

STILL SINGING: HOW GOSPEL CHOIR INVOLVEMENT SUPPORTS
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' SUCCESS AT A PWI
NARRATIVE INQUIRY

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the perceptions and experiences of graduated African American students regarding the effects of campus gospel choir involvement on their persistence at Michigan State University (MSU). Drawing upon the frameworks of Astin's Input-Output-Environment (IOE) model, Tinto's Theory of Belonging, and Kuh's High-Impact Practices (HIPs) theory, a narrative inquiry methodology is proposed to develop into the rich narratives and lived experiences of six African American students. The study seeks to highlight the potential benefits of gospel choir involvement in fostering a sense of belonging, support, and academic persistence among this student population at PWIs.

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My dissertation is dedicated to those family members who passed away. To my mother Bertha Lee Nelson, father John L. Nelson, godmother Irma Farmer Moss, brother Edward Charles Nelson and Tommy Wash, sisters Shawn Bolder and Kearney Thomas, nieces Darchelle Tenese Nelson and Sheila Denise Adams, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Thank you for loving and supporting me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	23
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN	52
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	78
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERATURE, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY	114
APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	123
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS STORIES	125
APPENDIX C: FIRST SET OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	204
APPENDIX D: SECOND SET OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	205
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE	206
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT DATA CODING.....	209
APPENDIX G: CODE MAPPING.....	210
APPENDIX H: FIELD NOTES.....	211
APPENDIX I: MSU BOGC FRONT OF 1978 ALBUM COVER	212
APPENDIX J: MSU BOGC BACK OF 1978 ALBUM COVER	213
APPENDIX K: FIRST BOGC CONCERT 1972 ERICKSON KIVA	214
APPENDIX L: BOGC MEMBERS 1972	215
APPENDIX M: BOGC MEMBERS 1977	216

APPENDIX N: BOGC REHEARSAL CASE HALL 1979	217
APPENDIX O: BOGC SPRING CONCERT 1979 ERICKSON KIVA.....	218

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this research project was my personal experience attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) as an undergraduate student. I attributed my ability to successfully graduate to my participation in the Michigan State University Gospel Choir (MSUGC). I was drawn to narrative inquiry as a methodology because I wanted to share the stories of other students who had participated in the MSUGC since its inception in 1971. Narrative inquiry allows the story and the storytellers to come to life. Narrative inquiry was a natural choice because I come from a long line of storytellers. As a first-generation African American student, narrative inquiry spoke to me because it is a practice of letting people tell their stories. Furthermore, Clandinin (2006) shared how we as humans make meaning of our stories and build community with each other.

Narrative inquiry is an old practice that may feel new for a variety of reasons. It is commonplace to note that human beings both live and tell stories about their living. These lived and told stories and talk about those stories are ways we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities. What does feel new is the emergence of narrative methodologies in social science research. With this emergence has come intensified talk about our stories, their function in our lives, and their place in composing our collective affairs. (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44)

Clandinin (2006) utilized narrative inquiry in her work. An interviewer asked her what advice she would give someone who wanted to enter the narrative inquiry field. She said that before someone could go into relationships with others in the field to hear their stories, they

needed to tell their own stories. Clandinin's response to that question has heavily influenced my approach to this research.

I am a 64-year-old African American female who identifies as Christian, LGBTQIA2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, Plus), a graduate student, and a person with a disability. I am also a first-generation student. I graduated in 1982 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Urban Affairs. I experienced challenges related to the transition from being a high achieving high school student in the Flint School District to being an undergraduate student. One of my main regrets is that I never sought any support services for my disability because I did not know how to seek out, or find, those resources. I also did not want people to think that I did not belong because I was not smart, when in reality, I just learn differently. I did, however, seek out the Campus Gospel Choir, which became a major source of support for me as an undergraduate student. Nearly 30 years after graduating as an undergraduate, I returned to school in my 50s and completed my Master of Arts degree in Higher Adult Lifelong Education (HALE) in 2014.

My professional experiences have contributed to my academic and research interests. I have 39 years of experience as a manager in Culinary Services and 11 years of experience as an academic advisor at Lansing Community College (LCC). My work at LCC solidified my understanding of the importance of providing adult learners, students with disabilities, or students who are transitioning from rural areas with good academic advising. In that position, I gained an appreciation for helping students navigate through the community college system to attain their goals. I assisted them with determining whether they wanted to obtain a certificate or transfer their college credits to a four-year institution. As a manager at Michigan State University, student and employee development has always been a focus for me. I have had the

opportunity to work with many talented students and staff over the years. Many of them took my advice and became very successful in their chosen careers.

I can remember what it felt like when I first came to the university as an undergraduate student, and I did not know anyone. It was the support staff that came to my aid in the dining hall where I worked. Not only did they teach me how to cook and serve food, but they also taught me how to be resilient and encouraged me to graduate. I have never forgotten their kindness and support; it is a part of me. I have continued this tradition by supporting staff members and students I have had the opportunity to serve alongside. That is why I call myself a servant leader. As a servant leader, I worked to support the needs of my support team and the students that live in the residence hall. In my current position as the Associate Director for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging for Culinary Services, I have continued the tradition of supporting staff and students to attain their academic and career goals.

I have also been an advisor for the MSU Gospel Choir for 38 years, helping members understand university policies and procedures, and providing them with resources that promote their academic, personal, and professional success. If not for the support I received as a member of the gospel choir, I may very well not have successfully completed my degrees. I joined the choir in 1975 during my first year at the university. The gospel choir provided me with a sense of belonging and the ability to find people who looked like me, wanted to sing gospel music, and loved the Lord as much as I did. At times I felt overwhelmed by my academic program and was convinced that I did not belong at the university. Oftentimes, the campus environment felt unwelcoming. My academic advisor scheduled me for 19 credit hours my first semester, which kept me very busy. In addition, I began working in culinary services. I remember coming back to my residence hall room physically and mentally exhausted. But every Monday and Thursday

from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. I would attend choir rehearsal. Singing made me feel better and re-energized my body, spirit, and soul. Serving as an advisor for the gospel choir at MSU has been a way for me to give back. The time I spent in the choir really gave me a better understanding of what I believed as a Christian. In the next section I give a detailed account of my time in the gospel choir to offer more context.

My Time in the Choir

I remember spending the summer before I left home preparing to start my academic journey in higher education. At that time, no one in my immediate family had ever completed a four-year degree. I worked on getting scholarships to defer some of the costs of my education. I received some financial aid, but it wasn't enough to cover the cost of my education. I remember thinking that I had to do my best work to make my parents, community, and church proud. I represented all of them. My success would be shared among all those family and church members who would be supporting me while I was away at school.

I was raised in the Black Baptist Church tradition. I went to Bible study on Wednesdays, Sunday school, and summer Bible studies that were like a summer camp that our church offered. I sang in the junior choir and participated in fundraising events and church anniversaries. This was all done under the watchful eyes of my parents, and everyone else's parents, because if you were not behaving, all the church members could discipline you and then report back to your parents on what you had done to earn their disapproval. My church was like a village. It nurtured, challenged, protected, and encouraged me. In so many ways it was an extension of my family. It shaped my understanding of my spirituality. My church was where I fell in love with gospel music. The time that I spent singing in the junior choir gave me a sense of belonging and

the ability to express my belief in God through music. Gospel music has always allowed me to connect to the moments in my life that have been filled with joy and challenge.

What I remember most about attending church as a child, is the choir singing during the service. The songs were amazing and made the sermon come alive. As the choir began to sing, everyone got up on their feet, clapping and singing along to the music. It was not until I got to college that I appreciated what our pastor had said. At that point in my life, I understood the meaning of his words from the pulpit as he quoted scriptures. I even began to understand how they would impact my life. When I asked my dad questions, that were more statements, about my feelings about church and life in general, he would look me straight in the eye and say, "just keep living." It was in church that I also grew to understand the importance of having an education - something my parents always expressed as well.

My parents were very determined to get us the best possible education because, like many Black families during the 1960s, and even before, they understood the importance of being able to interpret what was written so that you could take advantage of all the things that were available to literate people. For example, signing contracts so that you wouldn't be taken advantage of, the ability to vote, and finding gainful employment so that you could raise your family. Several factors have contributed to my own unique views. Growing up in a working-class African American family during the 1960s, I overheard my parents and grandparents telling stories about how they were treated in the South. Knowing that my grandfather on my dad's side was born in 1863 into slavery has contributed to who I am and how I view people who are oppressed, not seen, and not valued. My sense of community also informs my sense of service. My parents made sure we understood that you either had to continue your education or find gainful employment and, in those days, gainful employment was available at General Motors. I

do remember talking to my mother and father about my possibly going to work at General Motors for a while and then going on to college.

My parents raised eight children on one income. We did not have a lot of money, but we did have a lot of love. At times the money ran out and my father took on other work to supplement our family's income. We primarily lived paycheck to paycheck during the early days. We moved up and down the socioeconomic ladder, from being poor to middle class, depending on whether General Motors went on strike during any given year. I knew going to college was going to add an additional financial burden on our family and that concerned me. I felt that I had to succeed because I did not want to waste my parents' money. But my mother and father really felt that college was the best place for me to get answers to all the questions I asked. According to my parents, I would ask them questions about where the weather came from. Once I asked my mother if she could tell me who the first person was to leave for work in the morning. Her answer "was your father" and then she said I asked in the world. Who is the first person in the world to leave for work? She said that she didn't know but it was a good question. I told my parents that I was going to be a doctor and that I had a plan to make that happen.

When I left home, I planned to major in a science field so that I could become a medical doctor. By my second year, I changed my major to psychology because I really struggled with chemistry and math, and I was unsure of how to get the help that I needed. I had an academic advisor, but I did not understand what our relationship was. I thought he knew what was best and so I followed his instructions, like I had done in high school. I did not disclose to him that I had a learning disability. I believed he understood that from my records. I have a learning disability that during my K-12 school years was accommodated. When I came to the university, I did not understand the system or how to get support. I was ashamed to ask for help, so I spent hours

studying and rarely engaging in campus activities. My job working in culinary services was to earn enough money to pay all my bills. The first few weeks at the university I spent most of my time studying and working. I had a few friends, including my roommate and a few people from around the residence hall where I lived. I missed my family and all the church activities that I was involved in, especially the choir.

One day I met Becky walking across campus. She said hello to me like she knew me and she wanted to know if I would be interested in joining the Campus Gospel Choir. I told her that I was very interested and asked her when they met. She said they met every Monday and Thursday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. in the music practice room. I remember my first rehearsal and how it made me feel like I had been transported back home to one of my church choir rehearsals. After that first rehearsal I felt like I could breathe and be myself and that it was okay to pray and worship. The choir made it possible for me to not feel alone on campus; I knew that I was going to be all right because I found people like me.

The gospel choir became my community away from home. I grew up Black Southern Baptist and being a member of the choir exposed me to choir members from different faiths¹ who lived in different regions of the United States. It was great to get to know them and their families. Over the years they became my family. The choir fed my need and love of gospel music and scripture. Each week we participated in half an hour of Bible study prior to rehearsal. Members prayed with you and for you. A prayer list identified who needed prayer; yourself, a family member, or a friend. As a member of the choir, I was able to deal with issues related to my

¹ The word faith is an umbrella term and will be used interchangeably with religion, spirituality, beliefs, and other implied phrases. I know these terms each have their own specific meaning, but for the purposes of this research project they were used interchangeably by the participants. For more information about spirituality and religious trends in the United States can be found in a December 7, 2023, Pew Research Center survey of 11,201 Americans.

identity as a Christian. I had the support of my family, but it was reassuring to have my friends in the choir supporting me as well. To this day, they continue to support me through my trials and tribulations, as well as my joys.

As an adult I have been able to call choir members, who I call prayer warriors, and they have prayed me through some of the most difficult times in my life, including the loss of both of my parents. Most recently they supported me through the loss of my brother and nephew, who passed due to COVID, as well as the loss of my niece, who was like a daughter to me, five years ago. Choir members have also been there for me through my joys, including completing my bachelor's and master's degrees, and they are praying with me through my PhD journey. I can say unequivocally that if it were not for the choir, I would not have been able to finish my coursework and would have gone home like so many other students who do not find connection at their institutions.

I am passionate about addressing the issues related to the underrepresentation of African American students in higher education, especially at PWIs like Michigan State University (MSU). Research has shown that more African American high school students are applying to colleges and universities, but fewer are graduating than the numbers coming into PWIs. In the literature there is a lot of research in the areas of attrition, retention, dropping out, and the opportunity gap. My hope is that my research will add to the literature on persistence as it pertains to African American students who attend PWIs. My research on participating in gospel choirs on campus might be utilized by student affairs professionals and administrators as another opportunity to help African American students find spaces that nourish their intellect and programming that is relevant to their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

In my 40 years working in higher education, I have had the pleasure of encouraging many students from diverse backgrounds to complete their degrees. I am passionate about student success, because of the encouragement I received that transformed my life. My life, and the life of my family, would never be the same. I still get excited about graduation day because I remember mine. I want to make sure that every student has the opportunity to rejoice in all the sacrifices they made so that they could walk across the stage at commencement to collect on the promise that educational institutions make to each student how attends. Simply put, that promise is, work hard, get your degree, and contribute to your community and collect on your piece of the American dream.

Struggling for the American Dream

Colleges and universities have historically struggled to find effective persistence strategies for students, especially for students of color (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Keels, 2013; O’Keeffe, 2013; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup & Kuh, 2008; Quaye & Harper, 2015). According to Berger, Ramirez, and Lyons (2012) persistence refer to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion while retention refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation (p. 12).

I have chosen to use this definition of persistence to carry out my research. Harrison (2015) asserted "that higher education institutions have an ethical responsibility to provide avenues through which students can find success on their campuses, thus widening the pool of an educated (and diverse) population in the nation" (p. 1). Similarly, Kuh (2015) in his foreword to Quaye and Harper’s 2015 book *Student Engagement in Higher Education*, reflects on the Darwinian approach used in higher education through the middle of the 20th century.

The Darwinian approach to higher education refers to the idea and practice that students who deserved to succeed were those who could figure out on their own how to adjust to, and find their way through, the institution. In the 1970s, the campus ecology movement emerged, and its apostles (Strange & Banning, 2001 as cited in Quaye and Harper, 2015) argued that it was no longer sufficient or educationally sound to think of the institutions as a one size fits all shoe into which students must "fit" or squeeze into. Rather, colleges and universities had a moral, ethical, an educational obligation to modify their policies and practices in ways that were academically challenging and socially supportive of students especially those from historically underrepresented groups (Kuh, 2015, as cited; Quaye and Harper, 2015, p. ix).

The education of this country's citizens has been linked to individual and national success (Gonzalez, 2010; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Skaggs, 2016). Colleges and universities in the United States must strive to ensure that students complete their studies and learn what they need to know to be effective, productive contributors to society and the workplace. In order to compete in a more globalized workforce, Americans will need to attain greater educational achievement. Similarly, President Barack Obama announced that the United States needed to make sure that Americans were being educated and being prepared for the new jobs of the 21st century (Obama, 2009a). According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, by 2027, 70% of all jobs will require some postsecondary education and training (Blumenstyk, 2020; Carnevale, Smith & Strohl 2014; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Roberts & Styron, 2010). Moreover, researchers concerned with student persistence and graduation believe that administrators of PWIs have been unable to provide minority students with a comfortable, supportive, and engaging environment that supports their academic success (Astin, 1984,1999;

Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006a; Harrison, 2015; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2011).

Approximately 50% of all students who enter universities and colleges in the U.S. will not complete a degree (Astin & Oseguera, 2002; Renn & Reason, 2013; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Tinto, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Furthermore, Swail (2004) asserted that for the last 100 years, the national undergraduate graduation rate has hovered around fifty percent, meaning that only half of the high school graduates entering institutions of higher education in the United States graduate (Muses, 2008; Swail, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, Swail (2014) said that even though we are doing better in the United States with student success in higher education, student retention, persistence, and graduation are high priorities for institutions and policymakers. The news is not good; our graduation rates are not improving, even with all the conversations around student success and all the good intentions of administrators and policymakers.

However, in a study reported by The Education Trust (2010), for African Americans "less than half of these students emerged with a degree at nearly two-thirds of the colleges and universities in the study" (Trust, 2010, para. 3). The most recent data on graduation rates from four-year public institutions, available from 2023, show that all races is 42.4 %. African American students graduate at a rate of 24.4 %, while their White counterparts are graduating at a rate of 46.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Researchers call this gap between White and minority student graduation rates the *achievement gap*, and it has persisted for five decades (Cross & Slater, 2001; Doan, 2015; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Tinto, 2012).

Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that the achievement gap is one of the most talked about issues in the US postsecondary education system. She asserted that "the term refers to the

disparities on standardized test scores between Blacks and Whites, Latina/o and Whites, and recent immigrants and White students" (p. 3). African American students have different experiences at Historical Black Colleges and Universities or Minority Serving Institutions that support and nourish their academic endeavors, and they have better persistence rates than African American students who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). While African Americans attend PWIs at a rate of 87%, many do not persist to graduation because PWI campuses are unwelcoming, lack cultural support, and provide inadequate mentoring for African American students (Fleming, 1984; Guiffrida, 2003, 2005; Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes (2011); Roberts & Styron, 2010; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Soblo, 2008; Tinto 2012; Tinto 1987). Research in student involvement, engagement, persistence, and retention has been shown to make a difference in how African American students have a more positive perception of their campus experiences (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013)

The concept of the *opportunity gap*, as described by Harper in 2016, highlights a critical issue in the American education system. This perspective shifts the focus from blaming underserved populations for their lack of academic achievement, as often implied by the term achievement gap, to examining the systemic barriers and disparities that limit opportunities for certain groups of people. Harper emphasizes that the opportunity gap is not a recent phenomenon but a result of historical and ongoing inequalities, including structural racism, sexism, and classism.

According to Harper, the opportunity gap begins affecting individuals even before birth, illustrating how socioeconomic factors and systemic inequalities can impact early childhood

development and educational opportunities. These disparities persist throughout their academic journey, hindering their access to quality education, resources, and support systems.

Harper's argument challenges the common narrative that underserved communities are inherently less capable of academic success. Instead, he highlights the role of institutional and societal factors in perpetuating educational inequalities. By recognizing and addressing these systemic issues, Harper suggests that it is possible to create a more equitable educational system that provides equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status. This shift in focus from blaming individuals to addressing structural inequalities is essential for creating meaningful and lasting change in the education system. I wholeheartedly agree with Harper when he situates himself as belonging to an underserved group as an African American living in the United State. Harper (2016) said:

I know these people. They are my people. I was once one of them. And in many ways, I will always be one of them. Hence, I know for sure that we want better; we deserve fairness; and we would achieve at much higher rates were there fewer political, economic, and educational barriers to our success. In this way, it is not about the achievement gap; rather it is about the inequitable distribution of opportunity (Foreword, para. 2)

Harper's words resonated with me and took me back to when I participated in the choir. The choir members were, and still are, my people. I felt, and continue to feel, that the choir members I sang with were my people and that my participation in the gospel choir helped me persist to graduation.

Nearly five decades later, the time that I spent in the choir continues to be pivotal to my success both academically and professionally. I want to shed light on the choir's story because it

is my story and these are my people, and my success is connected to the choir. I could not have done all the things that I have accomplished without them. We had our challenges in MSUGC. Each term we had to find a space to rehearse and sources of funding, but somehow, we met the challenges and grew closer as a choir. The challenges we faced forced us to work together to solve problems. We helped each other stay in good academic standing by setting up choir member study groups. MSUGC provided mentoring for new choir members based on what section they sang. The choir invited guest speakers to discuss relevant topics such as self-care, financial aid, and career planning. Choir members networked with alumni who would often help them get in contact with previous members who worked in the field that they were interested in. Choir alumni provided job shadowing opportunities for current members. The support that choir members gave to one another created strong bonds for members with their peers from the choir and the gospel music that kept all of us hopeful and joyful during college and now life. Participating in the choir helped me, and other choir members, by providing us with opportunities to heal from the stress and pressures of feeling like we did not belong at the university.

