrative. Through the context of a location lens, Isaiah identified the institution's lack of concern for the personal and academic time commitments of Black male adult learners, which often differ from the temporal rhythms of institutional advising practices. Furthermore, Isaiah's narration aligned with the research indicating the lack of institutional structural timeframes that address people occupying different space-times or timescapes tied to sociocultural positioning and context (Bennett & Burke, 2017). In short, the lack of concern for the personal and academic time commitments with advising practices not inclusive to the needs of Black male adult learners is a means of situating them as others within the institution.

The brothas who participated in the individual interviews described how to understand advising and tutoring services from the viewpoint of the Afrocentric principle of location. For instance, Tye, a junior majoring in education, described a staff member who provided him with

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inadequate guidance for the courses to take and disregarded his ambition to teach high school math. Tye explained the following about the advising experience with the staff member:

> I've had some pretty sucky advising, and I say that because if I would've known what I knew when I first got into the TAL [Teaching All Learning] program, I would have finished early. I was specific with my advisor and told her, "I want to teach high school math. What's the path so that I can learn all I need to learn so I can pass this math practice and go about my life?" Instead, she put me into this TAL program. That's not what I wanted to do, and so I feel like if she would've honored what I said and really listened to me, I would have finished a year ago.

Similar to the narratives of the brothas in the focus groups, Tye's personal experience with the staff member indicated the possibility of interpreting his sensemaking of advising from an Afrocentric location perspective. With the Afrocentric location viewpoint, Tye explained that the lack of course program advising did not enable him to graduate early and gain the instructor experience he wanted and needed to establish a teaching career. Moreover, through an Afrocentric location lens, Tye revealed aspects of institutional temporality that did not align with his temporal rhythms of starting a teaching career. Ultimately, the institutional temporality of advising practices resulted in Tye's position as the "other," as they did not address his career interest. However, as a Black male nontraditional student, Tye had a unique temporal rhythm that was not the norm of all college students. His narrative suggests the need to recognize the uniqueness of the temporality of Black male nontraditional students.

During an individual follow-up interview, Jack shared his experience with tutoring services that indicated the urgency of having both an Afrocentric location and agency perspective. Jack recalled how a tutoring instructor demeaned him after determining that Jack did

not have content knowledge from a previous course helpful for a current class with which he needed help. However, Jack did not endure further marginalization. He described his interaction with the tutoring instructor and his decision to no longer utilize the service:

I go into the tutoring session with the staff, and he was like, "Why don't you know this already?" I'm thinking to myself, "I'm a nontraditional student, and I didn't just come straight outta high school or even community college knowing and remembering how to do physics or an advanced algebra course." They should have someone who understands [that] a Black male nontraditional student may have [had] some lapses in their road to education. Some of us struggled in high school, but we still want to get an education so we can better ourselves and our families. Right then, I decided I'm not going to sit here and be insulted because I [couldn't] grasp the material. I'll take an F in the class rather than go to a tutor.

Jack's narrative was an example of the Afrocentric location concept in his meaning-making. Through an Afrocentric location lens, Jack expressed that his educational temporal rhythms path did not align with the temporality academic expectations of the institution's tutoring services. Hence, Jack's narrative showed an Afrocentric location because he recognized the lack of recognition and support of the educational temporality of Black male adult learners, which differed from the institution's temporality.

**Chapter Summary**

The focus groups and interviews with the brothas showed they used the Afrocentric principle of location to assess their experiences and evaluate what the institution's services lacked and what they should include. Moreover, their narratives focused on their experiences as Black male nontraditional students and were not studied under a generalized assumption of adult

learners within higher education. In addition, their experiences showed that institutions focused on providing electronic communication of institutional resources the most relevant for traditional-aged students. As a result, the promotion of institutional services intended for traditional-aged students resulted in temporality and a sense of being the "other." The next chapter presents how the brothas' made meaning through the Afrocentric ideas of twinness and complementarity to advance their goal of contributing to the optimal development of themselves and others.

# CHAPTER 6: TWINNESS AND COMPLEMENTARITY RELATIONSHIPS

The discussions with brothas in the focus groups and one-on-one interviews included their interactions with traditional-aged students and faculty at the institution. I had limited opportunities to develop relationships with faculty and students who looked like me inside and outside of the classroom during my undergraduate years as a nontraditional student. Instead, I mostly formed communal relationships with family in Detroit and my best friend and roommate, who was also a Black male nontraditional student. Like me, my roommate had also attended several institutions. I experienced a lack of relationship-building with Black faculty and other Black students at the institution because the institution lacked such individuals. Therefore, I wanted to know if the brothas in this study had the opportunity to build these relationships. Their narratives showed their desire to build relationships with both institutional faculty and students.

The participants provided diverse insights about their interactions with younger students and their relationships with faculty. Scholars have discussed nontraditional students' interactions with traditional-aged students and faculty in adult education literature (Medved & Heisler, 2002). However, the brothas in this study showed meaning-making beyond the surface of the extant literature's concepts of relationships in learning by nontraditional students in higher education settings (Kidd, 1960; MacKeracher, 2004).

## Introduction

This chapter includes insights from the Black men in this study and how they made meaning from their experiences via the Afrocentric principles of twinness and complementarity. The Afrocentric principles of twinness and complementarity are theoretical constructs focused on an accumulation of knowledge and understanding; coexistence together and individually must occur for the optimal development of individual members of the group and the optimal

development of the group as a whole (Modupe, 2003; Tolliver, 2010). The Afrocentric principles of twinness and complementarity emerged in the brothas' narratives, as they reported developing strategies to avoid others alienating and viewing them as "others," valuing and practicing advocacy, and attending to mentoring roles and reciprocity practices within relationships. Similar to the findings in the previous chapter, the brothas' backgrounds and past experiences provided an understanding of how their encounters contributed to their perceptions of and relationships with traditional-aged students.

**Avoiding Being Alienated and Viewed as "Other"**

I was interested in knowing if the brothas in the second focus group had classroom interactions with traditional-aged students similar to what I had experienced as a Black male nontraditional student. The brothas' insights suggest that their meaning-making through the Afrocentric principle of twinness enabled them to develop strategies to avoid others alienating and viewing them as "other" among the traditional-aged students. For example, Tray-D said he did not share his age with younger students so they would include him in group class projects. Tray-D explained having to deal with the barrier created by younger students in class because he was an older Black male student and why he intentionally did not reveal his age:

> I don't tell anybody how old I am; it's just something I refuse to do. I feel like once you
> get to a certain age and students refer to you as "Mister," that automatically puts up a
> wall of separation, and I will no longer be able to connect with a younger person once
> I'm Mr. Tray-D. When students ask me how old I am, I ask, "How old do I look?" and
> whatever age they say, I go with that. I figure if they know how old I am, they will think I
> should already know what's going [on] and not include me. For the most part, I can
> finesse my way through conversations with younger students, so to entertain the

conversation, that means I have a study group for next week, and I can get help from one of them, and we can study together. So as far as fitting in goes, I don't have that barrier because I don't tell anyone my age.

Miles shared a similar rationale for not revealing his age to traditional-aged students. He said he took pride in his age but felt reluctant to disclose it due to their negative perceptions of older students. Miles said,

To piggyback on what Tray-D said, I agree with him 100-fold. I do not reveal my age, not because I'm ashamed of my age, but [because] students seem to assume that if you are older, you cannot fit in. We're in school trying to get to the next level, but it seems that a lot of the younger students here seem to judge us as misplaced or that we did something wrong.