Research Question and Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how former members of the MSU Black Gospel Choir would describe their experience and its effects on their persistence to graduation.

My research question was:

- 1) How do African American college graduates who sang in a PWI campus gospel choir describe the effect of that involvement on their persistence to graduation?

The Importance of Gospel Choir Involvement

I am not the first person to explore the impact of gospel choir involvement on Black students. Furr and Elling (2002) asserted that African American students who participated in gospel choirs improved their graduation rates at PWIs. Similarly, Harrison (2015) and Sablo (2008) found that involvement in the gospel choir improved students' sense of belonging and persistence. Other research, while very limited, found that gospel choir participation positively impacted student retention for African American students at PWIs (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Johnson, 2013; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). Other researchers looking at student involvement in on-campus organizations and activities, have found involvement in such organizations increases the retention of African American students (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Astin (1999) asserted that student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to academic experience. Thus, a "highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 518). Furthermore, Astin (1999) argued that student involvement is critical to student retention. Based on his longitudinal study of college dropouts, according to Astin, "students who participated in social fraternities or sororities, or participated in extracurricular activities of almost any kind, were less likely to drop out" (p. 523).

Strayhorn (2011) argued that the gospel choir provides a nurturing environment, social integration, faculty and peer mentoring, and cultivates spiritual resilience, so that choir members have increased retention and persist to graduation. Guiffrida (2003) asserted that one of the most important reasons for valuing membership by African American students in student organizations, like campus gospel choirs, is that they help students establish out of class

connections with faculty and other African American students that increase their comfort level at PWIs.

Researchers have argued that African American student organizations like campus gospel choirs help facilitate a sense of belonging, cultural connections, and social integration into PWIs (Harrison, 2015; Guiffida, 2003, 2006; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011; Stoker, 2013). Gospel choirs help with retention by scaling down the larger campus environment by providing smaller ethnic enclaves which provide the comfort and nurturing environment that African American students need to feel comfortable exploring the larger campus community (Conefrey, 2017; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Harrison, 2015; Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987; McClung, 1988 as cited in Guiffida, 2003; Guiffida, 2005; Harrison, 2014; Sablo, 2008). Research on African American student sense of belonging and student involvement has laid a foundation for knowing that participating in an activity like a campus gospel choir can facilitate persistence (Kuh, & Kinzie, 2018; Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008, Stoker, 2013).

Need for the Study

African American students are still enrolling in higher education at increasing rates, but are frequently describing their campuses as unwelcoming, chilly, and antagonistic environments. Higher education researchers have shared that is why African American students have low engagement rates at predominantly white institutions (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Kati Haycock, President of The Education Trust, asserted "what colleges do for students of color powerfully impacts the futures of these young people and that of our nation" (Trust, 2010, para 3, August 9). The opportunity gap between African American students and their White counterparts has been thoroughly documented (McDaniel, 2020; Doan, 2015; Harper, 2016; Strayhorn, 2011).

According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, "the United States has the highest college dropout rate among developed nations, and only ranks 10th in the college attainment of its 25- to 34-year-old population" which further supports Haycock's statement (Smith, 2009, p. 2). Similarly, that is why President Obama also wanted to increase the number of Americans obtaining a college education, so that we would regain our positions as leading in degree once again in the world. He understood that a more educated citizenry would keep us globally competitive (Obama, 2009a; Skaggs, 2016).

It is essential that this type of study is done because it assists our nation to be globally competitive and addresses the need to understand the retention and graduation rates of African American students at PWIs. Similar to Harrison, (2015), I agree that improving the retention and graduation rates of African American students will help the U.S. to become globally competitive, given the gap that currently exists between them and their white counterparts.

Undoubtedly, the disparity between the six-year graduation rates of White students with students of color, coupled with this country's rankings educationally compared to other developed nations, is a pressing concern for the U.S. This study works to address this disparity by illuminating the benefits of participating and involvement in college gospel choirs for African American students at PWIs (Harrison, 2015, p. 8)

Learning that there is a disparity in the graduation rate of African American students and White students from PWIs was shocking and unsettling as an African American and a researcher. Their stories are my stories because I came to MSU hoping to be able to graduate and to encourage other African American students, as well as my own family members, so that they could do the same thing if they worked hard. They could be successful at the university. In the gospel choir I saw that African American students were graduating, and I saw that they were

connecting with people like themselves who loved the Lord and celebrated similar traditions. I wanted those in academia to understand that they could utilize, particularly gospel choirs, to improve the persistence rates of African American students in their universities. With my previous experience as a student at MSU, I realized that the gospel choir was a resource that was underutilized. I was not a student who utilized all my resources, so upon this realization, I wanted others to recognize the true resource available in the gospel choir.

Overview of Theoretical Framework: Relationship Among Three Theories

My conceptual framework for this narrative inquiry is based on Astin's student involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and his resulting I-E-O Model. Based on Astin's theory "student involvement is defined as quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 297). Astin's (1984) involvement theory made it possible for institutions to measure and assess their programs by evaluating levels of students involvement (Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 641). Furthermore, Astin's (1984, 1999) involvement theory helps explain the process by which students integrate in the first year of college. During my research I was looking for a way to understand the relationship between Astin's (1984) involvement theory, Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of individual student departure, and Kuh's (2008; Kuh, G., O'Donnell, & Schneider, 2017) High Impact Educational Practices for college student success. I use these three theories to frame my research because all of them have elements of student involvement, integration, engagement and persistence in activities on and off campus. Milem and Berger (1979) asserted that "Astin's (1984) concepts of 'involvement' and Tinto's (1975, 1993) definition of 'integration' are the key conceptual underpinnings in this integrated model of college student persistence" (p. 641).

Tinto (1993), like Astin (1984) and Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991), also supports the role of student involvement in promoting positive educational outcomes for college students. Moreover, Tinto emphasizes the need to better understand the relationship between student involvement and the impact that involvement has on student persistence. Tinto's (1993) model was a revision of his initial conceptual model (Tinto, 1975) The new model was a more detailed argument that the interaction between behavior and perception by students as they move toward greater integration with their social and academic environment. There have also been some key pieces from student outcomes literature that illuminate the role that involvement may play in the undergraduate persistence process (Astin, 1987; Berger & Milem 1999; Tinto 1975, 1993). Kuh et al. (1991) implied that students who were involved in campus activities in colleges promote the best environment for student learning and development. Kuh et al. (1991) asserted that institutions that promoted active involvement for students find that students are more satisfied with their education and feel a sense of loyalty to their institution. Furthermore, Tinto's (1975, 1993) and Kuh et al.'s (1991) along with Berger and Milem (1999) findings are simply that "student involvement leads to greater integration in the social and academic systems of the college and promotes institutional commitment" (p. 644). These theories collectively and individually helped to shape the framework of my research.

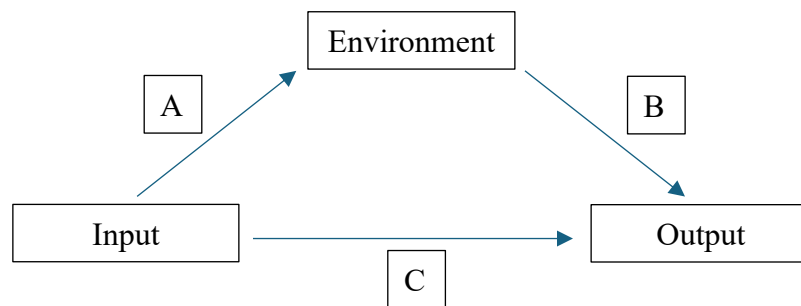
Astin's Theory

Astin's (1984) student involvement theory explains how desirable outcomes for institutions of higher education are viewed in relation to how students change and develop because of being involved co-curricularly. The core concept of the theory is composed of three elements. The first element is comprised of student inputs such as their demographics, their background, and any previous experiences. The second element is the students' environments,

which account for all the experience a student would have during college. Finally, there are outcomes which cover a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitude, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college. Below is Astin's I-E-O Model and my reconceptualized model of Astin's model. My model shows the importance of the Black Church and of gospel music in the lives of African American students who attend PWIs. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2)

Figure 1

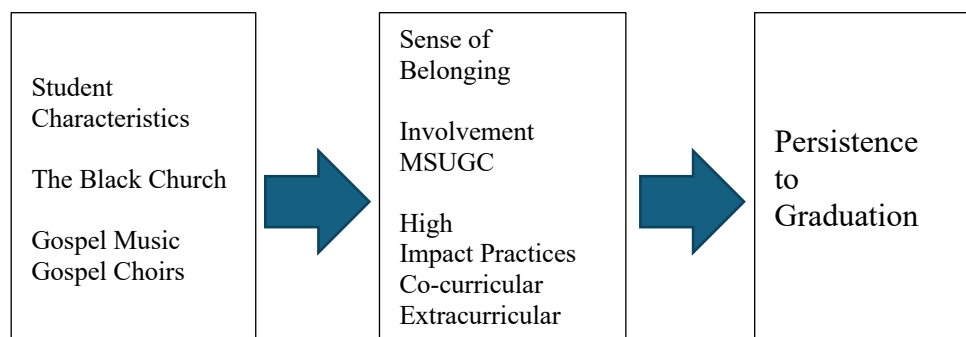
Alexander Astin's 1993 I-O-E Model



Note. Source: Assessment for Excellence (p. 18), Alexander W. Astin's 1993, Phoenix the Oryx Press

Figure 2

Reconceptualization of Astin's I-E-O Model



Note. My model adapted from Alexander Astin's I-O-E Model, 1993

Although Astin's (1984) involvement theory primarily applies in studies examining undergraduate students, other researchers have applied the framework to professional degree levels. The conceptual I-E-O model contains three components that are assigned aspects based upon the questions to be explored. According to Astin (1993), "input and outcome refer simply to the state of the person at two different time points, and environment refers to the intervening experiences" (p. 22). He explains that input contains the student background and refers to the personal attributes the student contributes initially to an educational setting that can affect the environment and outcome or output. The environment component includes all those variables external to the student, such as the student's experiences in the educational setting. In the final component, he explains that outcome or output refers to the product of "talent" that is desired out of the educational setting.

Kuh's Theory

Kuh (2008) coined the phrase High Impact Practices (HIPs) and identified 11 practices that facilitate learning in all students. HIPs include: 1) First Year Seminars; 2) Common Intellectual Experiences; 3) Learning Communities; 4) Writing-intensive Courses; 5) Collaborative Assignments and Projects; 6) Undergraduate Research; 7) Diversity/Global Learning; 8) Service and Community-based Learning; 9) Internships; 10) Capstone Courses and projects and 11) ePortfolios. Johnson and Stage (2018) asserted concerns that underrepresented students might not benefit as much as their White colleagues from HIPs. McCormick, Kinzie and Gonya (2017) argued that in general, underrepresented students who participated in HIPs have more favorable, quality interactions with others, including faculty, experience a more supportive campus environment, and manifest higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience compared to their same race peers who did not participate in HIPs. There is more evidence that

HIPs can lead to a wide range of positive outcomes (academic, personal, and civic) for the general population of college students, as well as underserved student populations and specifically underrepresented minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Swaner & Brownell, 2008; McCormick, Kinzie & Gonya, 2017).

Tinto's Theory

Tinto's (1975, 1993) innovative student integration model theorizes that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate. While Tinto's model has been supported, attacked, and revised over the last 46 years, it has significantly influenced how researchers and practitioners view undergraduate retention and graduation (Swail, 2004). Tinto's seminal theory created a base from which thousands of studies have proliferated in the ensuing years, making undergraduate retention one of the most widely studied areas of higher education (Berger & Lyons, 2005; Tinto, 2007).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the literature informing this study of gospel choir members' stories about their involvement in a campus student organization. First, I discuss relevant literature on the Black church, gospel music, and gospel choirs. Second, to provide context, I situate the study within the literature on the rich history of African American gospel music in the United States. Third, I discuss the important role gospel music plays in weaving and holding a community together in the best and worst of times. Fourth, I provide a history of the first college gospel choir, the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Fifth, I share the history of Michigan State University's Gospel Choir (MSUGC). Sixth, I review relevant research related to gospel choirs and their influence on other college and university campuses. Seventh, I examine the effects and benefits of co-curricular and extra-curricular involvement in the gospel choir. Finally, I pose that participation in gospel choirs should be categorized as a high impact practice (HIP) based on my research findings and that of others who have studied this topic (Haber-Curran, 2019; Harrison, 2015; Sablo, 2008, Shea, 2019).

Black Church, Gospel Music, and Gospel Choir

The task of disentangling the Black church from gospel music proves challenging due to the deeply intertwined nature of their origins. The Black church has played a significant role in providing spiritual solace and resilience to Black individuals in the United States, who have faced several challenges and discrimination due to their racial identity. This religious institution has served as a sanctuary where Black people have found solace, expressed their faith through prayer and song, and navigated the hardships of living in a society where certain segments of the white population historically denied their full humanity. The influence of external perspectives

on individuals of African descent did not impede our ability to commemorate our achievements and disseminate them within our group. In this section, "I will be taking you to church."

The Black Church

The positionality of gospel music, its history of community uplift and how it is integrated into the church, highlights its importance in the African American community. In an analysis, Jackson (1995), described African American gospel music as a contributing factor in the sustenance, identity, and survival of African American people in the United States.

There is a dearth of information written about the history and theology of the African American gospel movement (Harvey, 1986). According to Walker (2003) the history of African American gospel music is intertwined with the Black Church and the experience of African American people in the United States. Gospel music is linked to other genres like spirituals, work songs, the blues, and jazz. African American gospel music and the Black Church arose from the trials, difficulties, and burdens of African Americans (Gates, 2021; June 2008; Jackson, 2005).

No pillar of the African American community has been more central to the history, identity, and social justice vision than the "Black Church". To be sure, there is no single Black Church, just as there is no single Black religion, but the traditions and that fall under the umbrella of African American religion, particularly Christianity, constitute two stories: one of a people defining themselves in the presence of a higher power and the other of their journey for freedom and equality in a land where power itself- and even humanity- for so long was (and still is) denied them. (Gates, 2021, p. 1)

History of African American Gospel Music

African American gospel music is linked forever to the African American church for its ability to build unity and identity within the African American community (Burnim, 1980, 1983, 1985; Harvey, 1986; Jackson, 2005). According to Williams-Jones (1975),

If a basic theoretical concept of the black aesthetic can be drawn from the history of the black experience in America, the crystallization of this concept is embodied in Afro-American gospel music. The cultural traditions and ideas of West Africa are the ultimate source from which the basic concept of the black aesthetic definition is derived. There are many aspects of black American culture, such as folktales, speech patterns, religious beliefs and musical practices, which reveal connecting links to African roots in subtle and sometime obvious ways. Black gospel music, however, retains the most noticeable African-driven aesthetic features of all (p. 373)

Furthermore, Szwed (Szwed, 1970 as cited in William-Jones, 1975), argued that "song forms and performances are themselves models of social behavior that reflect strategies of adaptation to human and natural environments" (p. 373). African American gospel music, then, reflects changes and retention of West African musical styles and context that can only be understood within a synthesis of social and cultural change. Williams-Jones (1975) suggested that African American gospel music has played a role in gospel music performance and practice and clearly helped define the Black identity growing out of the Black experience in America. Furthermore, Weeks (2005) emphasized that African American gospel music played a pivotal role in the religious traditions of African Americans before and after their emancipation.

African American gospel music is complex and continues to evolve from the songs that slaves sang on the decks of ships as they were being brought to the new land that they would

help build into a nation (Gates, 2021). Gospel music has its roots in the struggle to overcome adversity, whether it is slavery, Jim Crow, legalized segregation, the migration of Black southerners to the North, discrimination, or studying for an exam; somehow the music made it all bearable. Even with all of the hardship they experienced, enslaved people used songs to free themselves from what they endured while physically being bound. The songs allowed them opportunities to escape the day-to-day hardships that they faced on the plantation (Jackson, 2005).

African American gospel music has its roots in pre-Civil War "invisible churches," where slaves held worship services out in the woods (Turner, 2008; Walker, 2003). After the Civil War, many of the church members' spontaneous musical creations, called spirituals, were written down in an effort to preserve them. The gospel song came into existence in the early 1900s when African Americans migrated from the South to the North (Jackson, 1995; Turner, 2008). Spirituals were seen to be inappropriate to city life, so they were recreated to be more expressive and were accompanied by instruments. This style was not completely accepted by the church, but Thomas Dorsey worked with local choir directors to gain acceptance by the churches (Burnim, 1980; Campbell, 1995; Jackson, 1995; Walker, 2003). Dorsey is credited with being the father of gospel music because of all his efforts to support its development at the turn of the 1930s. Dorsey, along with Mahalia Jackson, founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses in 1933 (, 1980; Walker, 2003).

A number of scholars have asserted that since the depression era, African American gospel music has occupied an increasingly important position in the religious lives of African American communities (Burnim, 1980; Walker, 2003; Weeks, 2005). When asked what the meaning and function of gospel music is to African Americans, (Burnim,1980 as cited in

Campbell, 1995) stated "that gospel music celebrated and affirmed their lives and the performance of gospel music helped African Americans identify with their cultural and historical past, transcend that past, and achieve the courage and strength to move forward into the future" (p. 42).

Although Dorsey was not the first to write gospel songs, he is credited with fusing popular secular styles of the day with religious music (Harvey, 1986; Walker, 2003). In the 1950s, African American gospel music was being performed by professional singers. The accompanying instruments expanded beyond the piano and the Hammond organ to include the bass and drums as staples for gospel music, and gospel groups were recording their albums in studios more than the live recording format that dominated the 1960s (Walker, 2003). In the late 1960s and early 1970s Weeks (2003) asserted that:

Americans heard gospel music on their radios and televisions. During the same time, gospel choirs were organized on college and university campuses. Although Holiness, Sanctified and Pentecostal religious sects heavily influenced the music traditions, the church was no longer the sole venue for African American gospel music. Gospel music gained worldwide exposure when it was performed at the Newport Jazz Festival, Philharmonic Hall, and Carnegie Hall, as well as in London, Paris, Munich, and Berlin, because of its popularity. It was during this time that African American gospel music borrowed instruments and materials from Jazz, as well as Rhythm and Blues (R&B), more than ever before (p. 24)

The following is a list of prominent composers of the contemporary gospel style: Andrae Crouch, Edwin Hawkins, Walter Hawkins, Bobby Jones, Richard Smallwood, Shirley Caesar, Kirk Frankland, Yolanda Adams, The Clark Sisters, The Winans, BeBe and CeCe Winans,

Marvin Sapp, Donnie McClurkin, and Mary Mary. African American gospel music increased in popularity, visibility, and its market share of the music industry.

African American gospel music continues into the 21st century, evolving and spreading the good news, through artists like Fantasia, Kurt Franklin, Marvin Sapp, BeBe and CeCe Winans, Yolanda Adams, Fred Hammond, and Hezekiah Walker, who attracted many to Christianity and the African American church. African American gospel music has also had success in crossing over into R&B charts (Weeks, 2005). More recently, the African American church has recognized contemporary music and is using it as a tool for evangelizing communities. During the 1980s, many churches utilized choirs for more than their music. Many churches, in fact, experienced growth based on the popularity of their choirs. Hence, an excellent choir director was more important to attain than a preacher and most churches made it their business to nurture at least one choir, understanding that there was a direct relationship between good music and full pews (Weeks, 2005). An examination of a short history of African American gospel music, and its roots, helps explain the importance of gospel choir participation and how it can be helpful in retaining African American students who attend PWIs.

Gospel Music

The simple definition of gospel music is "the good news: that there was a God who could take away all of your problems" (Burnim, 1980; Jackson, 1995; Turner, 2008; Weeks, 2005). Researchers have said that defining African American gospel music is more complex because of all the different genres that have contributed to the evolution of gospel music. African American gospel music is the religious musical style that originated in the Black church in the early 20th century (Boyer, 1979; Burnim, 1980; Weeks, 2005; Wise, 2002a). It borrows elements from secular African American musical styles (Jackson, 2004; Walker, 2003) and focuses not only on

the good news of Jesus Christ in the Bible but also presents a message of faith, hope, assurance, and life experiences (Boyer, 1979; Weeks, 2005). Jackson (1995) stated that a definition of gospel music is difficult to determine because the existing definitions are either too broad or too specific. This lack of a precise definition might cause some ambiguity in discussions of gospel music (Burnim, 1980). Jackson (1995) maintained that gospel music is complex because all of the categories researchers have utilized to define it have only made things more confusing. Burnim (1980) described gospel music as a cultural, spiritual, textual, and musical creation. The cultural aspect of gospel music pertains to the fact that African Americans explicitly developed it (Burnim, 1980). Moreover, Walker (2003) asserted spiritually that the music originated in the Black Christian Church and was sacred in nature. Jackson (1995) described the textual aspect of the music which also defines it in that its lyrical content is based upon the gospel message of faith, hope, assurance, and related themes found in the Bible.

First Campus Gospel Choir

The first campus gospel choir that I could find records for was the Fisk University Jubilee Singers who in 1871 started touring across the U.S., and then internationally, to raise money to keep their Historically Black College and University (HBCU) open for previously enslaved people. The Fisk Jubilee singers made personal sacrifices to keep the college open and introduce the world to Negro Slave songs which would evolve into Spirituals and then Gospel music-songs that were sung during enslavement and after emancipation (Milner, 2016). Songs like *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* and *Steal Away* were used as a form of spiritual uplift. As the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang, it helped them overcome burdens in all forms. Just as the Underground Railroad carried slaves to freedom in the North and offered them a safe place, in slave songs the Fisk Jubilee

Singers found comfort in each other's company, encouragement when times were difficult, and the singing held them together in community (Milner, 2016).

Fisk University opened in Nashville in 1866 as the first American university to offer a liberal arts education to men and women of color. After five years the school was in financial trouble. George L. White, Fisk treasurer and music professor, created a nine-member choral ensemble that consisted of four men and five women students and took it on tour to earn money for the university. Mr. White was unable to secure loans from the American Missionary Association to take the choir on tour. He was still determined to take the choir on tour so he used all of his personal funds, and any he could borrow, along with what the school could spare, to take the singers North across the Mason and Dixon line. He was not sure what to expect, but he was working in God's will and trying to save the college. The group left campus on October 6, 1871, to begin their singing tour (Tipton, 1970; Seroff, 2001; Milner, 2016). Even today, Fisk University celebrates this historic date to commemorate what the Jubilee Singers accomplished.

The Jubilee Singers started out performing concerts in small towns. "Surprise, curiosity, and some hostilities were the early responses to these young Black singers who did not perform in the traditional minstrel fashion" (Seroff, 2001, p. 131). At a concert in Cincinnati the singers were paid \$50 for performing and they donated these funds to victims of the 1871 fire in Chicago. The tour was very difficult for the students who were physically and emotionally drained (Milner, 2016). To give them hope and encouragement Mr. White named them "The Jubilee Singers," a Biblical reference to the year of Jubilee in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 25.

Eventually their persistence and mesmerizing voices would change the minds of the predominantly White audiences (Tipton, 1970). Ultimately the audiences' suspicion was replaced by their true appreciation for the Jubilee Singers who received standing ovations and

praise from critics. Slowly over time the Jubilee Singers earned enough funds to cover their expenses as well as send \$150,000 back to Fisk University to keep the school afloat.

By the end of their first tour in 1878, the Jubilee Singers had sung at the World Peace Festival and for President Ulysses S. Grant at the White House (Tipton, 1970). The group toured Europe in 1873 and the monies from that tour were used to construct Fisk University's first permanent building, aptly named Jubilee Hall (Tipton, 1970). During their 1873 tour Queen Victoria commissioned a floor to ceiling portrait of the original Jubilee Singers. In 1975 Jubilee Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of Interior and today is one of the oldest structures on campus.

The Jubilee Singers sang to keep Fisk University open and sang for the right as free people to be educated. The Jubilee Singers "told their own story, by their appearance and their songs, far better than anyone else could tell it for them" (Seroff, 2008, p. 134). Today the Fisk Jubilee Singers are still singing and telling their amazing story. The Grammy award-winning Fisk Jubilee Singers celebrated their 150th anniversary in 2021.

History of the Michigan State University Gospel Choir (MSUGC)

Like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the MSUGC wants to tell their own story. The Fisk Jubilee Singers paved the way for other Black gospel choirs, even those at PWIs. This section describes one of those choirs, the MSUGC, formerly known as the Black Orpheus Gospel Choir (BOGC) at Michigan State University (MSU). For nearly five decades, the choir has welcomed African American students to MSU. Given the choir's many years of providing spaces so that African American students can feel more at home, much of what has happened in the choir has gone unnoticed and there is a dearth of information about the choir and its activities over the last five decades. Before my dissertation study, the choir's history has been an oral one, and I hope

through my research, that it will allow the voices of its members to be heard. The MSUGC began in 1971 and continues to be a beacon of hope and support for African American students at MSU. Over the years, MSUGC members have found the choir to be a spiritual waystation that created a nurturing, supportive, and positive environment for them. In the words of Maya, a former choir member, "I am amazed at how a group of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students could self-govern to become an amazing force for inspiring students to achieve their academic potential through singing in a choir" (personal communication, November 10, 2022).

The Choir's Early Years

To understand the history of the MSUGC, it is important to note the state and national climate that led up to the creation of the choir in the early 1970s. In 1967, racial tensions were high in Detroit and those tensions spread through pockets of Michigan after the Detroit race riots (Fields, 2016). In 1968, there were national riots after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and in Michigan, riots again in the city of Detroit (Fine, 1989). This is important to note because it frames the mindset of the founding and current choir members, many of whom were from the Detroit area themselves, and who asserted that they did not trust that MSU had their best interests at heart.

Although the MSUGC has existed for 50 years, very little information about its history is available at the MSU archive library. The choir began performing concerts on campus and in the greater Lansing area in 1971. However, only two articles from 1976 exist in the MSU archives (Martin, 1974 and McClell, 1978).

A search of the MSU homepage resulted in three additional articles. A Google search found the choir's webpage, Instagram account and four YouTube videos. As a result of finding

very little information about the history of the choir, personal communication with six former gospel choir members helped to expand upon this history.

The choir was founded on humble beginnings. Three African American women students (Amy Boyce, Mickey Assata, and Wanda Lindsey) living in Case Hall decided they wanted to sing and founded the choir. The choir grew from three women singing in a hallway to 25 people singing in the music room in Case Hall. In 1971 this was the only African American gospel choir on campus, and they were seeking recognition from MSU for the contributions they were making to the campus community. Roger Groves, one of the original members of the choir, penned the choir's name "Black Orpheus" because in Greek mythology Orpheus was the angel of music who could set stone and trees in motion by singing. In the winter of 1972, after months of rehearsing, the choir was invited to perform at Central Michigan University's Black History month activities. By the spring of 1972, the Black Orpheus Gospel Choir held its first concert at MSU in the Erickson Kiva (Martin, 1974, p. 2).

The Kiva was filled to capacity with only standing room available as the choir sang both secular and Christian music. Wanda Lindsey, who directed MSGC at the time, confirmed that the choir made some policy changes after their debut concert. First, choir members decided that they would no longer sing secular music. Second, members decided to become a registered student organization (RSO) at MSU (Martin, 1974, p. 2).

The choir had been torn between staying independent from MSU and applying to become an RSO. Choir members hoped that by becoming a registered student organization they might be able to receive financial support and improve the choir's financial status. The goal was to purchase a bus so that the choir could travel to perform across the state and the country (Martin, 1974, p. 2).

There were members of the choir that felt the university funded other choirs on campus more than the MSUGC. Furthermore, the president of MSUGC in 1972, Wanda Lindsey, asserted:

We were deprived by MSU, but I can see the fault as being on both ends, because we hadn't pressured any administrators or other influential people to assist us. But on the other hand, neither had anyone offered to help. We still held our concerts in Erickson Hall Kiva, which was not adequate.

(personal communication, November 2010). MSUGC had outgrown seating capacity at Erickson Kiva during its first concert and began looking for larger venues at MSU. The choir found it difficult because they did not have funds to rent larger venues on campus. This led to tension between the university administration and some choir members (Martin, 1974, p. 2).

In 1978 MSUGC recorded its first and only album *And With My Song Will I Praise Him* at Martin Luther Chapel in East Lansing. Speaking about the experience of making the album, Maya, a choir member at the time stated, "[God] gave us a vision, and we were on our way," referring to a Bible scripture from the Book of Proverbs (29:18), "Where there is no vision the people perish" (personal communication, March 2022). In November of 1978, the choir performed College Night (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). An event which was covered by an enthusiastic reporter from The State News. On November 25, 1978, God again blessed the MSUGC. The choir drove to Atlanta, Georgia to perform at the Black National College Festival. It was a spiritually fulfilling experience for all who participated.

In March 1981 the choir took the message of God to Toronto, Canada. The choir ministered in song to local churches and served as an ambassador for MSU. Maya asserted that the MSUGC spiritual foundation was commissioned by God, and a love station with those in

need, whether on campus or off. And now unfounded faith, hope, and charity, but the greatest of these is charity (love). God's love has kept us together over the past 10 years. And we have grown into a knowledge of His word. We now stand steadfast, immovable, always abiding in the works of the Lord (personal communication, March of 2022)

The Later Years

In 2003, the choir changed its name to Michigan State University Gospel Chorale (MSUGC) to be more inclusive of all students at MSU. The choir members were very concerned with making sure that everyone who wanted to be in the choir felt welcome. The choir members have primarily been African American females since its beginnings. The name change that took place in 2003 was purposeful, with a goal of attracting a more diverse membership. Today, the choir is still primarily an African American student organization but hopes that through its music ministry it is seen as a viable option for anyone who wants to minister and sing while at MSU. In 2010, MSUGC changed its name to the Michigan State University Gospel Choir because the choir had grown to over 100 people and "chorale" signifies a smaller group.

MSUGC Challenges

As MSU has converted residence hall spaces into student success support (e.g., tutoring, advising), student organizations like MSUGC have to find other locations for their activities; as a result MSUGC no longer sings in the residence halls. The group has had to change its recruiting style for new members. Members participate in Sparticipation (an event at MSU that introduces incoming students to registered student organizations), hold concerts at MSU and in the local community, and recruit by word of mouth. Increased security in the residence halls has made recruitment more challenging because members can no longer enter residence halls and hang flyers to recruit new members.

Funding continues to be a major challenge for the choir each year. The funding that the choir does get is mostly from fundraising events like car washes, can drives, popcorn sales, choir members' dues, and love offerings from churches when they sing there. The choir has gotten some money from Associated Students of Michigan State University for large concerts over the years. The choir utilizes funds to rent space to perform, for transportation to and from engagements, to rent sound equipment, for advertising/marketing, and to purchase refreshments. When performances take place outside of the country, like in 2013 when the choir traveled to Venezuela for one week to do mission work and hold concerts, the members fundraise. The choir uses GoFundMe, a crowdfunding source, to help create awareness and raise funds. The choir also uses Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms to put themselves out to the public. The choir also looks to alumni for donations to help with deferring the costs of their annual budget. The choir requests that each current member pay a small dues to help offset their costs.

The Choir's Influence on Its Members

By participating in a gospel choir, African American students develop a sense of belonging, persist to graduation, and improve their ability to mitigate their campuses' chilly environments (Haynes, 2006; Harrison, 2015; Salbo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Furthermore, involvement in campus clubs and organizations, especially engagement with same-race peers, has been shown to foster a sense of belonging, facilitate college adjustment, and promote academic success among African American undergraduates at PWIs (Arminio et al., 2000; Flowers, 2004; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b, 2011). The gospel choir creates a sense of belonging, fosters students' relationships with God, and nurtures their persistence to graduate from MSU. Astin, (2004), Astin, Astin, & Lindholm (2011) asserted that

spirituality has an impact on students' educational and personal development. Furthermore, the authors urged universities to prioritize students' spiritual needs while on campus. Moreover Astin, 2004 asserted that higher education importantly understands the powerful responsibility and function of supporting holistic and spiritual development of our students.

The gospel choir continues to be an important entity at the university to support African American student engagement in the institution. The gospel choir helps to create a sense of belonging for its members. It allows them to have a spiritual connection. Gospel choirs are one of the most popular organizations for African Americans at PWIs (Guiffrida, 2003). Religion often serves as a source of comfort to African American students in PWIs (Strayhorn, 2011). Pope and Moore (2004) asserted, "For African American students, matriculation at a predominantly White institution of higher education can be quite intimidating. Religion is important in providing comfort and encouragement for many of these students" (p. 84).

Baker (2007) reported "studies that examine the influence of involvement in...religious organizations...suggest that these types of organizations may be beneficial to the academic performance of under-represented students" (p. 281) (See also Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Luftig, 2000; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus, 2000; Schussman & Soule, 2006 as cited in Baker, 2007). Coupled with the idea regarding religious organizations, Baker also noted "several studies highlight the idea that involvement in minority-based organizations facilitates the adjustment to the college environment for minority students in ways that non-ethnic organizations do not" (p. 280) (See also Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Conchas, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1998; Kimbrough, 1995; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Baker, 2007).

High Impact Practices

Kuh (2008) identified "High Impact Practices" (HIPs) as experiences that provide positive benefits to students' outcomes and lead to overall engagement at colleges and universities. Further, according to Kuh (2008) these are the characteristics of HIPs:

(1) they require a significant amount of time, (2) shared intellectual experiences with peers and faculty, (3) exposure to diversity, (4) receiving prompt feedback, (5) students apply what they learned, and (6) an opportunity for students to internalize new ideas and to have an awareness of the world they live in (p. 1)

Kuh (2008, 2009) identified 11 HIPs that he asserted are beneficial to teaching and learning for college students. The utilization of HIPs has made it possible to assess student involvement in active learning practices, and they have contributed to student's cumulative learning. HIPs have been widely tested for students who come from diverse backgrounds (Kuh, 2008). Moreover, Kuh stated that undergraduate students who participate in one HIP scored higher than their peers who have not had these experiences. Further, he noted that students who participated in HIPs reported more frequent deep learning behaviors and benefits to a greater degree on various self-reported outcomes, such as personal social development and practical competencies.

Additional researchers (Brownell & Swaner, 2009) supported Kuh's findings. In more recent analyses college students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds who participated in HIPs were more likely to persist to graduation. Kuh (2015) also stated that while HIPs benefit all students, not all students participate in them. He suggested that more college experiences can be, or are, high impact in addition to the 11 listed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. These practices include: First Year Seminars, Common Intellectual Experiences,

Learning Communities, Writing-intensive Courses, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, ePortfolios, Service and Community-based Learning, Internships and Capstone courses and projects.

Kuh (2009) asserted that HIPs are important because they help all students, including students from historically under-represented groups. Furthermore, he argued that colleges and universities have a moral, ethical, and educational obligation to modify their policies and practices in ways that are academically challenging and socially supportive of students who have been historically disadvantaged.

Though participation in a gospel choir is not identified as an HIP by Kuh (2008), it embodies similar characteristics. Choir members spend a significant amount of time with each other practicing regularly and going on singing engagements during weekends, both of which give them an opportunity to develop deep and lasting relationships. Choir members work with their faculty/staff advisor on projects regularly to make sure that they are supported academically. Choir members also receive feedback on their performances weekly from the choir director. These critiques help them to improve their performance. Choirs can often provide students with a sense of community and a learning community, making them a prime HIP.

Kuh (1995) points out that HIPs provide students with the opportunity to apply what they have learned, both inside and outside of the classroom. Through their participation, gospel choir members learn to work together towards accomplishing a common goal, as well as developing time management, communication, networking, and negotiation skills. Choir members are given time to reflect on their learning and personal growth during rehearsals and they can ask to talk with the choir director, musician, or a chaplain if they have concerns after a period of reflection.

Kuh (2008) asserted that activities such as writing for campus publications, campus jobs, performing in musical or theater productions, participating in inter-collegiate athletics, and learning organizations should be considered HIPs. I would argue that participation in the gospel choir could be labeled as an HIP.

Furthermore, Kuh (2008) stressed that without meaningful involvement students may leave their institution. Students who participate in HIPs tend to do better on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2015). HIPs are designed to get students to invest substantial time and energy in their educational pursuits and allow more time for interaction with teachers and peers, so they have more opportunities to receive feedback. Students who participate in HIPs have opportunities to apply what they have learned academically and socially (Kuh, 2008, 2009).

Quaye and Harper (2015) stated that the increasing diversity among colleges and universities makes it important that faculty and student affairs educators strategize and intentionally foster conditions that help all students make the most of college, both inside and outside the classroom.

Benefits of Extra-Curricular Involvement for African American College Students

African American student involvement with peers in campus student organizations is linked to student academic achievement and persistence (Guiffrida, 2003, 2004). According to Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, the more African American students are involved in the life of the university, like participating with peers in student organizations, the more likely they will learn to enjoy their time at the university. Some researchers have argued that extracurricular involvement with peers in student organizations is particularly important in

helping African American students persist who attend PWIs (Harrison, 2015; Pope and Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn 2011).

African American students who have cultural differences from their White peers especially benefit from being involved with student peers with whom they share cultural/ethnic interests (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Guiffrida, 2003; Harrison, 2015; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). Sablo (2008) and Harrison (2015) found that participation in ethnic/cultural student organizations was vital in allowing African American students to bridge the cultural gap between home and university. In addition, Guiffrida (2003) found that involvement in African American student organizations helped African American students become socially integrated into PWIs. Furthermore, Guiffrida asserted that involvement in extracurricular activities is important to persistence for African American students.

Theoretical Framework

High-Impact Practices

Kuh is a prominent education researcher known for his work on student engagement and creating the concept of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) in higher education (Kuh, 2008). HIPs are defined as "teaching and learning practices [that] have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9) The HIPs model is a framework that identifies specific educational practices that have been shown to be particularly beneficial for student learning and development. These practices are believed to contribute significantly to student success, both academically and personally. Kuh was asked what one thing we can do to enhance student engagement and increase student success. He said he now had an answer. "Make it possible for every student to participate in at least two high impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field" (Kuh, 2008, p. 21).

Kuh's (2008) HIP model focuses on educational practices that have been shown to positively impact student engagement and learning outcomes. These practices are often implemented at colleges and universities to enhance the overall educational experience for students. While the model itself is not specifically tailored to any racial or ethnic group, it can be applied to various student populations, including African American students at PWIs. While these practices are not specific to African American students, they can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. It is important for institutions to be mindful of the unique needs and experiences of African American students and to consider how these practices can be adapted or supplemented to address those needs (Zilvinskis, 2018). The

following are brief descriptions of those high impact activities for student engagement and success.

Kuh (2008), High-Impact Practices model typically includes the following:

1. First-Year Seminars and Experiences

Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students' intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members' own research.

2. Common Intellectual Experiences

The older idea of a "core" curriculum has evolved into a variety of modern forms such as a set of required common courses or a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies and/or required participation in a learning community (see below). These programs often combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options for students.

3. Learning Communities

The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with "big questions" that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a

group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link "liberal arts" and "professional courses"; others feature service learning (see below).