Tray-D's and Miles' narratives suggest that they acted from a twinness perspective. They embodied a dualistic mindset; although they felt reluctant to reveal their age as others could have viewed it as a hindrance, they also utilized that reluctance as a tool to avoid alienation by students with ageism. Both Tray-D's and Mile's reluctance and hesitation to reveal their age resonated with my experience as an undergraduate student. For example, I often heard criticism about people from Detroit and older students in college during my participation in mostly White younger student group projects and classes. I learned from the brothas in the second focus group that they also viewed their experiences through a twinness perspective.

The brothas' narratives in the second focus group had insights parallel to the twinness perspective. Isaiah, a senior majoring in criminal justice, recalled a class discussion when a White student shared an opinion that could only be understood through a White perspective;

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however, Isaiah expressed the importance of persevering despite the comment made. Isaiah stated,

> I experienced some prejudice from a student who gave their opinion on an issue that made them sound ignorant, and I thought, "That doesn't make sense because they're speaking from a White perspective. They don't have any other perspective to include, so they're going off on something they've learned from maybe their family or interacting with other White students." It was just an ignorant comment.

Isaiah further explained how students in his criminal justice class cited negative stereotypes of Blacks as criminals when discussing stop-and-frisk. He explained how traditional White students supported the stereotype. Isaiah said, "We have White students who are traditional students coming with the racist notions that, 'Oh, Blacks are all criminals.'" Although the White students subscribed to negative stereotypes about Black individuals, Isiah used the negative comments to open up a larger conversation about conditions that cause individuals to commit crimes. Isaiah said, "They're not looking at the whole picture when it comes to criminal justice in America. There needs to be a lot of reform, and there needs to be a lot of myths dispelled about why crimes are committed." Isaiah's insights suggest how he engaged in meaning-making through a twinness perspective. Isaiah realized the racist comments of White students and their unilateral views as hindrances. However, through the twinness perspective, Isaiah used those comments to engage in conversations to help others understand the reasons behind criminal behaviors without negatively stereotyping a racial group.

Curt, a senior majoring in engineering, agreed with Isaiah's sentiments and said, "I look at it as just the way they were raised and their backgrounds, where they haven't been around older Black men like me." Curt described a personal encounter with a White professor who

racially stereotyped Curt as a drug dealer. Curt explained that his telephone had rung during a class meeting, and his professor had made a negative comment, saying, "'Uh oh, there goes another sell,' and laughed." Curt indicated that he felt furious and said, "I was on straight rage about it."

Curt said he did not understand why the professor would make such a comment. He insisted that his cellular phone's ringtone did not have any references to rap or anything that aligned with stereotypical assumptions of Black men. Furthermore, Curt acknowledged that he viewed the professor differently after the incident, which increased his motivation to exhibit his commitment to his academic work. He said, "I didn't get angry. I was going to let my work ethic speak for me." Curt's experience showed that he interpreted the interaction through a twinness perspective, in which he had a dualistic mindset of not looking at racism as a hindrance but perceiving it as a foundation for resilience and empowerment (Ellis, 2013). In other words, Curt did not consider the racist comment a hindrance; instead, it was a means of enacting agency to perform and make the dean's list for his engineering program. Isaiah and Curt maintained their growth despite their encounters with racially stereotyped situations with White students and professors. Their actions showed a form of self-empowerment despite their experiences with racial stereotypes.

**Practice Reciprocity Within Established Student Relationships**

The brothas described interactions with traditional-aged students that showed an Afrocentric complementarity perspective. An African proverb of the concept of complementarity is, "We are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are (Wiredo & Gyeke, 2010, p. 103). Scholars have suggested that the complementarity point of view of the African-centered perspective indicates the importance of communal interdependence and complementary, not

competing actions in communities (Ellis, 2013; & Tolliver, 2010). Tye, a returning student to the

institution majoring in education and a full-time employee of the technology department,

presented the following story about his initial interaction and decision to mentor a young Black

male student struggling in an accounting class:

> I work in the IT department on campus, fixing computer issues in various departments
>
> and [I] run into young Black male students often. One day, I helped reset a young Black
>
> male student's password. From there, the conversation went from, "What's your
>
> classification?" to "How are classes going?" So, he was like, "Well, my accounting class
>
> is kind of difficult," and so that's when I went into mentor mode. So, I asked him, "Did
>
> you reach out to your professor? Have you tried tutoring resources? Are you taking
>
> advantage of other resources that you have on campus so you can make the best grade
>
> possible? I know everybody's not an A student, and everybody's not aiming for an A, but
>
> are you doing what you're supposed to do so that you can get up out of here and start
>
> making some money?"

Tye discussed his faith in younger Back male students supporting and advocating for

each other and his own need to participate in support programs to mentor other Black male

students. Tye said, "I hope Black brothers are taking the initiative to be encouraging and

motivating for each other, but I do need to get more involved in organizations on campus that

support them." He acknowledged his obligation as a nontraditional Black male student to aid and

advocate for younger Black male students. Tye continued,

> I'm an older, nontraditional African-American male, and I do feel like my input would be
>
> resourceful to [young Black male students], so [I] do want to get more involved in those

programs because it's so important that we do as much as we can to promote our own and to keep our own motivated.

Tye showed a complementarity perspective, as he advocated for interdependence and service to others (Ellis, 2013) by mentoring the younger Black male student on maintaining academic accountability and utilizing campus resources. In this example, the concept of complementarity provided a nuanced notion of meaning-making often unaddressed in the concept of group dynamics. For instance, group dynamics theory does not indicate the reasons why individuals desire to mentor others when they occupy leadership positions. Moreover, group dynamics focus on the self of the individual rather than the complementarity practices of reciprocity, compassion, cooperation, and solidarity with others (Wiredo & Gyekye, 2010) shown in the brothas' narratives.

Similar to Tye's sentiments, Curt also discussed establishing relationships with traditional Black male students. Curt explained how his past experiences of struggling academically and eventually dropping out contributed to his desire to mentor younger Black men with similar academic issues. Curt indicated that he not only focused on getting his undergraduate degree but also wanted to mentor younger Black male students because of his experiences of feeling intimidated by college courses that caused him to drop out of college. Curt explained how his experience of overcoming academic difficulties contributed to his motivation to mentor young Black male students:

> Basically, I came to college only to get my degree, but I wanted to make sure I schooled at least one to five other Black males under me. That was my goal, to be a mentor. If we don't have a "reach one, teach one" kind of attitude, we're going to always fail, and I learned that from my first degree. Nobody told me nothing.

Curt indicated the young Black men embraced his guidance and said, "The guys look up to me and respect my word when I told them the mistakes I made [that] they could not be prepared for." Curt's narrative suggests he engaged in meaning-making through a complementarity lens, as he viewed his decision to mentor traditional-aged Black male students as an obligatory commitment to their academic success. Furthermore, Curt noted that he wanted to mentor others because of the lack of mentoring he encountered during his previous academic struggles.