4. Writing-Intensive Courses

These courses emphasize writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum, including final-year projects. Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines. The effectiveness of this repeated practice "across the curriculum" has led to parallel efforts in such areas as quantitative reasoning, oral communication, information literacy, and, on some campuses, ethical inquiry.

5. Collaborative Assignments and Projects

Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences. Approaches range from study groups within a course, to team-based assignments and writing, to cooperative projects and research.

6. Undergraduate Research

Many colleges and universities are now providing research experiences for students in all disciplines. Undergraduate research, however, has been most prominently used in science disciplines. With strong support from the

National Science Foundation and the research community, scientists are reshaping their courses to connect key concepts and questions with students' early and active involvement in systematic investigation and research. The goal is to involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.

7. Diversity/Global Learning

Many colleges and universities now emphasize courses and programs that help students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own. These studies—which may address U.S. diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore "difficult differences" such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power. Frequently, intercultural studies are augmented by experiential learning in the community and/or by study abroad.

8. ePortfolios

ePortfolios are the latest addition to AACU's and use list of high impact educational practices, and higher education has developed a range of ways to implement them for teaching and learning, programmatic assessment, and career development. ePortfolios enable students to electronically collect their work overtime, reflect upon their personal and academic growth, and then share selected items with others, such as professors, advisors, and potential employers. Because collecting over time is a key element of ePortfolio process, employing ePortfolios in collaboration with other high

impact practices provide opportunities for students to make connections between various educational experiences.

9. Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

In these programs, field-based "experiential learning" with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.

10. Internships

Internships are another increasingly common form of experiential learning. The idea is to provide students with direct experience in a work setting—usually related to their career interests—and to give them the benefit of supervision and coaching from professionals in the field. If the internship is taken for "course credit," students complete a project or paper that is approved by a faculty member.

11. Capstone Courses and Projects

Whether they're called "senior capstones" or some other name, these culminating experiences require students nearing the end of their college years

to create a project of some sort that integrates and applies what they've learned. The project might be a research paper, a performance, a portfolio of "best work," or an exhibit of artwork (p. 1-2)

The HIP model, when intentionally designed and implemented, can enhance student engagement, retention, persistence, and overall success in higher education. Institutions are encouraged to incorporate these practices into their curricula to create a more enriching and transformative educational experience for students (Kuh, 2008).

Integration Theory

Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory described the importance of college and university administrators understanding the importance of students integrating into the academic and social life of the school. Tinto explained that students who find ways to integrate into their institution are less likely to leave and are more likely to succeed. Tinto modeled his theory after Durkheim's (1951) study of suicide which said that if people do not socially integrate, they leave society by committing suicide. Tinto (1993) stated that when students do not do well academically and drop out of school, it is because they have not successfully integrated into the institutional community.

Tinto's theory (1993) argued that it is important that colleges and universities provide a supportive environment for student academic success. One indicator that students are receiving support from their institution is by participation in student organizations. Furthermore, Tinto's theory is helpful in explaining the positive relationships between academic performance and extracurricular involvement, which can provide a sense of connection to the larger institution. Moreover, Tinto asserted that through repetitive contact with peers, extracurricular activities

provide a forum to establish friendships that extend well beyond formal social activities and decrease feelings of marginalization on campus (Tinto, 1987).

Other Gospel Choir Studies

Sablo (2008)

Sablo's (2008) research investigated how African American students often feel marginalized at PWIs. Further, his study explained that participation in the gospel choir decreased feelings of marginalization and enhanced feelings of social integration for African American students who were otherwise often uninvolved on their campuses. Sablo used a qualitative research design with ethnographic and phenomenological inquiry to capture his data which he described as "a colorful representation of the experiences of gospel choir participants" based on the students' descriptions of their participation while providing "an in-depth analysis of the individual perceptions and experiences of choir participants" (Sablo, 2008, p. 55).

Sablo (2008) conducted 10 in-depth individual interviews and conducted focus group interviews with an additional 32 participants in the choir. Sablo's study used Tinto's 1987 social integration component of his retention theory to explain how African Americans can use an extracurricular activity like the gospel choir to help them persist to graduation. Sablo's research showed that African American students who participated in the gospel choir had a more positive outlook on their time at the institution and that their involvement in the choir helped them socially integrate into the larger institution. Moreover, Sablo's study demonstrated how gospel choir participation played a significant role in assisting with persistence, and graduation of African American students at PWIs.

Sablo's (2008) choir participants shared they felt the choir members were part of their extended family and helped them with the transition from home to the university environment.

They referred to each other as brothers and sisters in the choir. There were times when gospel choir members would teach each other a song or help each other with getting the right notes. The choir played a role in lifting the participants' spirits during difficult times. The director and musicians were mentors to the choir members and provided them with a safe environment to talk about their concerns, both academic and personal. The choir director would contact participants if they missed a few rehearsals just to make sure that they were okay.

One of the components of Sablo's (2008) study dealt with the importance of the Black church and the important role that spirituality played in the lives of members of the gospel choir. Some of the study participants noted that spirituality was the reason they joined the choir.

Harrison (2015)

Harrison (2015) replicated Sablo's study and took it "a step further by adding a quantitative component as it delves into the perceived benefits of gospel choir participation from the vantage points of both current and alumni gospel choir members during the 2003–2013-time frame". (p. 6). Harrison conducted an on-line survey of 77 students followed by structured focus group interviews of choir members and alumni. According to Harrison, "the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived benefits (social integration, persistence, and eventual graduation) African American students at West Chester University (WCU) attributed to their participation in its gospel choir" (p. 79).

Harrison's (2015) study was viewed through the lens of social integration, an aspect of Tinto's retention theory. Harrison's study added a quantitative component to exploring how participation in a gospel choir influences current members' persistence. It also included an investigation of how gospel choir alumni members, who had graduated from the institution between 2003 and 2013, viewed the role of the WCU gospel choir in their social integration,

persistence, and eventual graduation. The data collected from these inquiries supported the presence of gospel choirs on the campuses of PWIs in fostering the social integration, persistence, and graduation of African Americans at those institutions. This suggests that gospel choirs play a significant role in the educational experiences and outcomes of African American students at PWIs. Harrison reported that the data collected revealed that participating in the gospel choir helped choir members adjust to the campus community, which improved their collegiate experience and helped them stay at the institution.

Literature Review Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on extracurricular campus engagement, provided a definition and examples of high impact practices and argued that participating in the MSU Gospel Choir is an example of extracurricular involvement as well as a high impact practice. In contributing to the literature on the extracurricular involvement and high impact practices, I added to the conversation about the benefits of such involvement and how students describe their experiences in the gospel choir. Second, I turned to existing studies of former and current college students to see what scholars have already discovered regarding the effects of involvement in gospel choirs on students. I only found a few articles and dissertations that considered the benefits of participating in campus gospel choirs and the benefits of participation on students' persistence in PWIs. I highlighted the work of Astin, Tinto, Kuh and others who have studied student persistence, engagement, and involvement. I contributed to this literature by analyzing choir members' stories and making meaning of their current and previous collegiate experiences in the gospel choir.

I ended this review by investigating how narrative inquiry has been utilized by other scholars in higher education. By applying narrative inquiry to the persistence of African

Americans who participated in campus gospel choirs, I have contributed to the conversation about how narrative inquiry as a methodology enriches the study of persistence in higher education. Utilizing narrative inquiry centered the voices of African Americans and highlighted the importance of gospel music. This research has demonstrated that narrative inquiry, was an appropriate methodology for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Sitting in my basement, which I call the lower lounge, filled with five years of research spread all over the table, the loveseat, massage table, and a makeshift table next to my 55-inch flat screen television, I am reflecting on all their stories that I have collected from the six, participants wanting to make sure that I have kept their stories as told to me centered. These six choir members helped build community that supported and encouraged each other to graduate under very difficult circumstances. I have mentioned this in detail in Chapter Four. (see APPENDIX A) The campus environment was not encouraging for these six African American students. They felt like they were not welcomed at the institution, but their time in the choir helped them connect through their shared stories of family, faith, and friends. Finding a place to fit in all of these played a major role in their successfully graduating.

I shared their stories, because I had a similar experience as an undergraduate at Michigan State University singing in the choir. For 40 years I thought about telling this story: how participating in the gospel choir had been for me, and I believed it had a similar effect on other members but that was all anecdotal. This experience informs my beliefs "that truth and knowledge are not universal, but rather contextual and influenced by one's experiences and culture (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 24). My views are consistent with the constructivism paradigm, which maintains that knowledge is co-constructed by researchers and the researched and that there are numerous realities that differ in context (Abes, 2009). My views are likewise consistent with cultural paradigms that emphasize "norms, values, assumptions, beliefs, and meanings undergirding an artifact, population, policy, or organization" and maintain that truth is socially created (Patton et al., 2016, p. page number) Finally, informed by my work in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, my education, role as faculty staff/advising for the

MSUGC, and my socialization, I am committed to working for the issue of social justice and examining issues of power, oppression, and inequity that exist in higher education for marginalized communities.

This chapter describes the tradition of narrative inquiry and how my theoretical framework is grounded in a qualitative narrative methodology. Methodological foundations, positionality and the research design are reviewed. The recruitment of participants and data collection procedures are explained.

Restatement of Problem and Research Question

In this qualitative study, I used narrative inquiry to illuminate how African American students perceive and describe the effects of extra-curricular campus gospel choir involvement on their college experience at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). I used the social integration component of Tinto's (1975, 1993) departure theory, Astin's (1999) involvement theory, and Kuh's (2009) High Impact Practices (HIPs) to support the utilization of narrative inquiry to better understand the complexities of the participants' experiences in the gospel choir at a PWI.

For all the above reasons, I designed a study to examine the experiences of African American students who sang in the Michigan State University Gospel Choir a PWI.

My research question was:

1) How do African American college graduates who sang in a PWI campus gospel choir describe the effect of that involvement on their persistence to graduation?

In answering this question, I believe it is important to make sure that I explore the historical context of the importance of The Black Church and gospel music on the lives of African Americans and their ancestors who overcame slavery, discrimination, Jim Crow laws, their migrations to the

North, and segregation. They kept singing for their lives. The narrative inquiry qualitative research method allows me to bring the participants' stories to life.

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

In this section, I describe what narrative inquiry as a research methodology aims to accomplish and how specifically this methodology aligns with my ontology and epistemology. I will also define and describe how using narrative inquiry uniquely contributes to the study of African American student experiences in higher education.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the difference between narrative inquiry and narrative research. There is a tendency to use these terms interchangeably, however, there are differences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that "we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives and collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience" (p. 2).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000), defined narrative inquiry as:

a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

Their arguments for narrative inquiry are based on the idea that humans live storied lives, both individually and socially. People live on their and others' stories and interpret their past via them. The modern definition of a story is an entryway to the world and a means of interpreting and personalizing it. The inquiry investigates the story. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006),

Narrative inquiry, the study of experiences as stories, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of the experience as phenomenon under study (p. 479).

In the 35 years "since narrative inquiry emerged as a social science research methodology, it has been swiftly taken up in the social sciences (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 574)". In what is sometimes called a "narrative revolution," researchers with diverse understandings have co-opted the concept of narrative inquiry and used narrative inquiry or narrative research to name their methodology. "We understand narrative inquiry as both phenomenon and methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, as cited in Caine et. al. 2013; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr (2007)) this forms the basis of "ways we know how to be, and live, as researchers and as people in relations (Caine, et. al, 2013, p. 575)".

My research sought to give voice to African American students at a PWI by identifying the meaning and interpretation of gospel choir participation stories about their college experience at MSU. This study aligned with narrative inquiry, because the data obtained is an energetic representation of the experiences gospel choir participants had (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This study utilized narrative inquiry, a technique that provided an in-depth analysis of the individual perceptions and experiences of MSU gospel choir (MSUGC) participants. Narrative inquiry is rich and descriptive, such that words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon (Clandinin, 2006).

Researcher's Positionality

My identity and my personal and professional experiences influence my approach and commitment to this research. It is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Clandinin, 2006; Holmes, 2020; Jameel, Shaheen, & Maiid, 2018; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013). Understanding the role that reflexivity plays in my positionality was essential according to Holmes (2020). "Reflexivity suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it" (Cohen, Manion et al. 2011, p. 225). I needed to make sure I managed my biases.

Furthermore, Holmes, (2020), asserted that:

A reflexive approach suggests that, rather than trying to eliminate their effect, researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their work, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process. It is important for new researchers to note here that their positionality not only shapes their work but influences their interpretation, understanding, and, ultimately, their belief in the truthfulness and validity of other's research that they read or are exposed to. It also influences the importance given to, the extent of belief in, and their understanding of the concept of positionality (p. 3)

I conducted this study and I identify as a Christian, African American female, first generation student, with a learning disability, and a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Two Spirits (LGBTQIA2S+) community. I have a constructivist worldview from an interpretivist framework that there is more than one truth. According to Lather, 2007 "multiple realities exist, differing in context, and knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and researched" (p. 24).

My research interest focuses on how African America college graduates who sang in the MSU Gospel Choir (MSUGC) describe the effect of that involvement on their persistence to graduation. Additionally, I have been involved with the MSUGC choir for 48 years and currently I am the advisor to the choir. I believed that because I have been with the choir for a lengthy period it gave me insider status which came with some advantages but also had its disadvantages for me as a researcher and a friend. Utilizing Merton's long-standing definition of insiders and outsiders that "Insiders are the members of specified groups and collectives or occupants of specified social statuses: Outsiders are non-members" (Merton, 1972, p. 21). The insider shares personal biographical characteristic of the participants (gender, race, skin-color, class, sexual orientation and so on) which gives them a 'lived familiarity' with and a prior knowledge of the group being researched. Conversely, the outsider researcher does not have any prior knowledge of the group being researched (Griffith, 1998, cited in Mercer, 2007). Given that definition, next I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages that I dealt with during the study.

Some of the advantages were: (1) I had easy access to the choir and was seen as one of them; (2) my ability to ask more meaningful and insightful questions because of my knowledge of the choir; (3) I felt that as a researcher and friend they trusted me and answered honestly; (4) I felt like I was able to get more candid, authentic, and thick description from choir members; (5) I believe the culture shock was mitigated, and (6) I was able to understand the language including colloquial language and nonverbal cues during the interviews. Some of the disadvantages that I dealt with during the study was: (1) I knew that I would struggle with my inherent and unknowing biases and was overtly sympathetic to the culture; (2) I was too close and familiar with the culture, but I knew that going in to the study, (3) I was overtly sympathetic to the choir members; (4) participants may have made assumptions because I was an insider and that I possessed more or

better insider knowledge than they did, and did not share; (5) there were some questions that I did not ask because I felt that the participant might be triggered because of insider knowledge; and (6) it was difficult leaving the field given that I had been very available to the participants more so than I had been for a few years for some and it created some tension.

What I learned during this study was that my positionality is integral to the process of qualitative research and that as a researcher my awareness of the stability of my own and others' positionality is essential to the quality of the research. It is important that I clearly articulate my positionality with respect to the study being undertaken and understand that it is a vital undertaking for the integrity of the study.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) described the narrative inquirer as one who is working in a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. The metaphoric narrative inquiry space has three dimensions: personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); and place (situation) (p.50). They write, "using these concepts, any question is defined by this three-dimensional space: Studies address time issues and balance personal and social aspects in certain places or sequences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 54).

As encouraged by Connelly and Clandinin (2006), I began the inquiries either with engaging the participants through telling stories or through coming alongside participants in the living out of stories. Narrative inquiry allowed me to experience the co-construction of each of the participants' stories in the moment. At times, it was very difficult for me when participants were triggered with visceral memories that were emotionally debilitating. Some of these events took place while they were attending MSU, and others happened after they had graduated. The experiences they shared are still with me today and when I speak with them, like friends do, I wonder to myself and out loud, "Are you all right?"

Some of the participants allowed me to continue to tape while others asked that I turn the tape off during these difficult moments. I noted these times in my field notes but did not add the details of the concerns, respecting the participants' rights to just share what they wanted to share during our time together. I still carry those difficult moments with me even though it's been months since I did the interviews. I think it stays with me because somehow, I wish I could have helped, been someone they could lean on a bit more. Their stories are now a part of my stories, which I feel grateful that they trusted me to tell.

In narrative inquiry the most important thing is to take care of the participant, so that was very difficult at times, but I would follow up a couple of days after the interviews with the individuals just to make sure they were okay. What I have learned about narrative inquiry, and it took me some time, but it has finally sunk in, is that as an Inquirer I am in the experience and not just writing about it. I'm living it with them. That is one of my key takeaways from this experience and it was unexpected.

As I conducted this study, I aimed to be aware of my biases and reflected on them and answered the interview questions myself so that I could be more aware of what the participants would be going through. As I entered the narrative inquiry relationship with them, I participated in ongoing negotiations that were part of engaging in narrative inquiry. Moreover, I negotiated relationships, common research purposes I explained about the interviews, my transitions in and out of the field as well as how I was going to be useful in these relationships. These negotiations occurred moment by moment in the setting up of interviews and places, but the participant could not get their Zoom to work, within each encounter, sometimes in ways that I was not aware of. For example, when I called to set up a meeting with Maya, she was struggling at times with health problems but did not tell me until much later (Clandinin, 2006). The negotiations also

occurred in internal ways as I worked with participants. Some of the participants were friends that I sang with, but others were friends I met as the choir's advisor, so they did not see me as their peer, but more as their mentor. In noting the difference between my relationships with each of these peer or mentor relationships, the peer interviews seemed easier than the mentor interviews. I had to take the time to build more trust with the "mentor" participants during their interviews. These interviews have changed my life and after reading them multiple times looking for labels and then primary codes, I continue to remember what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) said: people are not the data, but their stories are.

According to Patton (2016), a researcher must ensure that their chosen methodology is informed by and aligned with their ontology and epistemology. In my perspective, qualitative research methods are most appropriate for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of African American college graduates who participated in a gospel choir at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how their membership in the choir influenced their determination to successfully complete their college education. Therefore, my adherence to constructivist principles is congruent with the utilization of qualitative methodologies, particularly narrative inquiry.

Research Design

For this study I used a qualitative design with the goal of answering the following research question:

- 1) How do African American college graduates who sang in a PWI campus gospel choir describe the effect of that involvement on their persistence to graduation?

I conducted this narrative inquiry at Michigan State University. I interviewed six choir members who had been involved in the MSU Gospel Choir from 1972 to 2002. In this section I describe site selection, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

Site Description

MSU is a research intensive, land-grant institution, located in East Lansing, a suburban community with a population of approximately 48,000 permanent residents. In 2023, approximately 51,000 students were enrolled. In 1972, when the campus gospel choir became a registered student organization, there were approximately 41,000 students attending, a difference of 10,000 students. Understanding the population size of this campus is crucial context for this story.

For some students, arriving at a PWI like MSU might cause them to experience culture shock. The study participants, all of whom were African American, experienced this culture shock to some degree. Students of color have been dealing with microaggressions and racial bias incidents since they have been able to enroll at MSU, near the turn of the 20th century. Students of color have described MSU as a hostile campus environment. Black students at MSU have been engaging in activism aimed at improving the campus climate since 1967. Barry D. Amis was one such student activist. "In the midst of student protests over racism nationwide and on campus, Barry D. Amis helped found the Black Student Alliance at Michigan State University in 1967 and served as its first president. He has notebooks filled with news clippings and photos from his years as a student activist" (Popiolek, para, 1, 2022). More recently, Black Lives Matter and the killing of George Floyd have led students of color to hold on-campus protests. These incidents matter because African American students are navigating both the institution and social issues that are still happening in the community, country, and world around them.

Participant Recruitment

I chose to use purposive sampling which allowed me to identify a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which I was interested. I chose purposive homogeneous sampling because it prompted me to seek information rich cases that can provide individual perspectives and experiences that are relevant to the research questions. According to Morris and Niehaus (2009), purposive sampling intends to achieve depth. Further, it aligns with my narrative methodology given that narrative inquiry looks at the depth of the experience not the breath of the experience.

I recruited the six choir members to participate in my study by utilizing the choir's records of participants via annual yearbooks and members I follow on different social media platforms. I recruited participants who were able to provide distinct perspectives and experiences defined "as samples chosen for their similarities, which can then be used for contrastive analysis or comparison with maximum variation groups or intense small sampling of other groups" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 157). They must have participated in the choir for at least one year and have graduated from Michigan State University. My goal was to get representation from each of the last five decades that the choir has been in existence.

I was only able to recruit participants from the 1970s through the 2000s- thirty years of the choir's history. I also asked MSUGC alumni to send out emails through their social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram requesting participation. In correspondence I explained that I was doing my dissertation on their involvement in the choir during their time at Michigan State University. I also called a few choir members I know well and asked them to participate. There was one other criteria: I wanted to get an even number of men and women to participate in the study. One of my committee members wanted to make sure that I had a decent

number of men and women in my study during my dissertation proposal defense. I also wanted to get some of the founders of the choir to participate in this study because of their experience in building the choir from the ground up. I wanted to make sure I captured their experiences.

I had one participant from 2015 initially fill out the participant consent form, but never respond to emails or phone messages that I left for them. I wanted to make sure that there was someone in the study who was from the 2000s. I was sharing my concerns with a friend of mine about losing my participant from 2000s on a call and he said to me that he was in the choir in the 2000s and would be happy to be a part of the study. I was pleased because I was in the process of setting up interviews and was not sure I could get someone given the short notice. They became my sixth participant for the study.

The recruitment process took place during COVID, so I was concerned that people might just not be mentally about to do more than just stay safe at home. It took about two weeks to get the participants that I needed for the study. I called and emailed those selected for individual interviews to confirm that they were still interested in participating in the study: they all confirmed yes. I shared with them that I would be emailing them a participant consent form that I needed them to read over, contact me if they had any questions, sign it, and return it to me (see APPENDIX B). I told them once I received their consent form, which also told them about the protocol for the interviews, that I would go ahead and set up their first and second interviews prior to our starting. Once I received the signed consent forms I went ahead and worked with them on dates, times, and locations they were available to meet. We could meet either in person or on zooms or teams for their first interview (on Zoom or face to face depending on COVID-19 restrictions). See Table 3 which contains the participants' demographic information.

Table 1**Michigan State University Gospel Choir Individual Interview Participants**

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Race	Years in Choir	Major	College	Graduation Year
Maya	She/her	67	African American	1973- 1987	Urban Affairs	Social Science	1979
Jasper	He/him	45	African American	2000- 2002	Labor Relations	Social Science	2002
Ruby	She/her	48	African American	1988, 1995	Biology	Social Science	1993
Stan	He/him	69	African American	1971- 1976	Social Work	Social Science	1976
Tank	He/him	55	African American	1986- 1992	Education	Education	1992
Toot	She/her	46	African American	1992- 1994	Microbiology	Natural Science	1993

Data Collection

The interviews began with a brief explanation of the research project to establish rapport with participants. The six participants completed two 90–120-minute semi-structured interviews. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a \$50 gift card for their participation. Prior to the start of the interviews, participants gave their consent and were asked to complete a brief demographic survey. During the interviews, I engaged participants in conversation and asked them to describe their experience in the gospel choir, along with their academic and social experiences while attending MSU. I used standard interview protocol consisting of semi-structured open-ended questions (see APPENDIX D). There were eight questions on the first interview and five questions on the second interview.

Below are a few of the questions that were asked in the first and second interviews. I created a narrative inquiry interview protocol so that I would make sure that I asked questions in the same manner and provided information about confidentiality being important and that if they had any concerns to please let me know (see APPENDIX B). I also explained what narrative inquiry is and gave them examples of how to tell their stories: that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. For the most part people utilized that model for telling their stories and if they didn't follow the model I would gently, with probing questions, ask them to tell me how that experience started. That seemed to work in most cases and when it did not work, I just allowed them to tell their story. I also reminded them that I was going to be recording and taking notes and, again, if there was a time when they did not want me to record or take notes just to let me know and then I would turn off the recording devices. Below are the questions that were asked during the first and second interviews.

First Set of Individual Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to attend MSU?
2. Why did you join the MSUGC?
3. What did/does it mean being a member of MSUGC?
4. Tell me about rehearsals and engagements for MSUGC.
5. Tell me about your experiences with other choir members.
6. What types of gospel songs did you like to sing in the choir and why?
7. Do you see MSUGC did/do you see choir members outside of rehearsals and events?
8. What would your college experience have been like if you were not involved in the MSUGC?

Second Set of Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your life story.
2. What mechanisms did you use to help yourself persist to graduation from MSU?
3. Was there ever a time that you felt like you would not graduate from MSU?
4. What was the environment like when you attended MSU in terms of finding a place where you felt like you fit on campus?
5. Did you have any academic struggles when you've attended MSU?

I hoped that the individual interviews would be less stressful for the participants after giving them a choice to meet either face to face or online due to COVID concerns. Further, the time between each of the interviews gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on the second set of questions which I shared with them after the first interview. I did that because I noticed that there was a lot of time spent reflecting on the questions after the first interview, so I thought it might be advantageous if they had the second set of questions sooner. I had one of the participants ask me if they could have the questions in advance of the first interview so that they could be prepared because it had been such a long time since they participated in MSUGC. What I found interesting was that when they showed up for their interview, they did not bring the interview questions that they had responded to, so I gave them time to review the questions. That interview took about two hours, so we were roughly 30 minutes over, but I was glad that they had the time they needed and that their suggestion helped other participants prepare for the interviews in advance.

Similarly to Shea (2019) I identified my purposes, my ethical responsibilities, and presented myself as a researcher to the participants, and discussed with them the logistics of the project. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) stated that "practical considerations about how to get

access to the people you have selected are entwined with ethical issues about informed consent, and possible harm to research subjects or others" (p. 157). The correspondence let participants know that the two individual interviews would be taped, would last approximately 90 to 120 minutes each, and that field notes would be written (see APPENDIX D).

One of the study participants lived out of town, so I did the first interview with her using Zoom and the second interview was done face to face. A second participant was having problems navigating Zoom so our first interview ended up not happening because we could not get Zoom to work. We spent the whole 90 minutes trying to figure it out. We even contacted her sister to see if she could help, but it still did not work, so we decided to reschedule. We had a face to face interview the next time she was in town. One participant did both interviews online. Three participants met with me face to face. Two of them met with me in my office because it worked better for them, and one met me at the church in the pastor's office for both of his interviews. His first interview we did on Zoom, but it did not transcribe the interview, so at his second interview I arrived with my field notes, and we were able to successfully rerecord his first interview followed up by his second interview.

After each interview I completed my field notes and checked to make sure that the transcription was working on Zoom. I had another problem with Zoom not transcribing an interview, so I started using a second transcription application called Otter.ai as a backup system to make sure that if one system failed, I had another way to capture the interview session transcripts. I returned the transcript summary to each participant so that they could check them for accuracy. I only had two participants ask me to make minor corrections to their stories. The participants sent their edits back to me and I made the corrections. The other four participants,

after several emails and calls, decided that they were not going to make corrections and were satisfied with what I had sent them.

I recorded and transcribed interviews using Zoom and Otter.ai. I assured participants that their names would be changed. Five of the six participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. One participant asked that his name be used. I used approved data collection techniques and recorded observations regarding the ways participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

The interviews were full of life and emotion, and the participants found closure by talking about the challenges they faced as African Americans and 18-year-olds in a predominantly white institution where they were not expected to be successful. Participants discussed the songs they enjoyed singing and the people they have become close with over the years. Some had a harder time than others adjusting to college life, which was a topic of discussion. They discussed the waves of culture shock they experienced, marveled at the disproportionate number of white people on campus, and sought out safe havens. One such place was, coincidentally, the choir. We ate together at some of the interviews, and cried together at others, because we realized we hadn't been as consistent in keeping up with one another as we'd anticipated. We reminisced about our days as gospel choir members and the emotions we experienced back then.

During the interviews, family matters came up, as did the passing of friends and acquaintances through the years. We discussed our shared experiences of spiritual awakening and how we drew strength from our faith to persevere. We talked about the people that assisted us during our time in the choir. There were choir members who were second, third, and fourth year students that would give us recommendations on which professor or class to take. There

would be suggestions about which advisor to seek out for information about financial aid, and what majors to consider. We were also supported by black faculty and staff who also helped us navigate the university system. In some cases, this advice had a profound effect on whether or not some choir members could return to the university or would have to sit out a semester or a year. Silently and aloud, we sang songs of gratitude and reminiscence. Even today we are still here for each other, phoning to check in, lending a hand when we can, and showering each other with love. All the members thought that their involvement in the MSU gospel choir overall was a beneficial influence in their life. We shared more joy than sorrow, we laughed more often than we cried, and we helped each other figure out the ins and outs of life at MSU.

Data Analysis

I utilized a narrative inquiry approach to analyze qualitative data in this study. By telling choir members' stories using this narrative inquiry methodology, I retained the participants' integrity and humanity (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). I recognized that I was ethically responsible for retelling my participants' stories to capture what they shared about their lived experiences. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), the utilization of a narrative approach in data analysis serves multiple purposes. First, it effectively conveys information, making it more engaging and relatable. Additionally, it fulfills individuals' psychological needs by aiding in their ability to cope with life's challenges. Furthermore, this approach facilitates the clarification and definition of various viewpoints, values, or perspectives within a group. Moreover, it enables researchers and readers to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of participants and their respective cultures. Lastly, the narrative approach contributes to the formation and organization of identity.

Narrative analysis is a prominent method of qualitative data analysis frequently employed in the field of narrative inquiry (Butina, 2015). The existence of standardized procedures for narrative analysis is currently lacking, however some narrative scholars have contributed to the field by offering recommendations and methodologies for the analysis of narratives. There are four possible methodologies that might be employed in narrative analysis. Among the four ways, narrative thematic analysis is the most frequently employed method. This approach places major emphasis on the content within the text. The second methodology employed is structural analysis, which centers on the narrative construction and organization of a story. The third technique pertains to dialogic/performance analysis, which centers on examining the dialogic process that occurs between the teller and the listener, which is why I chose to utilize it in my study, because it aligned best with my narrative inquiry methodology. Finally, visual narrative analysis is a comprehensive field that encompasses the examination of both words and images. It involves the integration of visual elements into the analysis of narratives, which can be in the form of written or spoken texts (Butina, 2015).

These are the steps that I took to do a narrative analysis of the data that I collected after two rounds of interviews for the study. The narrative dialogic/performance process I used has three stages: First, organization and preparation of the data; Second, the coding process, and third, interpretation of the data (Butina, 2015).

Organization and Preparation

In order to organize and prepare the data, I used Otter.ai, a service that transcribed the audio tapes in real time. I reviewed all the interview transcripts either immediately after, or shortly after, the interviews concluded and made any needed additions or corrections. I noted which themes emerged from the interviews while transcribing the audiotapes. I also kept field

notes to record non-narrative conversation as well. I assigned each participant a pseudonym, and changed identifying information, with the exception of one participant who chose to use his actual name.

I co-created narratives for each participant, which represents narrative inquiry's three-dimensional storytelling, which situates the story in time, place, and future. By co-creating the narratives with the participants, it allowed me to be in the experience with them. It also gave structure, allowing their stories to have a beginning (Genesis), middle (Psalms) and end (Exodus). The participants' full narratives are in APPENDIX A.

Categories and Themes

During the first cycle, open coding, I read through each of the participants' transcripts and field notes line by line to define coding generated categories and define their priorities in the data, and found relationships between the codes, code frequency, and the underlying meaning across codes. During the second cycle, axial coding, I encoded data into categories and looked for patterns in codes. I used the appropriate coding, processing, and development methods to view the data in a bottom-up process, which allowed for analytic coding and allowed me to identify broad salient categories (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) (See APPENDIX F).

Coding Process

The subsequent stage involved manual coding. I made the decision to conduct my data analysis manually, despite the existence of a qualitative analysis software application. According to Glesne (2006), coding is a systematic procedure including the organization and categorization of relevant data fragments obtained for the aim of research. The coding procedure involved a thorough review of the transcripts, wherein I identified recurring words, ideas, or patterns that emerged from the data. Upon revisiting the narratives, I engaged in a process of careful

examination, wherein I meticulously identified and emphasized significant concepts, as well as any recurring lexical elements or overarching themes present within each narrative.

Subsequently, I devised a similar algorithm, a concise symbolization intended to facilitate the identification of recurrent concepts and phrases within the given text. These recurring elements I then strategically positioned in the margins. Following the completion of coding the initial transcripts, a master coding list was constructed.

As the analysis progressed, transcript codes I extracted from the master list of relevant codes, while also generating and incorporating new codes into the master list. The original compilation of codes in my master code list consisted of a total of 54 recurrent patterns. The codes I organized into coherent groups based on clear descriptors or labels that represent certain segments of the material. The codes ought to accurately capture the emerging themes and effectively convey the primary discoveries of the research. In this study, the codes I consolidated into four primary categories or themes, namely: family, faith, friends, and fit. For an illustrative depiction of the sequential phases of narrative dialogic/performance that were used during the analysis of an interview participant's transcript. (See Table 2)

Table 2

Data analysis of Ruby's narrative adapted from Butina (2015) dialogic/performance analysis

Transcript passage	Initial code (s)	Corresponding category/ theme
X: Was there ever a time you felt like you would not graduate from MSU?		
Ruby: Yeah, my freshman year I struggle with math introduction to algebra. No, no, no, it was that algebra. I took algebra but what is it trigonometry? yeah. So, I had never taken trigonometry . So, I had to take that as my intro and yeah, kicked my butt. I failed it twice . A group of people from the choir which Kay was the one told me about because she was in a while though she was in Engineering for a while. So, somebody I was with I'm trying to think of her name because I didn't really hang out with a lot of different people, but mostly with choir friends who helped me get help from an advisor in college of Engineering	1) Academic struggles 2) Received support from friends 3) Negative experiences with class	1), 2) Support of friend
X: Did you see MSUGC members outside of choir rehearsal and event		
Ruby: I cannot think of their names, but they were wonderful singers as well, and I just remembered, like all the girls came over to our apartment one night, and we had a sleep over , and I think some people would have posted a picture of all of us, or whatever, but all of them, you know, from the choir director to, you know, it was just. It was like family, you know. it was really like family. I feel like that . Some of what happened with the choir is that spiritually, during that period of time and history. Religion was kind of going into this notoriety kind of thing you know about gifts, and you know you're place in the church. and if you're gonna be a pastor or a preacher, and so I feel like in some cases we did kind of bump heads, but nothing like destroyed the family .	4) confident and feelings of family like environments	3), 4), Family

Note. Data analysis of Ruby's narrative. Example of the stages of narrative dialogic/performance analysis performed on Ruby's transcript. The interviewer has been designated as "X". The bolded lines within coordinating code is found in the middle column. In the last column is the category of or theme that corresponded to the assigned code.

Interpretation of Data

During the interpretation I studied the categories and their corresponding codes to determine if there were any overarching themes or theories that provide insight on what choir members shared in their interview. I generated the four major themes of family, faith, friends, and fit from the narratives. They provide a better understanding of what each participant's experience was, and I was able to see patterns across them.

Trustworthiness

In narrative inquiry, the researcher is given access to participants' life stories and is entrusted to be careful with how those stories are interpreted. Guba and Lincoln, (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; as cited in Amankwaa, 2016) stated that, following about the importance of rigor:

All research must have 'truth value', 'applicability', 'consistency', and 'neutrality' to be considered worthwhile. They concluded that the result of establishing rigor or "trustworthiness," (the analogous for rigor in qualitative research), for each method of research requires a different approach. Within the rationalistic paradigm, criteria to reach the goal of rigor are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. They proposed use of terms such as credibility, fittingness, auditability, and confirmability in qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness. Later, these criteria were changed to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the value of a research study is strengthened by its trustworthiness. As established by Lincoln and Guba in the 1980s, trustworthiness involves establishing:

- Credibility - confidence in the 'truth' of the finding
- Transferability - showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts

- Dependability - showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated
- Confirmability - a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; as cited in Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121)

Throughout this study, I conducted member checks and asked for feedback on data collected from each participant. To maintain trustworthiness, I was transparent with my positionality as a previous member of the choir, and current advisor, who has biases. Agreeing with, Lincoln and Guba (1985), I asserted that trustworthiness criteria like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability guide field activities and impose checks to ensure that they are being followed. I journaled my observations and my thoughts about each interview as a way of acknowledging my bias and reflections on what I heard and what I saw. Further, I created an excel spreadsheet so that I could easily find four themes throughout all their narratives (see APPENDIX F).

I used several strategies that helped enhance the credibility and rigorousness with which I conducted the study including triangulation methods, multiple data sources, and multiple points in time to build the picture while investigating choir member stories. Because I have a lengthy history with the choir, I used my insider status to ensure that I had an accurate picture of the phenomenon that I was studying. I used member checking to verify participants' feedback so that I was able to make sure that they could elaborate, correct, extend, or argue about interview transcripts. Throughout this study, I conducted member checks and asked for feedback on data collected from each participant, some interviews took long to complete, so I had to follow up with them by e-mail and by phone calls just to make sure to answer any of the questions that they

had and encourage them to return their feedback on the narratives. According to Rossman and Rallis (2017) this is also done as a method to elicit further information.

Furthermore, I adapted Amankwaa's (2015) trustworthiness protocol for qualitative research to mitigate researcher bias and reliability to my trustworthiness (see Table3.3). It is a simple table with the criteria and the techniques used to ensure trustworthiness during my research. Below I used the dates I started and the dates I completed individual tasks based on the protocol listed for my research.

Table 3

Basic Trustworthiness adapted from Lincoln & Gruba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria & techniques

Criteria	Techniques	Date Begun	Date Finished
Credibility	Peer debriefing, Member checks, Journaling	07/09/2022	07/23/2022
		07/04/2022	09/27/2023
		07/04/2022	09/27/2023
Transferability	Thick Descriptions, Journaling	07/09/2022	07/07/2022
		07/09/2022	09/27/2023
Dependability	Inquiry Audit with Audit Trail Journaling	08/15/2022	10/07/2023
		08/15/2022	10/07/2023
		08/15/2022	10/07/2023
Confirmability	Triangulation, Journaling	07/09/2022	09/23/2023
		07/09/2022	10/07/2023

Furthermore, I adhered to Creswell's (2013) suggestion that researchers should employ a minimum of two techniques in each study. The implementation of member-check, which involves sharing interview transcripts, analytical views, and/or drafts of the final research with participants, is one strategy employed to enhance credibility (internal validity) by ensuring proper representation of their opinions. Furthermore, I utilized an audit reviewer who evaluated the quality of my work throughout the duration of the study. Ultimately, I have explained the

inherent biases that I, as the researcher, brought forward throughout the course of this study. I engaged in a transparent and candid dialogue regarding my personal biases, encompassing previous experiences, assumptions, and orientations, which may influence my understanding of research outcomes and my methodology in conducting the study.