Curt also described how a younger Black male student in the engineering program supported him by tutoring him in a difficult course. Curt explained how the younger Black male student who assisted him prompted him to reciprocate support by sharing professional appearance advice:

The first guy that helped me was in my math class. He's one of the smartest guys in the engineering department. You would never know, but he comes from the church background, and he was willing to help me. He would stay up here with me until 11 p.m., 12 [a.m.] at night on campus, helping me with math. He's from a rough neighborhood. He got braids to the back. I'm talking about he got the old-school braids like cornrows. I'm like, "You're going to have to cut them. It's going to be the first sign that they're going to take your resume out of the pile of people applying for a job."

Curt's narrative shows the principle of complementarity in his meaning-making. Through a complementarity lens, Curt saw the importance of advocating for interdependence, and he realized interconnection and reciprocity were essential to the needs of others (Ellis, 2013). Therefore, the support Curt received from the younger Black male student was an opportunity

for him to reciprocate by providing guidance on how to manage professional appearance when applying for jobs.

Curt acknowledged that the two-way support with the young Black male student led him to establish study groups with other traditional-aged students. Curt's study groups included traditional-aged students who were Black, White, and of other ethnicities. Curt said,

> I made sure I got the smartest kids around me, and I wanted to make sure I got my Black students, minority students, and Caucasian students to come together as Black and White, regardless of the race or anything, [to] just study together.

Curt's insight aligned with the principle of complementarity, as his decision to establish study groups showed that he recognized the need to balance the group's needs with those of the individuals (Ellis, 2013). Thus, Curt's viewpoint of successfully passing the course consisted of him and the younger students in his class forming study groups. In this example, the concept of complementarity provided a more nuanced notion of meaning-making because Curt sought to solve problems and make choices and decisions (MacKeracher, 2004) beneficial for the group as a whole and the members of the group.

**Value Advocacy and Accountability**

As our conversations continued, I wanted to know how faculty members supported Black male nontraditional students. The brothas shared their interactions with faculty and how they made meaning through the Afrocentric principles of twinness and complementarity. The brothas discussed their interactions with Black and White institution faculty who provided encouragement and support. Their insights showed how encounters with Black male faculty members at the institution enabled them to view professors as advocates.

For example, Tray-D discussed failing to get admitted to the nursing program and the encouragement he received from his Black male nursing course professor. Tray-D explained how the professor encouraged him to attend office hour meetings to discuss admission strategies into the nursing program. During one of their meetings, the professor shared his experience of receiving a less-than-anticipated grade in a nursing course, using it as motivation to obtain a 4.0 and outperforming other students in his class. During their discussion, the professor encouraged Tray-D to take a similar approach when reapplying to the nursing program. Tray-D said, "[The faculty] told me, 'That the same chip [you] have on [your] shoulder, you need to put it on yours and show them they made a mistake when coming back and admitting you because you should have been there the first time.'" Tray-D described the value and credibility of the professor and the experience he shared that ultimately enabled him to get into the nursing program. As a result of the interaction, "I feel like [that faculty] represents someone who's in the conversation, who has a bit more experience, and he's helping me to be better."

Tray-D's narrative suggests he made meaning of his interaction with his Black male professor through a twinness perspective, seeing an apparent failure as the "opposite" view (e.g., success) to replace the apparent failure under supportive conditions (Stepteau-Watson & Tolliver, 2018). For instance, Tray-D replaced his failure to achieve admission into the nursing program with the supportive conditions of guidance and encouragement from his Black male professor. Moreover, Tray-D's meaning-making of his encounter with his professor occurred through a complementarity perspective in which he valued the advocacy, interdependence, and commitment to serving others (Ellis, 2013) that the Black male professor embodied.

In addition, Tray-D provided insights from a complementarity perspective through which he experienced communal advocacy from other Black male professors. The participant discussed receiving common support from other Black male professors at the institution, saying,

> Most of the Black males professors have been like that, like, "Hey, you ever want to come talk, I'm here, my door is open, even though you don't take my class anymore," 2, 4, 6 years down the line. So, I've had positive experiences with Black male professors wanting me to succeed.

Tray-D's insights suggest he engaged in meaning-making by interacting with Black male faculty from a complementarity perspective. He associated the advocacy from those professors with communal interdependence because they performed actions complementary to others (Tolliver, 2010). Tray-D's insights indicate making meaning with a complementarity perspective because he used failure as a means for success due to the advocacy and encouragement of his Black male professors.

Miles expressed similar sentiments when explaining how he attributed his ability to continue at the institution to the encouragement and support he received from his Black male professors. Miles said,

> My Black professors are the reason why I'm still here. They took a liking to me because they knew I was trying to study and prepare better for work. So, like Tray-D, they took the initiative and challenged me to work harder.

Miles's narrative indicates that he engaged in sense-making through an advocacy lens, valuing Black male professors who motivated students to confront the rigor of their academic studies. Unlike Tray-D, Miles' meaning-making contributed to his motivation to actively participate in campus support programs for traditional and nontraditional Black male students, as discussed in

the previous chapter. From a complementarity perspective, Miles practiced interdependence and reciprocity (Ellis, 2013) in his support program work with traditional and nontraditional age Black male students. Thus, he reciprocated the guidance and advocacy he valued in his Black male professors by supporting other Black male students at the institution.

During an individual interview, Jack shared his interactions with his Black male and White female professors from a complementarity perspective, valuing how they held him accountable for holding himself responsible for his academic learning. For example, during the focus group discussion, Jack shared an instance when he did not put his best efforts into a written assignment. His professor knew of his lack of effort and told him he could do better. Jack recalled a conversation he had with the professor:

> He pulled me to the side, and we talked about the annotated bibliography that I wrote but I [had] never read the entire book. He told me, "You need to read this again because you skimmed through it and just wrote up something." He said, "You're used to doing this," and I was like, "Yeah." So, he challenged me to read the book and complete the bibliography the right way. He told me, "You can do better than this. This is a C paper. I know you can write an A paper." I eventually got an A+ out [of] the class.

Unlike the narrative of his Black male professor, Jack described an encounter with his White female finance professor from a complementarity lens. Through a complementarity perspective, Jack recognized and valued how his White female professor embodied accountability. During the focus group interview, Jack shared an incident when he struggled with course modules in his finance class. He indicated that his White female professor knew of his struggle and compelled him in an email to start attending her office hours for help. Jack said,

She saw that I didn't understand the concepts of the class module and emailed me saying,

"We need to set up a time to talk and go over the material because if you don't

understand the concepts, you will not pass this class."

After attending several sessions at her office, Jack explained that he maintained

responsibility for his academic learning with detailed reading and analysis of the course module.

He said, "I stopped skimming the readings and paid more attention to answering the questions

correctly, and I passed the class." Jack made sense of his interactions with his White female

professor through a complementarity lens by viewing her commitment to serve others. Jack saw

that she had interests reflective of the community members (Ellis, 2013) within the classroom

because she emphasized and exemplified self-accountability.

The brothas also shared their faculty interactions with a complementarity lens that

contributed to their self-confidence in their academic abilities. For example, K-Dubb, a reentry

student to the institution, recalled how his Black male professor ensured that he did not detach

from the course curriculum and younger students in the class. K-Dubb said, "As a nontraditional

Black male student older than the rest of class, I could feel at the beginning of the semester [that]

the professor would not isolate me, but [he] eventually left me alone." However, K-Dubb

acknowledged that the professor sensed he could adjust to the classroom environment and other

students without assistance. K-Dubb stated,

Eventually [the professor] left me alone and probably thought [that] I don't want to be

bothered because he knew I could do it, and you know me, as the course goes on, I'm

doing well and even better than my counterparts.