Methodology and Research Design Summary

This chapter addressed this study's research question "How do African American college graduates who sang in a campus gospel choir at a PWI describe the effects of that involvement on their persistence to graduation?" I also described the methodology used to answer this question. I was transparent with my positionality as an insider, including the positives and negatives of my insider position in the MSUGC. This chapter also highlighted the research design, participant recruitment, and data collection processes used in this study. I utilized narrative inquiry as my methodology to address the research question at hand, to capture the richness of the experience of the participants' stories and to allow their voices to be heard. The voices of the participants are at the center of this research. At this time, I recommend that you proceed to APPENDIX A to experience the richness and depth of the participants' stories told in their own voices before you read the findings in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

By utilizing narrative inquiry as my methodology, I was able to prompt six participants to tell their life stories. When I asked them "tell me your life story," one of the hallmark questions of the methodology, each study participant was rendered speechless by being asked such an all-encompassing question about their life. Usually, after taking a deep breath, they would say something like "Oh my, oh my God, let me think about that a minute." Then, after they took the time they needed, they started talking and asking me questions like "do you mean from the beginning from when I was born?" I would respond "wherever you feel comfortable starting, it is your life story."

Narrative inquiry allowed the research participants to dig deep into their memories to remember preparing for and attending the university. For some of the participants, it had been over 47 years since they had graduated. They had to maneuver through time, space, and context, but they all did it, which is a hallmark of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). At times the interviews were difficult for the participants as they were filled with emotion while deeply reflecting on their life choices, both the ones they made and the ones they didn't make.

When telling their stories, the participants were thoughtful about what they were saying. For each one of them it seemed like a journey in time. The interview became uncomfortable for a few of them who asked me to stop the tape because of some of the emotional things that were coming up. I did make time and space for them to stop or continue. Although I knew them while they attended the university, I was not aware of their individual struggles. Some of the participants shared information I wish I had known at the time so I could have been a better friend to them. There was laughter for sure, and there were tears for things that they would have done differently if they knew then what they know now. All the participants were

amazing, brave individuals who joined me on this storytelling journey. The participants credited the gospel choir with getting them through some of their most difficult times at the university. They also noted that the older choir members, along with the directors and musicians, supported the newer choir members. This support came, whether it be in giving them the right note to sing in their sections, or when choir members had personal or academic concerns and needed someone to just listen. There was always someone in the choir that was willing to pray with them and support them during those problematic times. It was in those moments that the gospel choir members built their community of love and support that continues today for these members.

I utilized narrative inquiry because of its ability to move people through time: backward, forward, inward, and outward. That is how I was able to get to the richness of each individual person's story. Learning from their stories and thinking about them through the perspective of narrative inquiry, I looked at choir members' personal and social interactions-past, present, and future on a continuum. Bound by the notion of setting and context, narrative inquiry creates a methodology that is three dimensional (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). (see APPENDIX A).

In this chapter, I merge data collected from study participants during two individual interviews and one group interview to describe how participation in the gospel choir impacted their experiences at the university. As they shared their stories with me, I understood how important their time in the gospel choir had been for each of them. Their stories illuminated the intersectionality of their personalities and how they changed over their time at the university and being a part of the choir. They were very curious about each other's religions and were able to adapt their faith beliefs to understand each other's beliefs. Choir members who were raised as African Methodist Episcopal (AME) were willing to learn from choir members who were raised as Pentecostals, spoke in tongues, and fasted. Although they knew nothing about each other's

religious practices, they were fascinated by them. Some choir members even joined different denominations based on their interactions with different religious beliefs. Others modified their beliefs and added practices like fasting and speaking in tongues.

After a period of thoughtful review of the transcripts from the individual interviews, and the gospel choir members' narratives, I was able to identify four themes apparent in the data about building community at a PWI: family, friends, faith, and fit. In the sections that follow, I describe these four themes, and use these themes to show how the six gospel choir members' stories demonstrate the depth of their experiences as members of the choir at the university.

Family

In *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* Billingsley (1992) asserted "Black families are more than just biological kinship; family is more inclusive (p. 28)". Billingsley (1992) asked a question about the origins of the meaning of the African American family:

What do we mean by African American family? Essentially, it is an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation; sustained by a history of common residency in America; and deeply embedded in a network of social structure both internal to and external to itself. Numerous interlocking elements come together, forming a and extraordinary resilient institution (p. 28)

Billingsley's book outlines the history of Black family life from its roots in Africa, through Slavery, Reconstruction, the Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement, to the late 1980s. Billingsley (1992) maintains that Black families cannot be measured against White norms. In the 1990s, Billingsley's work challenged some of the most common misrepresentation about African American families. He examined the development of Black

families, described the forces that have shaped them, and examined their resiliency in the face of trying conditions, and the strengths that helped sustain them. For the participants in the choir, all of whom are African American, their sense of family was defined by more than just biology or formal adaption. They thought of each other as family. They thought of each other as brothers and sisters as is evident in the narratives of each of the participants.

Stan remarked "It took me a few weeks before I actually attended a choir rehearsal, but once I did, I felt like I had found a place where I fit into. I felt like home. The choir members were like brothers and sisters and when I interacted with their parents, I felt like I had more mothers and fathers." Similarly, Tank noted "My interactions with the members of the choir, like I had said I think for me, a lot of it was that, you know, they were just like family to me, you know?" Ruby reflected that "In my walk with learning about who I was as a Christian, I believe I should have done more of that on my own. But my need to be supported might have, in hindsight, caused me to stay too long because my friends in the choir were my family".

Like Billingsley, after I listened to the participants' stories, I had to adopt a more expansive definition that explained the relationships choir members formed while singing in the gospel choir. Billingsley argued that the word "family" as it applies to African Americans is "an intimate association of persons of African descent who are related to one another by a variety of means, including blood, marriage, formal adoption, informal adoption, or by appropriation" (Billingsley, 1992, p. 28). The choir members all referred to other members of the choir as "family," which is why I chose to use Billingsley's definition of family. Many of us were adopted into the choir and into individual families. That sense of family existed when we were in the choir together, and still exists today. All the participants indicated that they would not

have managed the time they were in the institution well, had it not been for the family that they found in the choir. Stan especially put into perspective how poignant these relationships became Stan noted:

Being sort of like family, we could go to each other's houses, especially when we're on engagement, and we just picked up additional mothers. Okay. And I can just remember, you know, going to Detroit. I'm meeting Maya's mom. And it got to the point where she would say, "You ain't gotta wait today. Come home. You got to come by. If you in the neighborhood, stop by here." And a lot of times I stopped by the house if I knew she was making some rolls or something. Do you know what I'm saying? The beauty of it was that it was like going home.

For choir members, they found family in each other during their time participating in the MSUGC. This sense of family was not about blood or biological ties, but instead the feeling of what they meant to one another. This allotted them the support they needed to continue their success at the institution they were attending.

Faith

The faith of African Americans throughout history can be traced back to the Black church and the power it held, and continues to hold, within families and communities. Reverend Otis Moss III spoke of the power of faith.

Never confuse position with power. Pharaoh had the position, but Moses had the power Herod had the position, but John had the power. The cross had the position, but Jesus had the power. Lincoln had the position, but Douglas had the power. Woodrow Wilson had the position, but Ida B. Wells had the power. George Wallace had the position, but Rosa Parks had the power. Lyndon Baines Johnson had the position, but Martin Luther King

had the power. We have the power don't you ever forget it (Reverend Otis Moss III as cited in Gates, 2021, p. xv).

Even today, the Black church still holds power in many Black communities. Participants spoke about growing up and being raised in the church and how that experience created a sense of belonging for them. Fellowship between choir members deepened participants' spiritual faith. They encouraged each other to better understand the power of faith in their lives and how it helped them overcome challenges in their homes. Their faith helped them build their relationship with God. All the study participants shared that being a part of the gospel choir had a very significant impact on their faith journey throughout their lives. Toot reflected on how her faith was shaped by the time she spent in the choir stating:

I credit the gospel choir with helping me develop spiritually while I was at the university. My love for singing was one of the reasons I felt like I had found a place where I could be my authentic self and deepen my understanding and relationship with the Lord. Many of the choir members didn't know that I had not grown up in the church, so they made assumptions about me knowing all the old spirituals, which wasn't true in my case. I was developing my understanding of what it meant to have a personal relationship with the Lord. I think this might have happened if I had not joined the choir, but I think that it happened sooner because of the gospel choir

Stan shared the following about his experience: "Rehearsal wasn't really rehearsal. A lot of times, it was our only piece of fellowship. It was our only real church. It was, if you will, our spiritual therapy."

I decided to utilize the definition of the word gospel from the Encyclopedia Britannica which explains the origin of the word.

Gospel, any of four biblical narratives covering the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Written, according to tradition, respectively by St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John (the four evangelists), they are placed at the beginning of the New Testament and make up about half the total text. The word *gospel* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term *god-spell*, meaning “good story,” a rendering of the Latin *evangelium* and the Greek *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “good telling.” (Britannica, Encyclopedia (2024, June 14, Gospel New Testament section, para. 1)

The good news was a source of power for the choir members. People are drawn to the good news for many reasons including their struggles, hardships, trials, and tribulations and still they come to church full of the faith that sustained them through slavery, Jim Crow, the migrations to the North, and the oppressive discrimination often faced in work and in school. Each choir member shared stories about their faith journey, life struggles, and how their faith gave them the resilience and power to overcome their trials.

The participants shared how they prayed for strength during difficult times. In choir rehearsals, they noted that it oftentimes felt like they were in church. Many of the members stayed after rehearsal and prayed for the members who needed to be prayed over. They would pray for each other to do well academically, for meeting the financial needs of others, for family members, and relationships. Toot shared that she went to church on major holidays, like Christmas and Easter, while other study participants said they were at church on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays for choir rehearsals and Bible studies. All the participants shared that their faith had been instrumental in their abilities to navigate the university and graduate. Stan highlighted this, saying,

For example, maybe it was a day where you took a test and you did the best that you could, but you fell short. When you got to choir rehearsal, there would be a song that, you'd end up singing that will help you get over that

Jasper described how joining the choir nurtured his spiritual needs. Jasper fondly remembered those long rehearsals when someone needed prayer, and how they helped him feel better about the struggles he had. Jasper shared an experience he had on his way to church. He was stopped by a police officer as he was getting money to pay his tithe. He was asked to put his hands up and produce identification so the officer could confirm that he was not a person he was looking for who had committed a crime. After the incident, Jasper went to choir practice and sought refuge from what had happened to him. He asked the choir members to pray for him and he received those prayers.

Stan shared stories about how his faith sustained him when he came to the university and how, at times, he did not take it as seriously as he should have. He also said that he was looking to find a connection and that the gospel choir was that connection because it felt familiar, like home. Stan shared that although he was a member of a fraternity, he really did not feel like he belonged, because his faith did not always align with what his fraternity did. He remarked,

You know, I was a member of a fraternity and there was some constructive things I could do to have fellowship. But there was some things that the fraternity was doing that I just couldn't partake in because it wasn't who I was. But the choir offered that fellowship that was comfortable, that was consistent and familiar.

When Stan joined the choir, he felt as though he had found his place and his family, and he flourished in his belief and his faith due to this. He loved God so much that he became the

minister for a campus Bible study. Stan continued his education and earned his doctorate in theological studies.

Faith played a major role in participants' time at the university. It gave them the strength to persist and persevere through whatever difficulties they were having, whether personal or academic. Faith was something that each of the participants wanted and developed, and the choir was instrumental in helping them meet those needs.

Friends

According to McCabe (2023), researchers have been studying postsecondary education and the importance of peer friendships in student success for more than 50 years. Newcomb and Wilson (1996) described friendships in universities as both a "problem" and a "resource" for student success. Like McCabe (2023), who asserted that "having a few friends increased persistence and makes students' college experience more meaningful and impactful" (p. 6), the participants in my study described how important their friends were to them in making their experience at the university better. Stan remarked, "I'd say we built lifelong friendships. You know, we've been there for each other, right? You know, because all of us, during this period of time, have life issues that's going to come up. And what was that song that they used to sing? Lean on me? Oh yeah." Tank reflected on how it felt going to choir rehearsals. "It was going knowing that you had a group of people who care and understood about what you are going through."

All the participants shared stories of how they were invited to participate in the gospel choir by someone they knew. Tank shared:

It was my roommate that started going to gospel choir rehearsal and one day he invited me to go to rehearsal with him. I wanted to get involved in an organization at the

university. I had been in choirs most of my life and I believed that the gospel choir was just the right fit because I knew what was expected of me. I met some of the choir members that first night and really enjoyed the people I met, so I joined the gospel choir my first year at the university. By joining the choir, I was able to connect with people like myself with similar interests

Jasper shared that one of his friends from his Bible study group decided to become a member of the choir and that he decided to join in his second year at the university as well. Jasper shared, "Choir rehearsals were more like actual praise and worship services, and they could give off enriching energy."

They talked about the people on their floors or in the halls that invited them to rehearsal. Some shared that they found out about the choir through institutional meet and greets that they attended during the first few weeks of their time at the institution. One participant told me that her friend brought her to choir rehearsal at a time that she really needed support. Ruby shared the following: "During this time I was falling apart. All of my friends were part of the gospel choir and they were always inviting me to rehearsal, but I would always say no. But eventually it got to a point where I just almost had to go, because I just needed the support."

Most participants shared that their love of gospel music and their need to be in community with other African American students was a driving force for them to join the gospel choir. They talked about how large and how predominantly White the university was. The choir helped them build a community that supported them, helped them deal with the stresses of academia and provided a social environment that looked like most of the ones they had grown up in. The participants described how happy they felt about being in spaces with other African Americans with similar backgrounds compared to the dominant culture on campus, which was

White. Stan remarked, "I dealt with my culture shock by looking for people who shared the same values and beliefs that I had. I did not feel lonely on campus because I had found the choir for support." Tank also reported,

Choir members supported each other through very difficult personal and academic times.

They understood what each other was going through and would offer suggestions along with prayer. Many participants in the choir would go to church and social events together

During every decade that choir members attended the university they helped their peers manage the day-to-day pressures associated with being an African American student living on a predominantly White campus. Choir members helped decrease each other's feelings of isolation and not fitting in. They spent a lot of time during engagements at each other's churches getting to know more about each other's religion and faith. Ruby shared,

I used this time to explore my relationship with Christ and my friends were an integral part of my exploration. I loved building relationships and socializing with people. I loved them all and at that time we all loved each other and just had a good time. The choir was a happy place. The people in the choir just kept me going

The relationships between choir members and the friendships they built created a community of support. The composition of the choir changed from year to year as did the political and cultural context within which it operated, but the love of God and singing gospel music remained a constant and has continued to nourish these friendships over the years. These friendships lent strength to the participants to navigate their time at the university.

Fit

This study addressed the challenges faced by African American students in a PWI environment. Participants in this study identified how a sense of belonging and personal fit

contributed to their persistence in PWIs. According to Tinto (1993), students, like choir members, often need to find people like themselves in environments where they may not naturally fit in. This lack of support and a sense of not belonging can lead students to leave university.

Tinto's (1993) study highlights that student may depart from a university for many reasons. Students might choose to leave if they are overwhelmed by academic difficulties and need more support. Students may leave if they find the academic environment does not challenge them intellectually. Moreover, student must feel like they fit into the university community this is a very import factor for student. Tinto (1993) asserted that fitting could involve student being introduced to diverse experiences while on campus. Like meeting other students similar and different racial backgrounds, socioeconomic status, political views, religious affiliations, or lifestyle. Furthermore, Tinto (1933) argued that if students do not feel comfortable and included, they may leave the university. To summarize, Tinto's research highlights the significance of academic assistance, stimulating academic environment, and a sense of feeling into the academic and social environment enhances students' persistence to staying at the university.

For the study participants, fit looked like African American students who were interested in having a relationship with God and singing gospel music. Choir members were at different levels spiritually when they arrived at the university and each of them talked about their journey and understanding of their relationship with God. Furthermore, they expressed that as they grew in their understanding of God's ministry through song, they personally benefited, and their relationships grew stronger with the Lord and with individuals in the choir with whom they connected. Each of the choir members was searching for where they fit in at the university, where they fit in the African American community they were a part of, and eventually where

they fit into the choir. There is a dearth of information on student spirituality in higher education and its impact on students' lives as they matriculate through their institutions. A few of the former choir members struggled because they felt the university did not support them and they felt that they did not fit for several reasons. Ruby went home for a semester because of academic and personal struggles. Stan was having difficulties fitting in because he really did not understand what was required of him academically until he received the letter stating that he would be put on academic probation if he did not improve his academic standing. Maya changed her major because she did not get the support she needed from her advisor or her college. Maya did not feel she that fit in, so she chose a different college where she felt more supported.

Each participant shared how being a part of the choir made their experiences at the university more tolerable. One participant even said that it felt like going to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) because of the opportunity to be in fellowship with so many African Americans that provided them with a sense of belonging like the one that they had at home. Maya stated, "Members of the gospel choir spent quite a lot of time together given the number of rehearsals and engagements, along with spending time together at meals, in class, going to the mall, singing engagements, and going to Bible study. I cannot imagine how different that is than an HBCU." Maya's testament shows how integral the choir members were in her sense of belonging to the university. Tank shared how his sense of belonging with the choir helped him while he was having academic difficulties. He stated, "I was struggling academically. I stayed in the choir because I needed the support that the choir members offered."

When thinking about fit and religion for the students in this study, their spirituality and spiritual development was an outcome of their university experience. Each of them shared that their spirituality had been impacted during their time at the university and being a part of the gospel choir made them feel like they fit in. All of them shared that they were looking for a place that they fit in at the university while they were there. Stan shared the following about his experience looking for a place where he fit in on campus:

I got there in '72 and prior to that, most of the African American students that hit Michigan State came as a result of the '68 riots. So, the atmosphere on campus was very militant. Okay. We used to have an office called Black Student Affairs, and they were very militant, and then there were other militant groups. And so, the atmosphere was militant. That really wasn't me. I mean, I just wasn't cut from the same cloth because that's just wasn't again, part of my foundation, so it was kind of militant. And then racism was still heavy on the campus at the time. Okay. And I couldn't feel at home with BSA. I couldn't feel at home with even some of the white Christian groups. And even talking with that person that may look like me, but our backgrounds were different. When I talk about the Black church experience, they looked at me like I was talking in a foreign language. So, you know, connecting with Orpheus gave me that home

They were looking for people like themselves, African American students, which were harder to find during some decades. The participants from the 70s said the campus was very White and that there was some unrest that they felt dated back to the 1968 Detroit riots. Participants who came from larger urban areas tended to be a bit more distrusting of their White counterparts because they were not used to being around so many White people, something that some of the participants shared during their interviews.

The participants in my study, who all identify as Christians, highlight how their spirituality plays a significant role in their lives, helping them understand their purpose and providing comfort and encouragement, especially during challenging times. This spiritual aspect is crucial for them in finding their place, sense of belonging, and fit in the university community. Tank reflected on how his spirituality led the way to his sense of belonging through the conduit of the MSUGC, stating, "Because this was a PWI, it was nice to be able to congregate with other students of color. You know, that also had a similar love for singing."

Scholars like Renn and Reason (2013) and Astin (2011) have explored spirituality in higher education, emphasizing its broader significance beyond religious adherence. This broader perspective considers spirituality as a search for meaning, encompassing one's values, identity, and purpose in life. Pope and Moore (2004) also conducted a study of African American students participating in a gospel choir at a PWI, highlighting how spirituality provided comfort and encouragement for these students and was integral to their sense of belonging in the university community. Given the participant's reflections on their spirituality, it's clear that it played and still plays a vital role in the lives of these participants, helping them navigate their university experiences and find their purpose, through their sense of belonging. This could not be more evident than with Toot, who shared the following: "Even in my most difficult times, I never believed that I would not graduate from the university. A combination of my faith, finding the gospel choir, and never giving up, led to my successfully graduating. I had a plan and I followed it. The skills I learned in college have made me very successful in life and a contributing member of my community." It was this sense of belonging to the MSUGC that helped Toot to continue and persevere, allowing her to eventually receive her diploma.

The participants in the MSUGC were looking for their people. They were looking for a place to come together, sing, and praise the lord. This would allow them to feel a sense of belonging and a place where they fit in with those around them, which was significant in the context of their time at a PWI.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the four themes that were most impactful to choir members as they matriculated through the university. Each choir member shared their stories about the importance of their family from home, but also, the families they created while they were in the university and how important these relationships were and continue to be. When talking about their faith journey, each participant had a different path, but faith played a major role in their ability to maneuver through the many difficulties at the PWI. Attending a university is already difficult for African American students. It is more difficult for students who come with a spiritual background, who want to find "their people" so they can thrive in the environment.

Study participants spoke about how being a part of the gospel choir deterred them from getting into trouble. Without the support of choir members, they could have gotten into situations that would have jeopardized their academic careers. These friendships were respectful, supportive, and nurturing. Together the students created a space where it was safe for them to be their authentic selves. The choir provided support to students whatever their needs were.

What was most salient in the conversation with the choir members was that they were searching for a place and people like themselves to fit in at the university that was not welcoming or supportive to them academically and socially. For each participant the gospel choir was their home away from home. The choir was a place where they could be themselves with people like them, people who loved God and were not ashamed to say it out loud. Four themes of

family, faith, friends, and fit sustained gospel choir members gave them a sense of belonging and helped them persist to graduation.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERATURE, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a discussion of the study findings in relation to the research question, then shifts to contributions to literature on involvement and persistence, followed by limitations, recommendations for further research, and the conclusion. This study explored the stories of three women and three men who participated in a campus gospel choir while attending a university. Using narrative inquiry as my methodology, I addressed the following research question:

How do African American students perceive, or describe the effects of campus gospel choir involvement on their persistence at a predominantly white institution (PWI)?

Discussion

The goal of this study was to allow six participants to tell their stories in the ways that worked for them and to join them in the process of restorying so that stakeholders in the academic arena (e.g., administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals) will understand the importance of participation in the campus gospel choir and its impact on persistence to graduation. This study also illuminates the positive effect of participation in the campus gospel choir on students who are African American at PWIs and who are figuring out ways to integrate so they can persist to matriculation. This study contributes to a rich body of literature that addresses the importance of student integration (Astin, 1984, 1993; Harrison, 2015; Hausman, 2007; Kuh, 1997; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011; Stoker 2013; Tinto, 1987,1993).

The stories told by choir members highlighted the various ways that being in the choir influenced their experiences in college, as well as the lives they went on to lead post graduation.

As I described in Chapter Four, the main themes that became apparent through the analysis of the data were the importance of family, faith, friends, and fit. Overall, I learned that participating in the choir was deeply influential and transformative for the study participants. The time the study participants spent in the gospel choir gave each of them what they needed to persist to graduation. According to Astin (1993), links to a peer group is important for African American students' persistence at PWIs. While study participants did integrate into the larger institutional community, their main source of support was the choir.

The choir held varied meanings for members: some came to sing gospel music and others came to be with other Christians; others came for the social interaction the choir offered for African American students living on a PWI campus; still others came because they needed to be with other African American students for social and academic support. Participating in the choir affected students dramatically. It affected them as both individually and collectively. Choir members bonded to each other because they found ways to overcome their hardships, whether academic or personal. They knew that other choir members would be there for them.

The time choir members spent together created ways for them to navigate the numerous trials they faced at the university. The friendships they formed help them to mitigate harm by providing each of them with extended families that nurtured them throughout their time at the university and beyond. The six participants reminisced about the times that they spent with the choir members while undergraduates and the friends that they have stayed in touch with over the years. The friends became family and participants spoke about them lovingly. All the participants credited their involvement with the choir as being a place to sing, pray, and rejuvenate. Singing gospel music in the choir played a major role in making their time at the

university more palatable. Study participants found their people and a place where they fit that helped them to persist to graduation.

Contributions to Literature on Involvement and Persistence

This study adds to the literature available on the topic of African American student involvement in a PWI gospel choir and the impact of extracurricular student engagement outside of the classroom on persistence to graduation. It is important to note that the participants of this study did not refer to or understand Austin's I-E-O model regarding input, environment, and output. Furthermore, they could not appreciate Tinto's model about students integrating in the university community and did not use the vocabulary outlined in Kuh's model to describe their experiences. Each of these models, along with narrative inquiry as my methodology, helped me to center participants' voices and let them tell their stories, which allowed me as the researcher to restorying them.

Study participants' stories were complex, personal, and helped me to make meaning of their stories as data which is what narrative inquirers do (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry not only conveys information but brings information to life. During this process, according to the poet Pasternak, who asserted "that events catch fire on their way, through reporting a personal experience, dramatic events and even the simple unfolding of a sequence of actions, behaviors or people over time" (Pasternak as cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 553). The participants' stories, like the gospel music that they love to sing, was the vehicle that I used to catch fire and make the participants' stories come to life.

The participants' stories chronicled events as they unfolded over a 50-year time period and allowed me to see similarities that appeared over time (Astin, 2007). Astin's I-E-O Model was utilized in this study as a way of showing what the students brought in with them, what

happened to them during their time in the university environment, and what happened when they graduated and left the university. The three dimensions perspective of Astin's model also helped me to mark the passing of time. Just as Astin, Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional properties are "personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation), and space (personal and social)" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50), I kept these dimensional properties in my mind as I entered the field, because I was going to interview gospel choir participants from 50 years ago. This state of moving inward and outward and moving backward and forward helped me keep track of time and when things happened in the lives of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This study uniquely contributes to the research on extracurricular involvement, given the advantage of its insight into the individual perspective of choir members from four different decades. This study had the advantage of being able to reflect on the experience of participants from nearly 50 years ago. Their stories highlighted the many long lasting benefits experienced by African American students as a result of extracurricular involvement, which has not previously been described in the literature. Participants' involvement in the gospel choir experience during university contributed to these members' making sense of the academic environment, personal growth, sense of belonging, and the development of some of their future endeavors (Austin, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Salbo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011; Stoker, 2013).

The gospel choir helped students heal from environmental traumas and connect to communities of support and belonging. Tinto (1993) asserted that community membership was important to the persistence of African American students, and he believed that the more involvement in a variety of groups, the more likely students were to stay at the university. The

choir had a significant influence on the participants' lives post graduation. The experiences they had in the choir gave them the tools to navigate challenging relationships, problematic work environments and assisted them in reflecting on their spiritual life and purpose. This study highlights how involvement in extracurricular activities matter (Astin, 1993; Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011).

This study contributes to the discovery of the ongoing impact of campus involvement experiences, specifically that of involvement in a student organization such as the gospel choir. The literature on gospel choir participation as a form of persistence, creating a sense of belonging and community building at PWIs is looked at primarily as extracurricular campus involvement (Astin, 1993; Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Tinto, 1993).

Another finding in this research project was how the participants built community through their involvement in the gospel choir which also contributed to their faith journey during their time at a PWI that was secular. They spoke about the importance of being in community with like-minded people who believed in God, and how singing gospel music was their way of ministering to one another and also to the university and surrounding community. June (2008) in his book *Yet With A Steady Beat* explains the importance of gospel music to the survival of Black people in the United States. June stated:

There was found in some songs a deep religious, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and theological significance. The song sung and "Black churches" often speak of a brighter day, assurance, hope, being on the battlefield, heaven, victory, and the power of God. Many observers of religion and gospel singing will admit that few sing with such creativity, melody, fervor, and emotion as Black people (p.128)

It was in their singing that participants found and created community that sustained them, given that the university did not. I think that the university did not support the participants holistically, and agree with Astin (2004) when he stated:

that academia has for far too long encouraged us to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives, where we act either as if we are not spiritual beings, or as if our spiritual side is irrelevant to our vocation or work. Under these conditions, our work becomes divorced from our most deeply felt values and we hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, wholeness, and fragmentations with our colleagues. At the same time, we likewise discourage our students from engaging these same issues among themselves and with us (p. 38)

The gospel choir provided what the university could not provide for African American students who were looking for a place to be their authentic selves as people of faith who wanted to express it in singing, one of the oldest traditions in African American communities. Black people sang on slave ships, plantations, churches, colleges, universities, and even in the White House. We are still singing! MSUGC built a community that still supports them today in coping with the stresses they face, according to the participants of this study. The faith community that they created during their college years continues to support them after college through social media. They have been able to continue to evolve in their prayer lives and utilize each other for networking for their children who are coming to the university and for job opportunities around the country and even the world. It is the power of these relationships that unites these participants as a family for life.

Furthermore, this study advances the understanding of how African American students' involvement in campus gospel choirs helps them to persist and graduate from secular PWIs.

Previous research included very little information on this topic. After a thorough review of my field notes and interview transcripts none of the study participants mentioned the fact that MSU is a secular university. However, every participant commented on the fact that MSU is a PWI, which was a major contributing factor to them seeking out and joining the choir. The idea of the impact of being at a secular institution could be an area for future research with gospel choir members on persistence to graduation.

Researchers have been studying social and academic integration, student involvement, retention, and persistence theories for some time, but my research focused on how African American students perceive or describe the effects of gospel choir involvement on their persistence at a PWI (Astin, 1993; Harrison, 2015; Hunn, 2014; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Stoker, 2013; Tinto, 1993). I could find only two dissertations, one master's thesis and two published articles that discussed the benefits of involvement in campus gospel choirs as a way of providing African American students with support (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011; Stoker, 2013). As an extracurricular organization the gospel choir helped to minimize the trauma of discrimination, isolation, marginalization, and alienation that often-left African American students "less interested in participating in social groups and organizations and furthered their marginalization from the mainstream cultures of campus" (Astin, 1993; Brouke, 2010; Fisher & Hartmann, 1995, as cited in Quaye & Harper, p.19, 2015; Tinto 1993). In the small body of research that exists, researchers found that gospel choirs helped participants feel a sense of belonging and connect to others like themselves for comfort and support (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2008, Stoker, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011).

My study builds on the work of Sablo (2008) and Harrison (2015). My study's findings are similar those of Sablo (2008) and Harrison (2015) and validates their findings that

participants in the gospel choir benefited from their extracurricular activities which allowed them to persist to graduation. One major difference from Sablo and Harrison's studies is my use of narrative inquiry to ensure that the choir members told their stories in their own words. With their permission I was able to retell their stories in deep rich thick descriptions.

Gospel Choir as a High Impact Practice

My contribution to the literature is related to looking at the gospel choir through the lens of Kuh's (1993) High Impact Practices. I believe participation in the gospel choir can be considered a high impact practice: because 1) it provides students contact with each other; 2) it gives students an opportunity to interact with other students on campus; 3) it requires a large time commitment (6-12 hours per week) for rehearsals and performances; and 4) it includes community outreach. I believe that when students must learn many lyrics, this is their common intellectual experience. Participation in the choir expands participants' ability to communicate both orally and in written form. Choir members also have an opportunity to collaborate on handling the logistics of performances including song choice, transportation, food, etc. This study provides an entrée into applying high impact practices to extracurricular activities such as participation in the gospel choir.

Given the popularity of campus gospel choirs and how many students and community members are engaged in them each year, it is unfortunate that more scholars in higher education research have not considered the effect and influence that gospel choir participation can have on its African American members. Maya said during her interview that the lack of research may have something to do with the fact the gospel choir was a religious organization. This study is unique in that it contributes to the literature specifically surrounding campus gospel choir participation, a topic that has been relatively unexplored through higher education literature.

When I started my research, I could only find two articles about the gospel choir in the university archives. As I talked to the archivist who helped me find these two articles, she asked me to provide her with a copy of my dissertation to preserve a portion of the gospel choir's rich history on campus. Furthermore, given the choir's widespread popularity with African Americans on campus and in the surrounding community, this study served to situate African American students' stories about the benefits of their involvement in this intensive extracurricular student organization. Understanding African American student experiences through narratives given my research question, narrative inquiry methodology allowed me to give each participant an opportunity to tell their stories with richness, depth, and clarity. For the participants in this study (as described with more detail in APPENIX A) retelling their stories helped them make sense of the various ways the gospel choir influenced many aspects of their lives. For some participants, the choir was the place where they gained an awareness of who they were, transformed their identities, and expanded their faith journey. Some found their purpose in helping other students navigate their way through the university. After being involved with the gospel choir for so many years, I came to understand how important my time in the choir had been for me as a student and now as a professional. My wanting to bring attention to my experience in the gospel choir and the experience of other choir members is exactly what prompted this study. The study shows that participants' involvement in the choir shared that their experiences still hold meaning for them today. I have a couple of examples in Chapter Four of how specific experiences affected choir members' long-term outcomes in many ways.

The four themes that I found (Family, Faith, Friends and Fit) are similar to the themes that both Sablo (2008) and Harrison (2015) found. The students' families of origin, or the

families they chose while they were at the university, played a significant role in their sense of belonging and security at PWIs.

Faith was a second theme that resonated throughout the three studies. Participants spoke of faith as being what brought them to the choir, kept them in the choir and kept them at the university. All three studies included information about the origins of gospel music in the Black church and how gospel music helped African Americans survive slavery. Faith, as part of the Black experience, played a role in antebellum times, through the civil rights movement and today remains the beacon on the hill, drawing African Americans into community with one another, both on and off campus.

In all three studies, finding friends in the choir was critical to the participants' adjustment at the university. Most of the participants in all three studies shared that their involvement in the gospel choirs led to their development of friendships that were helpful and shaped their behavior to include positive pursuits and steer away from partying, drinking, and smoking. Participants also did not want their behavior to reflect negatively on the choir. Older choir members mentored younger choir members, providing guidance in terms of which classes to take. In my study participants noted that they had maintained the friendships they formed over many years.

Fit was the final theme that was included in all three studies. Study participants sought out others like themselves. This sense of having found where they fit created a sense of belonging. Study participants talked about the culture shock they experienced coming from a supportive, mostly African American community to a PWI where they felt a sense of sadness, loneliness, and isolation (Harrison, 2015; Pope & Moore, 2004; Sablo, 2004; Stoker, 2013). Once they joined the choir the university became more manageable.

My study again differed from the work of Sablo and Harrison in that all my participants had graduated from the university. In some cases, study participants had to reflect back almost 50 years to their time in the choir. I purposefully chose not to include any current choir members to participate in this study because I was serving as the faculty staff advisor. I wanted there to be some distance between me and the students.

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Understanding Student Experiences through Narratives

For some participants, the choir was the place where they gained an awareness of who they were, transformed their identities, and expanded their faith journey. Some found their purpose in helping other students navigate their way through the university. After being involved with the gospel choir for so many years, I came to understand how important my time in the choir had been for me as a student and now as a professional. My wanting to bring attention to

my experience in the gospel choir and the experience of other choir members is exactly what prompted this study. The study shows that participants' involvement in the choir shared that their experiences still hold meaning for them today.

I have a couple of examples in Chapter Four of how specific experiences affected choir members' long-term outcomes in many ways. First, Stan shared the gospel choir helped fuel his desire to become a minister and how his participation in the choir prompted him to become engaged in other leadership roles both inside and outside of the choir on campus. He even credited the choir for increasing his faith walk with the Lord. Stan then became the campus minister for a student Bible study. He said after much reflection and in consultation with his wife, he believed the Lord had called him to the position. Reflecting many years later, this outcome became significant because it allowed Stan to understand how his participation in the choir had long lasting effects.

Ruby also found that reflection was a powerful experience for her. Initially she said that her experience in the choir had not been particularly impactful. She even lamented that it was a very difficult time for her because she had complex personal and social concerns. But after we started going through the interview process, she realized that actually the choir had been beneficial and that she had only been concentrating on the negative things that happened toward the end of her time in the choir which had tainted her thoughts about the choir. I had thought that Ruby would be the participant who would have that being in the choir could be difficult, or that participation in the choir was not as beneficial. She said that the interviews were therapeutic and reminded her how important the choir had been. It provided her with a family, friends, and a stronger faith base. Ruby's experience in the choir motivated her to become a teacher so that she could give back to others. Toot shared that she was not raised in the church and that her family

only attended church on major holidays like Easter and Christmas. She came to the choir for more social reasons, looking for other African American students to bond with and she loved to sing. She told me because of her time in the gospel choir she had a transformational experience and developed her own personal relationship with the Lord that changed her life. Stan, Ruby and Toot expressed having a lifelong desire and passion to be involved in ministry and education. That, paired with their desire to make a difference in their fields as well as their communities, were all very important and significant to the participants mentioned. These examples show how the choir affected them significantly, ultimately affecting their futures.

My study used narrative inquiry methods and aimed to explore the long-term impact of participation in the gospel choir on students' lives. This study gives student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty, and staff members an alternative way to support African American students at their university that would help them persist to graduation in increased numbers. Shea (2019) utilized feminist narrative to study nine women who participated in a production of *The Vagina Monologues* while in college. Study participants reflected over a five-year period and the impact participating in the production had on their lives. Their experiences and stories spoke to their own transformations from being involved with the production. Shea's questions ring true in my study as well "does time, in addition to inputs and environments, affect outcomes years later?" (Shea, 2019, p. 199). My study findings suggest that input and environment did have an effect on outcomes in the lives of gospel choir members many years later.

The Lasting Impact of Gospel Choir Participation

This study contributes significantly to the literature on gospel choir involvement and how it impacts persistence for African American students at PWIs. As described throughout this project, participants are still reaping the benefits of their involvement in the choir years later. The

study participants, along with a few other members of the gospel choir who were not included in this study, gathered to sing at a Black alumni homecoming event in 2022. Gospel choir alumni had one day to meet and greet each other at Stan's church and had dinner together. Choir members talked about the good old days when they were actively participating in the choir. Participants also wanted to know how they could help the current members of the gospel choir. The next morning choir members met for breakfast and then went to rehearsal. Participants had not sung together for over 30 years, but we got in our sections (sopranos, altos, and tenors) like we had always done. While we were rehearsing, former gospel choir members who were not participating in the Black alumni event heard about the event, stopped by and shared their testimonies. They wanted to be in community with each other again and wanted to support the choir.

One of the testimonies that still stays with me today is of a previous president of the choir who shared that he was torn between continuing his time as the president of the choir as a student and graduating to pursue employment in engineering. He graduated and while he was applying for engineering jobs he worked as a bus driver. On his wedding day he only had \$6 in his pocket; the monetary gifts that the couple received for wedding presents really made a difference in their ability to enjoy their honeymoon. He credited his participation in the choir for getting him his job with General Motors as an engineer, because the person who reviewed his resume saw that he had served as president of the gospel choir. His experience resonated with the human resources representative who had been a member of a gospel choir when he attended college. He was offered the position and an opportunity to travel all over the world and went from having \$6 in his pocket to receiving a \$2 million severance package when he retired from his position at General Motors. He just thanked the Lord.

Limitations

This study of former university students' reflections on their involvement in a campus gospel choir has limitations. In this section I will address the research design decisions that I made to further investigate the meanings that African American students ascribed to their participation and involvement in the gospel choir through a narrative inquiry that illuminated the stories of six participants who attended a PWI.

I called each participant and asked them to be in this study. I wanted to get not only a good gender mix, but also wanted to capture a forty-year period even though the choir has been together for over fifty years. The voice of choir members not represented in this study are not silent, because during this process I have had other conversations with choir members who wanted to participate but due to the lack of time and the type of study I was doing it wasn't possible to share those voices in this study.

The first limitation of the study is that it only included African Americans students who participated in the choir. Over the years the choir has had members who identified as White, Hispanic, Native American or Indigenous, and members representing these groups should be included in future research so that their voices can be heard as well. Missing from this study are the perspectives of participants who described a more negative experience in their participation in the gospel choir. This study largely encompasses participants who had predominantly positive experiences associated with their time in the choir.