K-Dubb's experience showed how he made sense of the actions of his professor through a

complementarity perspective. Through a complementarity perspective, K-Dubb interpreted the

professor's actions as a commitment to serving other individuals and building up his self-confidence and academic abilities.

Miles interpreted his interactions with his Black female professor from a complementarity perspective, which contributed to his self-confidence in his academic abilities due to the historical contributions of previous Black students at the institution. Miles discussed how his professor continuously reminded him of the first Black students to integrate into the institution and used their activism to foster his educational perseverance. He said,

> [The professor] always asked if I went and read the marker on campus that commemorates the Black students who broke the color barrier here, so one day I did and came back to class and told her, and it sparked something in me to work harder and rise to the occasion because it's more than getting this degree; it was [because of] people's courage that I have this opportunity to be a student.

Through a complementarity perspective, Miles valued the interdependence and reciprocity of the Black female professor who admired the academic and social contributions of historical Black students of the institution. Miles' appreciation of his professor's emphasis on these students made him determined to work harder, thus building the self-confidence he exhibited in the campus support programs for Black male students.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter included the brothas' narratives showing how they made meaning through the Afrocentric principle of twinness and complementarity. Through the Afrocentric lens of twinness, the brothas demonstrated their ability to avoid alienation, maintain growth despite negative perceptions from traditional-aged students, and assume mentoring roles. In addition, with a complementarity perspective, the brothas shared how their Black and White professors

exemplified advocacy and maintained their self-confidence in their academic abilities. The next and final chapter of this study presents the brothas' meaning-making from the Afrocentric perspective of agency to show their impetus for independently making choices to benefit themselves as Black male nontraditional students.

**CHAPTER 7: WE'RE AGENTS IN MAKING DECISONS IN OUR OWN BEST**

**INTERESTS**

The participants' narratives showed a notion of independence. A brotha in the second focus group mentioned attending the institution with a "business mindset." This insight was a perspective shared by the other brothas in this study in various observations. In addition, their insights caused me to reflect on my "business mindset" of being a nontraditional Black male student and motivation to complete my undergraduate degree. I realized that despite the university's accommodation to traditional-aged students and White learners, I needed to take the initiative to build relationships with campus staff and utilize campus resources to succeed academically. The same ambition I had as a Black male adult learner paralleled with the brothas' narratives of how they perceived achieving academic success. The brothas' accounts that suggest their meaning-making underwent exploration through the Afrocentric concept of agency.

**Introduction**

In meaning-making, the brothas showed Afrocentric agency when they interpreted the financial implications of knowing academic requirements and maximizing their use of campus staff and resources. Asante (2006) suggested that the Afrocentric concept of agency consists of acting independently in one's best interest to provide the psychological and cultural resources needed to advance human freedom. Therefore, I used the Afrocentric perspective of agency to interpret the narratives shared by the brothas in this study. Moreover, with the agency perspective, the brothas showed how they acted as autonomous agents for their self-interests despite social and institutional structures. Asante (1998) described the investigation of Afrocentric agency as essential for understanding the source and motivation of the African person. Therefore, this chapter presents the brothas' narratives of independence and resilience

that showed their impetus for independently making choices to benefit themselves as Black male nontraditional students.

**Detail-Oriented of Academic/Financial Requirements**

The brothas in the second focus group discussed taking responsibility for and ownership of their academic progress. The participants were transfer students from community colleges or 4-year institutions or students who had stopped their studies and reentered the university. Similar to my educational journey, the brothas had attended multiple institutions. The brothas' shared personal experiences suggest that they conducted their meaning-making through an Afrocentric lens of agency.

The brothas shared their ownership of understanding the institution's academic requirements and financial implications. For example, Curt discussed how he always carried his curriculum requirements and transfer course paperwork for easy reference if he forgot something. Curt said,

> Well, for me, I walk around campus with a book, and I write everything down every day because my memory is not that good, being I have so much [on] my mind. But I also found out that I do more when I write things down, so I walk [around] with a big yellow envelope with my paperwork.

Curt also described an advising appointment meeting when he corrected his academic advisor about the transfer courses he took to fulfill his graduation requirement and avoid taking an additional science course. Curt referenced his curriculum transfer document with his advisor:

> My advisor told me [that] I needed to take a Physics 2 class to graduate because I didn't have enough credits, and I told him I didn't need to take it to graduate. I showed him the transfer course sheet with the nine credits from the community college that [could] count

toward the physics class so I [could] still graduate. He forgot about our previous meeting when we discussed this before, so it's just little things like the advising and your classes that you got to be up on [top of] it.

Curt also said he considered it his responsibility to understand the financial implications of attending the institution and higher education. He expressed that he intentionally sought knowledge of the financial implications of higher education to take the appropriate courses. Curt said,

I came here [with] a business mind frame of trying to find out what [the institution] really had to offer, so I looked through the curriculum, the website, asked questions, doin' whatever I got to do to know what I'm spending my money on, and I found that helped me a lot.

As an older student, Curt's experience provided him with the advantages of understanding the financial implications of college and not taking courses that would not address his graduation requirements. Curt said, "Being an older student, I already know how to get through the graduation process quicker, so I don't have to go backward or spend money on classes that I don't need to." Curt's narrative is an example of an Afrocentric agency perspective. He pursued his best interests with a fiscally responsible approach to taking the courses needed for his academic course graduation requirements. Curt also utilized his experiences as a nontraditional student to understand the financial benefits of shortening his degree and graduation time.

Curt recognized how his viewpoint of attending college differed from his White male nontraditional student colleagues, who regarded taking courses as an opportunity for personal accomplishments and disregarded the financial implications of college. Curt described his

encounter with a White male nontraditional student who worked full-time with a significant

salary and did not take the financial implications of college seriously:

> We would go back and forth about graduating and finding jobs, and he was like, "You
>
> know, Curt, taking this class is just something to get off my bucket list. I'm like, "Bucket
>
> list? I need this to live. I'm trying to survive." He was like, "Well, I already make
>
> $130,000 a year." I'm thinking to myself, "Your job paid for these classes, and it's on
>
> your bucket list?" I make $70,000 less than that, but I'm still attending school [with] a
>
> business mindset, and you're talking about a bucket list? Attending school is no bucket
>
> list; this is real life, not the world he lives in.

Curt's insights suggest he based his viewpoint on the Afrocentric perspective of agency

because he assumed the primary position of viewing college as a means of economic survival. In

contrast, his White colleague saw higher education as an opportunity to learn for pleasure. Curt's

rationale to attend college was survival, which suggests that he made meaning through an

Afrocentric agency perspective. Curt acted in his best interest and contrary to the motive of his

economically privileged White male counterpart.

Curt took responsibility for knowing the academic requirements and financial

implications of attending higher education classes with Black and White students. He informed

his fellow students of the financial benefits of taking some courses at the neighboring community

college to fulfill program and graduation requirements. Curt said,

> I view [going to college] like running a business, so I was telling the students in class,
>
> like, "You can take these classes over there, but make sure they are similar on your
>
> transfer course sheet from the college website." But a lot of them [were] so stuck on
>
> being at the university that they weren't seeing the bigger financial picture.

Curt remained knowledgeable of university course requirements and even educated his

academic advisor on the transfer credits that provided his graduation prerequisites. He showed

his meaning-making through the Afrocentric principle of agency because he acted independently

and for his best interests. Moreover, Curt's willingness to share his knowledge of transfer

courses for graduation requirements with his fellow students showed how he made meaning

through a complementarity perspective, as he advocated for interdependence and a commitment

to serving others.

Isaiah and Mike acknowledged Curt's insights and the importance of understanding the

institution's financial implications and academic requirements. Isaiah stated,

> Curt made an excellent point. You definitely need to do your homework because the odds
>
> are stacked against us, even more so as nontraditional Black males. The odds are stacked,
>
> and you can get crushed by debt. It's just the reality of the situation.

Mike explained that understanding an institution's academic requirements enables one to

have confidence in understanding the academic requirements. Mike said,

> When you do your homework of the courses you need, it increases your comfort level.
>
> [You are] walking across this campus with your head high, knowing what you are doing,
>
> and not being scared or timid because you can navigate the classes.

Both Isaiah and Mike engaged in meaning-making with an agency perspective. They indicated

that knowing about the appropriate courses and their long-term financial implications provided

them with the confidence to navigate the institution's academic requirements.

The brothas' decisions to choose academic and personal priorities over socializing with

other students despite the institution's focus on student engagement also showed their

Afrocentric agency. During his one-on-one interview, Jack discussed choosing not to stay after

class to interact with students. Jack stated that the academic semester did not provide him enough time to interact with students and noted that having classes during the day and evening prevented him from socializing unless they were events beneficial to his career. Jack said,

> Once class is over, I got other things I have to do, so I don't linger to try to get to know people. At the end of the day, socializing should catapult me into a career to help me make more money, so it's a business mindset for me.

During his one-on-one interview, Tye similarly indicated that he did not participate in student activities because he focused on preparing to transition into his teaching career, which would provide him with financial benefits. Tye said, "I'm not here just to party. I'm here to apply my learning to teach and progress financially, so I do feel like I'm there for business, most definitely." Both Jack's and Tye's insights showed their Afrocentric agency and ability to act independently to make educational decisions in their best interests.

The one-on-one interviews with the other brothas produced different insights into how Black male nontraditional students socialize. Despite their diverse perspectives, the brothas had an Afrocentric agency perspective. For example, Tye no longer viewed his attendance at the institution through the lens of a traditional-aged student but rather through acquiring knowledge for financial benefit. Tye said, "I'm at the age now where I'm not 21, so I'm actually here to take some of my practical [teaching] experience to progress financially. I do feel like I'm here for business." Tye's observation showed that he viewed his participation in higher education from an Afrocentric agency perspective, as he focused on the goal of learning to ensure his financial stability after graduation.

However, Miles encouraged socializing to develop the skills needed to handle multiple priorities. Miles said, "Being aware of and involved in social activities helps [me] with time

management and planning, which helps me maintain a very high academic standard." Miles approached socializing from an Afrocentric agency perspective because he decided to participate in social activities to establish the necessary skills for balancing his academic priorities and meeting academic expectations.

**Maximize Campus Staff and Resources**

The brothas also shared their observations of proactively using campus staff and resources to navigate the institution. In the first focus group, Tray-D expressed going to the Veteran Affairs Office for additional campus activity information. Tray-D explained regularly meeting with a staff member who provided him with pertinent institutional information:

> I'm a veteran, so I have access to the veteran side of being a nontraditional student. M.J., the head of the Veteran Affairs Office, there's nothing I can't go and ask her for, and if she doesn't have the answer, she will get it to me before the end of the day. She will facilitate a phone call for me if I don't feel comfortable having a conversation trying to get the information I need. I just need to give her the questions that need answering.

Tray-D showed his Afrocentric agency perspective by taking the initiative to obtain institutional information not widely publicized. Afrocentric agency indicates that the source and motivation of an African person are to be active on the basis of one's volition (Asante, 2006). Similarly, Tray-D actively sought the information beneficial to him as a nontraditional Black male student. In addition, with the Afrocentric perspective of location, Tray-D's meaning-making was the mechanism by which he used his experience to assess what he missed and what he wanted to see in the campus communication. Tray-D's observation indicates that the institution lacked consistently publicized student information beneficial to nontraditional Black male students.

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In addition, Tray-D discussed how his experience with tutoring services caused him to think differently about those services. Tray-D said,

I needed tutoring for math, and I was able to utilize that service on the main campus, so it's one of those things where maybe hearing about tutoring services [in] a different way kind of clicks for you, and you can kind of go forward with it from there.

K-Dubb, a returning student of the university, also discussed how his past experiences caused him to take a different approach to advising services. He said, "My first time around, I didn't use my advisor at all. I dodged appointments because I felt like I didn't need [them]. But without an advisor, I probably would've quit again." K-Dubb used his experience to interpret advising services as an effective resource for graduation. Both Tray-D and K-Dubb shared experiences that showed their Afrocentric lens of agency as they embraced tutoring services to aid their academic progress.

Curt discussed a similar experience of deliberately investigating if his current job was the equivalent of an internship program to fulfill his engineering degree requirement. He described meeting with the coordinator of the engineering program and validating with her that he could use his job to fulfill the internship requirements. Curt expressed his approach to striving at the institution:

Being a Black male, I treat it like a hustle here. I'm a technician, and part of my job is working on medical devices, so I looked at the program chart, and I saw my job could count as an internship, but this is not something they [told] me. I had to find it out myself.

Curt's example of self-directed learning showed his resourcefulness and independence in acting in his best interest (Asante, 2006) by reviewing and confirming that he could use his job to fulfill the internship requirement with the program coordinator.

Unlike Tray-D and Curt, Miles discussed seeking out and participating in campus activities. Miles suggested that nontraditional Black male students proactively search for campus activities without waiting to receive this information from the institution. Miles said, "[Black male students] must be willing to go out and seek and take advantage of the programs that are provided to us and have the initiative to go out and be part of it." Miles also acknowledged that active engagement in campus activities is a way to develop the skills needed to handle multiple priorities. Miles said, "Being aware of and involved in social activities helps with time management and planning, which helps me maintain a very high academic standard." Miles' narrative suggests he engaged in meaning-making through an Afrocentric agency perspective, as he worked in his best interest by establishing the skills he needed to balance his academic priorities and meet academic expectations.

Miles indicated that his experience at a 4-year university caused him to seek active involvement in campus activities at the institution. Miles said,

When I got ready to attend this school, I transferred here from another university, and I told my wife that I wanted to be a little more involved, and she said, "Why would you do that? You're an older student. Just go to class."

However, Miles noted that the campus activities allowed him to share with and help older and younger Black male students. He stated, "I have been involved in so many things that it has opened more doors for my future, and it has propelled me [so] that I have to be active to help others." Mile's decision to participate in campus activities suggests that he made sense of his experiences through an Afrocentric agency lens. Through an agency lens, Miles focused on consciously applying the African people's collective resources, energy, and knowledge

(Shockley & Frederick, 2010) by using his previous experiences to continuously engage in campus programs to help other Black male students.

**Chapter Summary**

The brothas' narratives showed how they used the Afrocentric lens of agency to make meaning and be autonomous agents for their self-interests despite the social and institutional structures that contributed to their alienation from others at the institution. From a cultural agency perspective, the brothas assumed the primary position in acting independently in their best interest by showing their fiscal responsibility while attending higher education. They also drew on their agency lens to develop the strategies they needed to prevent people, mostly traditional-aged White students, from alienating and viewing them as "others." The brothas used campus staff and resources with an agency perspective by taking advantage of those in their best interests.

# CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

I used my experiences as a Black male nontraditional student who did not take a traditional higher education path to an undergraduate degree to inform this study. Scholars have documented the success of Black men in college (Bonner, 2010; Brooms, 2018; Goings, 2016b, 2017c). However, the increasing number of nontraditional students in higher education indicates the need for additional research on the educational experiences of Back male nontraditional students. For instance, Goings (2020e) developed a Black male identity theory due to the lack of a theory in higher education on the experiences of Black male adult learners. Most of the existing theoretical frameworks focus on the experiences of traditional-aged Black men in higher education (Harper, 2012; Palmer et al., 2014). Therefore, the objective of this interpretive study was to contribute to the racialization of adult education by investigating how Black male nontraditional students gave meaning to their educational experiences.

Mainstream adult learning theories have not addressed the experiences of ethnically diverse nontraditional students, particularly Black male nontraditional students. The Afrocentric paradigm principles are cultural lenses for understanding this population unaddressed by traditional adult learning theories. Moreover, the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm were the means used to answer this study's research question, How do Black male nontraditional students make sense of their educational experiences within a PWI? The chapters in this study provided evidence of how the brothas' narratives suggest they interpreted their experiences through the lenses of an Afrocentric paradigm.

**Overview of Findings**

Chapter 2 presented the adult education literature on nontraditional students' educational experiences. The extant studies have focused on Black female students via Black feminist thought (Coker, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007); however, scholars have only recently begun to investigate Black male students (Goings, 2016b, 2017c, 2018d). This study contributed to the literature by focusing on Black male nontraditional students using an Afrocentric paradigm. Chapter 2 presented the reasons why the cultural theoretical lenses of the Afrocentric paradigm are more suitable than the existing mainstream adult learning theories for addressing how Black male nontraditional students make sense of their educational experiences.

Chapter 3 showed how the study's field observations, interview data, and findings aligned with the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm. Moreover, the principles of the paradigm aligned with the brothas' insights presented in the findings chapters. Chapter 4 showed how the brothas' narratives included the Afrocentric lens of location and why the paradigm was an appropriate mechanism for showing how they used their past experiences to evaluate what the institution's support programs lacked and what they should include. Chapter 5 presented how the brothas used the Afrocentric principles of twinness to interpret their negative interactions with White traditional students and faculty to avoid grudges and accept others (Tutu, 1996). Moreover, the brothas showed the complementarity lens because they valued and practiced advocacy, remained accountable for each other, and reciprocated mentoring practices with traditional Black male students. Last, Chapter 6 showed how the brothas in this study made decisions in their best interests with the Afrocentric agency perspective to advance other Black male nontraditional students.

The conversations with the brothas in this study showed how they used the principles of the Afrocentric paradigm to make sense of their educational experiences as nontraditional Black male students. The Afrocentric paradigm is a means of empowering people of African descent to define themselves and not rely on the definitions presented by the dangerous and incomplete cultural assumptions of others (Adichie, 2009). The following section presents the findings and their connection to the adult education literature. Lastly, the chapter has the study's practical implications and recommendations for higher education.

**Theoretical Contribution to Adult Education Literature**

This study contributed to adult education scholarship by providing culturally relevant adult education research on how Black students validate themselves and form group identity with their cultural knowledge (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Moreover, this study addressed the call for theoretical perspectives on the unique experiences of Black male nontraditional students (Goings, 2020d). Goings (2016a, 2017b, 2018c, 2020d) argued that increasing numbers of Black male nontraditional students in higher education indicates the need for institutional leaders to understand these students' transitional experiences to improve their academic retention and graduation rates. Scholars have started the conversation of Black male nontraditional students; however, a need exists for research on how to provide Black male students with institutional support through a cultural theoretical lens. Therefore, this study contributed to the literature on Black male nontraditional students by addressing how they make meaning of their educational experiences.

The Afrocentric paradigm is a way to frame the origins of the adult learning theories of transformative learning, group dynamics, and motivational orientation, and the transformative learning of adult education participants (Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Houle, 1961; Mezirow,

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1991), as well as those applicable to adult education scholarship. This study broadened the effectiveness of cultural education by focusing on the positive aspects of learner culture. Black learners could use the findings to help themselves and other learners recreate a world in the image of their dreams (Guy, 1999b). The principles of the Afrocentric framework provided the cultural lens to empower the brothas in this study to define themselves and disregard the definitions presented by the dangerous and incomplete stories of the cultural assumptions of others (Adichie, 2009). This study showed how the Afrocentric paradigm is an accurate and appropriate lens for understanding the lived experiences, concerns, and needs of people of African descent (Tolliver, 2010). In addition, the findings showed how Black male nontraditional students used the paradigm to give meaning to their educational experiences. Accordingly, they could find alternative ways to understand the production of knowledge, the interests served by this knowledge, and the means of validating this knowledge (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

### *Connection to Context Within Transformative Learning*

A goal of this study was to address the meaning-making of Black male nontraditional by using the Afrocentric paradigm to replace the idea of transformative learning. Formulating dependable beliefs about Black male nontraditional students' experiences to assess their context is a central step in the adult learning process (Mezirow, 2000). Researchers cannot dictate the content of a comprehensive learning theory exclusively by cultural interest, as it enables or inhibits the realization of common human interests. Focusing on the cultural context of the Afrocentric principle of location contributed to the current understanding of learning and knowing in adult education (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) acknowledged that such exposure could affect the practices of adult educators, causing them to rethink their purpose as educators who are transmitters of "validated Western information"

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situated in one cultural context (i.e., Western; Ntseane, 2011). Transformative learning focuses on the rationality and individual autonomy of dominant Western values (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). Therefore, Western values' rationality and individual autonomy provide a way to ignore the sociocultural context of the diversity of nontraditional students, particularly Black men, in adult education scholarship. The Afrocentric idea of location in this study contributes to adult education scholarship. It is a more appropriate cultural theoretical lens and alternative way of knowing than the dominant Western values that have enabled the invalidation of the ways of knowing of people worldwide (Kincheloe, 2008).

### *Connection to Group Dynamics*

Scholars of adult education scholarship have conducted group dynamics in various contexts. Early researchers described group dynamics as a field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about groups; the laws associated with their development; and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and the larger institution (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). Knowles developed group dynamics from a series of events that led him to be a facilitator of the learning process rather than a teacher (Henschke, 2006). In a 1969 interview with Knowles, Henschke recognized how he followed his need for self-acceptance and self-respect, as well as acceptance and respect from others (Henschke, 1973). Scholars have applied group dynamics to leadership experiences and the difficulties of dialogue in transformative learning (Andritsakou & Kostara, 2016). However, group dynamics theory has not shown why individuals in leadership positions desire to mentor others. Moreover, group dynamics focus on the self of the individual rather than the complementarity practices of reciprocity, compassion, cooperation, and solidarity with others (Wiredo & Gyekye, 2010) shown in the narratives of the brothas in this study.

### *Connection to Motivational Orientation*

Similar to transformative learning and group dynamics, the motivational orientation typology does not address cultural knowledge with Afrocentric principles. In the theoretical framework of motivational orientation typology, Houle (1961) classified activity-oriented learners as participating in learning for reasons unrelated to the purposes or content of the activity. Activity-oriented adults might stay at a single institution or attend several; however, they seek social contact and select activities based on the amount and kind of human relationships they will produce (Houle, 1961). Activity-oriented adults are motivated to participate in learning to create social relationships with others (Strong & Harder, 2011). However, the motivational orientation typology does not address the motivations of Black male nontraditional students to attend higher education. TThe Black men in this study expressed motivations for learning beyond social relations. Rather, the participants' desire for learning consisted of obtaining their educational degrees despite the challenges of attending multiple institutions and stopping and resuming their educational journeys. The next section presents this study's implications and conclusions.

## Implications for Higher Education Practice and Student Success Initiatives

This study's findings have implications for higher education institutions and their culturally relevant practices for institutional adult support programs, services, and assessment. Culturally relevant research practices in adult education focus on sociocultural influences and inclusion in adult educational learning settings (Guy, 1999a, 1999b; Tisdell, 1995). Scholars and practitioners have conceptualized ideological and theoretical frameworks for culturally relevant teaching practices in K–12, postsecondary, and higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2001).

The next section presents the implications of this study applicable to the undergraduate student support work of higher education administrators, directors, and faculty.

### *Adult Support Programs*

The first implication for higher education is the need to establish culturally relevant practices in adult support programs. Implementing such practices is a way to reposition power dynamics, address social inequities, and enhance learners' critical awareness and agency (Guy, 2009). Guy (2009) suggested that culturally relevant practices are means of acknowledging the cultures of students who have not received equitable recognition and affirmation within learning spaces and the impact of their sociocultural differences on interactions and content. The adult student association referenced in this study provided activities assumed to be meaningful engagement opportunities for nontraditional students. However, the activities occurred once during the fall semester and lacked information that caused the Black male nontraditional students in this study to want to attend the events. Therefore, the planning of activities and events should occur with cultural theoretical practices for recognizing and creating socially affirming spaces for Black male and other nontraditional students who lack frequent opportunities to meet. Developing social engagement opportunities and academic resources events with culturally relevant practices is a way to recognize the diversity of nontraditional students and create affirming meeting spaces.

### *Institutional Services*

Implementing culturally relevant practices can also occur with advising and tutoring services to provide better institutional support for nontraditional Black male students. For example, advising and tutoring staff who ground their support services in culturally relevant practices could better guide Black male nontraditional students toward quality experiences inside

and outside of the classroom, creating supportive environments inclusive of their aspirations and interests. Advisors and tutors can use culturally relevant practices to conduct open discussions and reposition power dynamics during appointments and meetings with Black male nontraditional students. Reorienting power dynamics enables Black male nontraditional students to be active agents in finding solutions to their academic support needs with staff encouragement and assistance. In addition, acknowledging the power dynamics in institutional services exposes the institutional temporality noted align with Black male nontraditional students' temporality; this misalignment produces a sense of being the "other." Institutional leaders can use culturally relevant practices to reevaluate their temporal rhythmic protocols of time in relation to productivity and efficiency (Ylijoki, 2014) when providing academic support services to Black male and other nontraditional students.

### *Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices*

The findings in this study suggest that educators and faculty members can take culturally responsive assessment practices from the classroom to other institutional areas to support nontraditional Black male students. A culturally relevant component that begins with student learning outcomes and ends with improvements in student learning addresses student differences and includes assessment methods appropriate for different groups (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017), particularly Black male nontraditional students. Scholars have indicated the need for culturally responsive evaluations and assessments with cognitive, cultural, and interdisciplinary diversity responsive to culturally diverse communities and academic goals (Hood et al., 2014). Therefore, incorporating culturally responsive assessment practices could be an opportunity to evaluate institutional support programs and services for Black male nontraditional students.

Integrating the Afrocentric framework into assessment practices could be a more inclusive approach to assessment to reinforce students' sense of belonging or not belonging because they have experiences deemed invalid or unimportant (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). A culturally relevant component requires student involvement at every step in the assessment process. However, such an approach would require negotiating availability due to some Black male nontraditional students' unavailability to participate in the assessment plans.

### *Institutional Student Success*

The findings from this study could help institutional leaders looking to improve and implement student success strategies. Colleges and universities have different definitions of student success initiatives. The educational performance metrics institutions used to define student success strategies include data-informed proactive advising, enhanced student support services, and experiential learning activities (Mintz, 2019). However, higher education student success strategies have not focused on specific student populations. Black male student success has been a priority within higher education (Harper, 2012; Swayze, 2013; Wood & Palmer, 2014), particularly at the institution where this study occurred. However, its strategies have not provided for Black male nontraditional students. Therefore, institutions with student success initiatives must have more inclusive approaches and support for Black male nontraditional students.

### *Future Research Directions*

This study's findings suggest the need for an alternative research design with Afrocentric methods when conducting qualitative research on the educational experiences of Black students in higher education. This study had an Afrocentric theoretical framework; however, it did not have Afrocentric methods in its design. Mkabela (2005) suggested that researchers use the

Afrocentric method to complement qualitative research methods with interpretive schemes. In addition, as a sound methodology, the Afrocentric approach could be the foundation for coming to grips with Indigenous knowledge (Mkabela, 2005) when striving to understand the educational experiences of nontraditional Black students in higher education. The Afrocentric paradigm has interconnected principles, providing cultural theoretical ideas and a foundation for assessing and evaluating what institutional support lacks and what it should included for Black male nontraditional students.

Despite the inability to implement Afrocentric methods in this study, researchers could use the findings to further racialize research on nontraditional students. Researchers should acknowledge alternative means of inquiry and abandon the notion of distancing themselves from the project, specifically when they have connections to the research. When I started this study on Back male nontraditional students, I initially sought to remain distant from the participants to maintain the validity of the research. However, an Afrocentric project on Black male nontraditional students required immersion into the research. Personal life experiences influence many aspects of the research process, from choosing the topic to the research methodology and interpretation of the data (Reviere, 2001). Therefore, researchers who do not separate themselves from Afrocentric projects could produce deeper understanding and transparency in their studies.

Another lesson from this study was the need to further racialize adult education scholarship by using an African feminist perspective with Afrocentric methods to examine Black female nontraditional students. Connecting an African feminist perspective with Afrocentric methods could be a powerful research approach for addressing the gender inequalities experienced by Black women. For example, the voices of Africans and women have been silenced in the same way since the colonial era (Ntseane, 2011). Therefore, Afrocentric methods

and African feminist perspectives could enable researchers to put African ideals and values at the center of inquiry (Asante, 1990) when examining the educational experiences of Black female nontraditional students. In addition, scholars could pose research questions to determine the persistence, support, and academic achievements of Black male nontraditional students within graduate programs. New objects of analysis based on this study could be a way to examine diverse populations of nontraditional students with other cultural theoretical frameworks.

**Conclusion**

The institution where I work and previously attended as a Black male nontraditional student provided additional context to this study. My work in the undergraduate education office focuses on student success efforts, including the assessment of students' experiences using institutional support services. The assessment plan focuses on campus-wide student experiences specifically targeted to underrepresented populations, excluding Black male nontraditional students. Therefore, given my work with undergraduate student assessment, I suggest that further research on the educational experiences of Black male students in higher education should include nontraditional students. My experience as a nontraditional student suggests the need to investigate how Black male adult learners perceive, understand, and make sense of their educational experiences.

Throughout my conversations with the Black men in this study, I sensed the link between our experiences as nontraditional students. For example, in an initial meeting before he participated in the focus group and individual interviews, Miles said his son attended the same HBCU where I started my college career. I expressed my admiration of Curt's persistence in obtaining his engineering degree. His struggles in his math courses throughout his 20 years in education and the semester he made the dean's list led me to recall my academic struggles when

I transferred from an HBCU to a community college to a 4-year institution. My experiences and those of the brothas in this study inspired me to continue working to recognize Black male nontraditional students persisting in their higher education journeys.

**APPENDICES**

# APPENDIX A

## Participant Solicitation

Greetings,

On Behalf of Dr. Gregory Washington:

Charles Jackson, a doctoral student in the College of Education's Higher, Adult, Lifelong, Learning (HALE) program at Michigan State University, and I would like to invite you to participate in a 60-minute focus group interview, *Studying Folks Like Us: Examining the Transitional Experiences of Undergraduate Black Male Adult Learners Attending a Predominantly White Institution.* This study will provide you the opportunity to discuss your campus experiences while pursuing an undergraduate degree as a nontraditional student at the University of Memphis.

Charles was also a nontraditional student while attending Michigan State University and would like to hear your campus experiences and share his own educational journey. During the interview, there will be general questions asked to start the discussion about your classroom experiences, race/racism, campus services, and sense of belonging within a predominantly White institution. Subsequent questions may be asked based on how the conversation unfolds.

The focus group interview will occur on Wednesday, June 26, in McCord Hall, 3790 DeSoto Avenue, Room 207/209, from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $50 Visa gift card at the conclusion of the focus group interview. If you would like to participate, email me at gwshngt1@memphis.edu and Charles Jackson at jacks252@msu.edu or call 517-303-5030.


Thank you,

Dr. Gregory Washington and Charles Jackson

**Participant Consent Form**

*Research Study With Undergraduate Black Male Adult Learners (ages 25 and older)*

The purpose of this form is to provide you (a prospective research study participant) with information that could affect your decision to participate in this research.

You have been asked to participate in a research study, *Studying Folks like Us: Examining the Educational Experiences of Undergraduate Black Male Adult Learners Attending a Predominantly White Institution.* You were selected as a possible participant because you are an undergraduate Black male student of 25 years of age or older. This study will provide the participants the opportunity to discuss their campus experiences while pursuing their undergraduate degrees. The information from this study could provide information useful for strategies for providing campus resources and services for you and other undergraduate Black male adult learners.

This form is an invitation to participate in a focus group interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. Before the focus group interview, the participants must complete a Participant Information Sheet, where they will provide general background information. During the interview, there will be general questions asked to start the discussion about your classroom experiences, race/racism, campus services, and sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution. Charles Jackson will conduct the subsequent review of the interview data under the supervision of Dr. Riyad Shahjahan. Those who agree to participate will receive pseudonyms, and Charles Jackson will remove all identifying information from the transcripts before analysis. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $50 gift card at the conclusion of the focus group interview.

You may decide not to participate, as your participation is completely voluntary. Participation has no foreseeable risks. Additionally, you may withdraw at any time without consequences. You may decide not to participate or not answer some or all of the questions. Charles Jackson will record the focus group interview. If you do not want your voice recorded, you may choose to have the researcher take notes without recording and/or listen to your responses and record notes after the interview. If you agree that I may record (written, voice, recorded), you can request that I turn off the recorder at any time.

I agree to allow audiotaping of the focus group interview.
☐ Yes          ☐ No          Initials_____

I will store the recording in a locked cabinet within my home until 3 years after the study. After this date, I will erase the recording. Additionally, I will maintain the information sheet with your name, email, pseudonym, and answers to supplementary questions in a secure location until 3 years after the study, when I will destroy it. I will keep the information sheet in a separate location from the voice recording. Your identity will remain confidential, and I will use a pseudonym of your choice during transcription, analysis, and reporting.

It is possible that you may not feel comfortable with some discussion topics. You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already commenced. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not receive criticism.

Please indicate on the information form if you would like a copy of the findings of this study. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints or think the research has hurt you, you may contact the researcher, Charles Jackson, 517-303-5030, jacks252@msu.edu.

In addition, you may contact my faculty sponsors:

> Dr. Riyad Shahjahan, Associate Professor in Department of Educational Administration, 428 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, by phone: 517-355-4539, or email: shahjaha@msu.edu.

> Dr. Gregory Washington, 4050 South Park, Loop Building 29, University of Memphis, by phone: 901-678-1615 or email: gwshngt1@memphis.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by the members of the Institutional Review Boards at Michigan State University and the University of Memphis. If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may talk to Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, or email irb@ora.msu.edu. University of Memphis Division of Research and Innovation Research Compliance at 901-678-2705, or email research@memphis.edu

Please be sure to have read the above information, asked questions, and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.


_____     _____
Signature of Participant                                                      Date



_____
Name of Participant (please print)

**APPENDIX C**

**Participant Information Sheet**

Undergraduate Black Male Adult Learners' Campus Experiences
Within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

All information on this form will be considered confidential, and the form itself will be stored in a secure location.

Pseudonym: _____

Participant Name: _____

Email: _____

Student Classification:

Freshman     Sophomore     Junior     Senior

How many semesters have you attended the University? _____

## Focus Group Interview Questions

**Interview Questions**

Have you experienced incidents of racism in your classroom or anywhere else on campus? What does that mean to you?

How important is the classroom curriculum reflective of your identity as an older Black male student?

What type of campus services do you feel provide support for older undergraduate Black male students?

What campus services do you feel do not address the needs of older undergraduate Black male students and why?

As an older Black male student, describe your experiences of fitting in with younger, Black, and non-Black students.

How do your interactions with and support from professors contribute to your sense of belonging on campus?

Is there anything else you would like me to know?

# APPENDIX E

## Individual Interview Follow-up Questions

Describe where you are from and what motivated and brought you to attend the University of Memphis?

Someone mentioned during the second focus group interview that attending the University of Memphis is all about business. What does this statement mean to you?

One Black male student in the first focus group discussed not revealing his age to traditional-aged students for fear they would not accept him in class study groups. Does this experience apply to you?

I heard other undergraduate Black male students in the first focus group talk about their negative experiences with traditional Black male students. Traditional-aged Black male students did not want to embrace any mentorship. Does this experience apply to you? If so, how did you handle this? If not, were there positive experiences with traditional-aged (younger) Black male students?

Someone in the second focus group mentioned different types of advising and tutoring contributing to his academic success. Would you agree, and if so, what type of advising and tutoring contributes to your academic success?

I heard in previous discussions with Black male adult learners of the need to improve the university's email communication to students. Do you agree? What are ways to communicate to nontraditional Black male students about programs, services, and campus activities?

What are your suggestions for programs for helping undergraduate Black male adult learners connect with each other on campus?

Some students in the focus group discussed the New Adult Student Orientation for nontraditional students. What would you suggest adding to this orientation program to help Black male nontraditional students transition to the university?

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