Recommendations for Practice

There are many things that student affairs professionals can do in the wake of this study. This study brings to light the important role that gospel choirs can have on the persistence to graduation for African American students. It is important for student affair professionals to look

at organizations, such as a gospel choir, as a high impact practice that will allow for success for students both within and outside of the classroom.

Further training on the importance of student organizations is imperative for people doing direct work with students, who are helping to shape their time and experience at the university. These trainings will highlight the importance of student organizations and how they help students to achieve their ultimate goal of graduating. Student affairs professionals need to be aware of resources like student organizations on campus. This study will also make them aware of how a gospel choir can be a resource to African American students specifically, allowing them to use their own experiences as a resource for their students, if their university has a gospel choir.

Advisors who advise African American students may need to go a little deeper to understand what those students' needs are. This would not just be from the academic perspective, but how the student perceives their time on campus and what support they might need. These conversations can help to shed light to the advisor, who can use their knowledge of student organizations to help the student get more involved, allowing them to feel more of a sense of belonging on their campus. Inspired by Tinto's (2012) *Rethinking Institutional Action*, who asserts that success in college is most widely shaped by students' experience in the classroom, it is imperative that faculty are given access to the same knowledge of campus resources and student organizations as their advising and student affair counterparts.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study highlights the possibilities for future research and all of the important data that could be gleaned from it, specifically in the areas of persistence and gospel choir participation as a high impact practice for African American students in PWIs. As noted above, there are limitations in this research given the choice of participants and the limited perspectives that were

available to the study. Additionally, some themes that emerged through the qualitative methodology used could be further explored in a future study utilizing different methodologies that expanded on those themes. A future study could explore the experiences of choir members who did not persist to graduation, choir members who identify as LGBTQIA2S+, non-African American choir members, and individuals in the choir who were atheist. Other topics for consideration include exploring the impact of university music programs that have gospel choir as part of their curriculum, versus the impact of participation in an extracurricular gospel choir, versus the impact of not having a gospel choir.

As I reflected on the study, I recognized that the analysis was missing detail about the interactions choir members had with faculty and student affairs professionals. The interaction of the participants and faculty/student affairs professionals seldom came up during the interviews. A significant body of literature exists that addresses the importance of students having access to faculty and student affairs officials outside of the classroom when designing extracurricular engagement. Examples of this engagement would be undergraduate research, internships, service learning, community outreach and education abroad opportunities. While this study was limited to the experience of students at one university, future studies could explore the experience of African American students at multiple universities who are involved with gospel choirs.

One methodology I considered for the study early on was conducting a survey. However, given the dearth of research on PWIs that examine African American students and their involvement in campus gospel choirs, I chose not to use this methodology for this study. The survey method would have had the benefits of giving me the opportunity of "gathering large scale data in order to make generalizations, generating statistically manipulable data, gathering context-free data" (Chen, Manion, & Morrison, p. 128). Had I used a survey, I could have

reached a larger population of individuals who had participated in campus gospel choirs. However, I decided to focus on one gospel choir and conduct a more in-depth study of a limited number of participants. Given my positionality with the gospel choir, I wanted participants' voices and their stories to be represented. I have been embedded in the choir for 48 years, formed trusting relationships with choir members and decided to utilize narrative inquiry as my methodology, which better fit the scope of this project.

A future research opportunity would be a longitudinal study with choir members giving interviews when they join and every year they participate in the choir, when they leave the choir, and then every year after that. This would yield a rich continuous data source that can trace changes, and with great accuracy over time, a series of time and place interviews instead of past reflections to go on (Gorard, 2001b:86 as cited by Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). There is a dearth of longitudinal data about high impact practices (Brownell and Swaner, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, Brownell and Swaner (2009) asserted that there is a small amount of research that looks at specific student populations (i.e. underrepresented minorities, low income, and first-generation students) (p. 157). The longitudinal studies that do exist are primarily quantitative in nature (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee, 2000; Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015).

Conclusion

In conducting this study, I sought to understand to what extent and how campus gospel choir members perceived and describe the effects of their involvement on their persistence to graduation at a PWI.

By interviewing six former choir members, I sought to expand the literature surrounding African American students' persistence, outcomes, and the long lasting effects of participating in a dynamic campus gospel choir that is a high impact, extracurricular experience. The six

participants recounted their stories from the past 50 years, shared the numerous ways participating in the gospel choir impacted their lives and what they have been doing post-university.

Moreover, there is power in giving voice to, hearing, and exploring others' stories. In the case of the participants, who were involved in the gospel choir, their stories tell of the importance of family, growing in faith, finding friends, and finding where they fit and their people. Further, study participants shared their successes, trauma and how being involved with the choir helped them heal and overcome adversity while attending the university and beyond.

This study was a labor of love for me, and it gave me an opportunity to share how important participating in the campus gospel choir was to my persistence to graduation. This study allowed me to share my passion for storytelling and gospel music and give other African Americans opportunities to tell their stories. I hope that these stories are instrumental in empowering others to add their voices to making meaning of their experiences and involvement in gospel choirs at other PWIs.

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APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I used a narrative inquiry interview protocol which aims to collect rich, in-depth stories from the six participants to understand their experiences, perspectives, and meanings they attribute to their involvement in the Michigan State University Gospel Choir. During the study I kept in mind that narrative inquiry while humans naturally create narratives and stories when interpreting their own lives, certain data collection methods are more conducive to understanding the research participants' sense of self narrative. That is why I chose semi-structured interviews, because that gave the interviewee the space to go on narrative tangents and fully convey their internal narratives which is what narrative inquiry researchers want. Conversely, had I used structured interviews that followed a question-and-answer format or written surveys, these would have been less likely to capture narrative data richness. (Caine et al., 2013)

As mentioned earlier, narrative analysis has dual layers of interpretation. Researchers should not take narrative interviews at face value because they are not just summarizing a research participant's self-narrative. Instead, researchers should actively interpret how the interviewee created that self-narrative. Thus, narrative analysis emphasizes taking verbatim transcription of narrative interviews, where it is important to include pauses, filler words, and stray utterances like "um...". (Clandinin, 2006, p. 46) Below is the narrative inquiry interview protocol outline that I used to guide me during interviews:

Introduction

Greeting and rapport: building even though I knew some of the participants very well it had been some time since I had talked with a few, but this was new territory. As a researcher I wanted to make sure that as I entered the field, they knew I had their best interest at heart and that I wanted to help them have the best experience possible as we co-created their stories. To do

this, I was very transparent and told them they could ask me any questions that they needed to ask and that I would do my best to answer them I also said that I was learning with them and from them during this experience. I explained to each participant that I would be observing them and taking notes and if at any time they did not feel comfortable, just to let me know and I would stop the interview.

I also shared that I was going to be giving them each a pseudonym or they could choose the pseudonym of their liking to try and mitigate anyone from knowing who they were. I did reach out to each participant prior to the formal interviews to check and make sure that they were still interested and comfortable with participating in the study and all of them replied yes. I established a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere, and I told them that I would arrange for interviews that met their needs whether it was online through zoom, over the phone, or face to face interviews. I gave them the choice and most of the interviews were done face to face. I introduced myself and told them what my role as a researcher in the study was. I would be listening, observing, and taking notes. I also shared with them the purpose for the interview which was to capture through semi-structured questions which allowed them to have freedom and flexibility about sharing their involvement with the MSU gospel choir and describing and explaining their perceptions about the choir and the university. I emphasized the confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation in the study.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS STORIES

This narrative inquiry study involved interviewing six African American members of a gospel choir at a large mid-western land grant university. The members of the choir who participated in this study participated in the gospel choir between 1970 and 2000. Originally there were six members of the choir who were identified as participants. Study participation was voluntary. One of the participants who submitted his completed consent form, chose to not participate in the study. After his withdrawal, an additional participant was added, for a total of six.

The stories of the six participants as "data" are presented as life histories to allow for as much context, voice, depth, and viewpoint to emerge, while still providing some structure to the narratives. Each participant's experience sheds light on how they were able to be academically successful and tells the story of how they navigated their environment and made sense of their experiences in a predominantly white institution (PWI). The participants all felt that the university did not nurture their success, however, they were not hindered by the lack of nurturing because of their participation in the campus gospel choir. All the study participants described the benefits of participating in the gospel choir and how participation helped them through the institution to graduation. There are common themes across all their stories. However, I allow their individual stories to illuminate their individual truths. Each participant was invited based on the years they were involved in the choir. Their stories span three decades and are organized chronologically from the 1970s through 2000s.

Stan's Story

Stan is 68, stands 5 feet 5 inches tall and has a medium build. He has medium brown skin with red undertones, brown eyes, wears his hair short and sports a goatee. He is a man of God who is faithful to his family and the church that he pastors with his wife. Stan was raised in the church by his grandmother who he said he never wanted to disappoint. The church still plays a prominent role in his life today. Stan loves all gospel music, likes to sing, directs the choir, and preaches like the Baptist ministers that I grew up listening to. Stan loves the Lord with all his heart and glorifies God's name by attending to His word and people. Stan is outgoing, energetic, passionate, engaging, charismatic and authentic. I asked him if he wanted to use a pseudonym for this project and he said "no, just call me Stan".

I first met Stan many years ago. The one thing that I remembered about him was that he was very upbeat and carried a lot of keys. You could almost hear him coming down the hallway to rehearsal when he entered the building. He seemed to know who he was and took up lots of space in the rooms he entered. When Stan walked into a room, you could not help but notice him. He was loud and he talked very fast and when he got excited, he talked even faster. Even then, Stan sounded like the preacher he was going to become. Stan usually wore a suit. When he arrived at rehearsals, he quickly took his place on the first row of the tenor section and just sang until whatever he was dealing with was gone and the only thing left was praising God through song.

Stan is one of the most motivating individuals that I have had the privilege and pleasure of knowing for almost fifty years. Even in retirement he is one the hardest working men I know. Stan is always busy; it seems like the only time he slows down is when he is singing. While Stan was a student, he worked full-time and was also going to school to obtain his master's degree in

social work. As busy as he was, he continued to be committed to the gospel choir. The choir helped Stan stay grounded in his faith and "served as his family away from home." He found a group of people much like himself that loved the Lord and enjoyed singing.

Stan is married and has four children, one daughter and three sons, who he loves unconditionally with all of his heart and soul. His children have given him and his wife years of love, happiness, and unspeakable joy. Stan is an amazing father to his four children. He and his wife have been married for over forty-five years. She is the love of his life. Stan met his wife as he was walking down the hall of a resident hall with some of his fraternity brothers handing out flyers for a dance that was happening that night. He saw his wife in a dorm room with some other women. He walked in and invited the women to the dance, and they attended. Stan said he just kept inviting her until they married in 1977. He routinely tells people that he is still a newlywed.

Stan joined the choir in 1972. He has been affiliated with the choir off and on for many years and is the oldest person to participate in this study. As a founding member of the choir his insight is so helpful and meaningful to understanding the role the choir has played in members' lives for over four decades. I was very excited that Stan accepted my invitation to participate in this project. His input has been so helpful in illuminating the role the choir played in its members' lives historically and today.

Stan has maintained close contact with many of the choir members that he sang with at the university. When I was thinking about people that I wanted to include in this research project, I thought Stan would be perfect because of his connection to choir members' he sang with in the 1970s and his ability to express how important participating in the gospel choir was for him and others.

I am honored that Stan trusted me to retelling his story. During the time he actively participated in the gospel choir he dedicated countless hours of love and support to it and he had many roles in the choir.

Genesis

Stan "grew up in Inkster, Michigan where he lived with his mother and father. His father worked at Ford Motor Company and his mom was a homemaker. Neither of them went to college. He had seven brothers and four sisters. Stan told me that his grandmother was the backbone of their family. He said that he "loved his mother and father but had an amazingly special relationship with his grandmother." Stan grew up in the Black Missionary Baptist Church tradition and was very active in the church.

Out of all the people in the world I never wanted to disappoint her. I was not really concerned if my mom, dad got mad, oh well, they'll get over it. But my grandmother, there was just something within me it's like I can't afford for my grandmother, grandma to be unhappy

As Stan got older, he understood why his relationship with his grandmother was so special. He knew his grandmother would always love him and tell the truth; other people would not.

First of all, I knew my grandmother loved me unconditionally. That was number one.

Second, out of everybody in the world, my grandmother was going to tell me the truth and she didn't care if it was popular or not

His love of his grandmother and her words always kept him going even during his most difficult times in his life because he did not want to make her unhappy. Over time, as he matured he usually made better decisions. Stan believed God was interceding for him. He was rather ill-behaved and was expelled from the school district. I was shocked to hear that Stan had been

expelled from the Inkster school district. I did not ask him why. His mother was very upset and crying because one of her children would not graduate from high school. His mother said she didn't know what to do with him because there were no other high schools in Inkster, there was only one.

Stan said that "God's hand was on this situation." His aunt said she would work it out for him. His aunt also wanted to help calm down his mother who was worried about him not graduating high school. Stan would have been the only child in the family to not graduate high school. "I knew that God was going to work it out for me. My aunt had a friend who had just become a principal in Dearborn Heights, next to Inkster. She told the principal that she had a nephew that's crazy and he is just out of control and that he needed a school to go to." After speaking to his aunt, the principal decided to let Stan attend the high school in Dearborn Heights.

On Stan's first day at his new high school the principal met with him and told him that he was not going to tolerate the behavior that caused him to be expelled from his last high school. Stan really did not take what the principal said seriously until the principal said that he was instructing one of the security team members that if Stan sneezed wrong, he would be kicked out of the school. Stan said that he was afraid and that it was a traumatic event that changed his life. After the conversation with the principal, Stan went to see a guidance counselor with one question in mind; how fast and how many credits did he need to get out of there? Stan put all his energy into graduating as soon as he could. Because he focused on his coursework, he was able to graduate six months early.

During his senior year of high school Stan started applying to universities to attend in the fall. His choice of school was based on three criteria: the school was close to home, the amount of money he was offered, and the campus was beautiful. Stan was supposed to start his first year

of college in 1972 but because he graduated six months early, he started his college career in 1971.

Psalms

Stan moved into his residence hall in the fall of 1971 with the help of his family members. He experienced a major culture shock because he hadn't seen that many White people. Growing up in Inkster there were some White people in his neighborhood, but mostly African Americans. Stan had a Black roommate in college. He commented that he did not see many people that looked like him. Stan explained that what he meant by culture shock was that he grew up in a mostly Black community that supported and nurtured him. Stan wanted me to understand what it was like on campus when he got there in 1972.

The environment when we got there in 1972. Let me give you a little history. And prior to that, most of the African American students that hit the university came as a result of the 68 riots. So, the atmosphere on campus was very militant. Okay. We used to have an office called Black Student Affairs, and they were very militant, and there were one or two other militant groups. The atmosphere was militant. That really wasn't me. I mean, I wasn't cut from that cloth as the members of that Office of Black Affairs, OBA. So those were the groups that kind of permeated, if you will, the environment.

Stan stumbled upon gospel choir members when he was in the dorm visiting some friends. The choir members were singing in the hallway. That was how he found out about the choir.

And they were singing and so forth. And I was like, you know, what church you go to, and they really were not connected to a church, that I can remember. And they said, well we're part of a choir on campus. And so, I kind of asked about it. And they told me when rehearsals were. It took me three or four weeks before I got there, but I knew okay, this

may be an option. And so out of all the other connections that I had made on campus, they weren't working. So, when I got to gospel choir, and again, it was like-minded people, people who love the Lord. I felt more at home there than I did any other places. And I had been to other organizations like InterVarsity, Campus Crusade and one or two other groups, but there was no connection there. Nothing that I could connect to. They looked at me like why are you here? Because in most of those places, when I showed up, I was probably the only Black face there. Maybe there might have been one other. And even talking with people that look like me, but had different backgrounds, I felt when I talked about the Black church experience, they looked at me like I was talking in a foreign language. So, you know, connecting with gospel choir gave me that sense of home that I was searching for on campus

Stan dealt with his culture shock by looking for people who shared the same values and beliefs that he did. Stan said he never felt lonely on campus because he had found the choir for support and joined the fraternity which connected him with Black people that helped him navigate his culture shock and the university. He did say that the racism left a heaviness on the environment on campus. When he got there, he felt that some Black students and Black student organizations were very militant. Stan shared that he did not fit in with the militant presence on campus at that time. He really wanted to be around like-minded people who loved the Lord so he gravitated toward the choir where he found fellowship, family and faith. Stan shared that the tools he utilized to help him persist to graduation were the gospel choir, who he called his anchor, and faculty members that belonged to his fraternity who helped him navigate the university structure.

Stan joined the choir and said that the choir was welcoming and like a family to him. He later joined the fraternity. However, he shared that his fraternity did not have the same family feel as the choir. The fraternity did not feed his spiritual needs. The choir provided the connection to the divine that had always been in his life, something that is grandmother, father and mother nourished in his home. Speaking about his experience in the fraternity, Stan said

They didn't have that genuine, if you will, love and concern for me as a person. They didn't have what would I call that level of camaraderie. It just wasn't there. So, from that you know, I joined the choir

Stan joined the choir in 1972 and actively participated in the choir until 1985 and again in the 1990s. He also said he joined the choir to please his grandmother, because he was brought up in the church. Stan was walking down the hall and he saw three women singing gospel music. He was drawn to them because it reminded him of his Christian foundation. The women invited Stan to check out the gospel choir. Stan shared that:

It took him a few weeks before he attended a choir rehearsal, but once he did, he felt like he had found a place where he fit in. It felt like home. the choir members were like brothers and sisters and when he interacted with their parents, he felt like he had more mothers and fathers

He received three of his degrees from the university and founded a Christian student organization to fill a void that was created when a similar Christian student organization disbanded after their advisor left the group. Stan was also very active in the local churches in town. He not only sang in the choir, but also directed it and served on the executive board. Stan loved gospel music; it was part of the spiritual base that he grew up with. He also shared how important the choir was for helping him not to feel lonely in such a large institution where there

were not a lot of Black students. He said that he had extended his family and that he had more mothers and brothers and sisters because of the relationships he had formed with choir members. He shared that there were times when he didn't do well on exams and that he would come to choir rehearsal and have what he calls spiritual therapy. I asked him to explain what spiritual therapy was for him and he said that there were songs that the choir would sing that would speak to him and give him words of encouragement so that he didn't give up on his classes. The songs also helped him stop thinking about leaving the university. The songs and fellowship were enough to minister to Stan's spirit and then he would go back and try again.

In his first and second years at the university Stan said he was not really applying himself academically. He referred to himself as "mischievous". Even though he had a network set up that could help him navigate the university structure he was not utilizing it to its fullest potential. During his second year he received a letter that let him know he would be on academic probation if he didn't improve his grades. Stan said he didn't know what academic probation meant, so he promptly ignored the first letter. One day while he was playing cards with friends, he went to his mailbox and he had gotten a second letter. One of his friends told him that the university was going to kick him out if he did not improve his grades in one term. Stan thought that the university would not kick him out because he had paid all his bills. However, after he received the second letter, he reached out to his support network to talk with an advisor.

According to Stan, the advisor had thoroughly gone over the last two years of his academic record and was prepared to talk to him about how he was going to make the necessary improvements so he could stay at the university. What really got Stan's attention was that she said that she was going to call his grandmother. The advisor had a relative that went to the same church as Stan's grandmother, and she knew that he had a special relationship with his

grandmother. At this point Stan shared that his heart was racing, and he was pleading with her not to call his grandmother. In that moment he changed from not applying himself to being a serious student. Stan said with his newfound enthusiasm for academic excellence he was able to graduate early once again. He did not want to disappoint his grandmother by getting suspended from the university.

Stan was the first member of his immediate family to attend a four-year university and graduate. He said that he did not want to disappoint his grandmother by not graduating and so he pushed himself academically with the help of his advisors and the choir. Stan's grandmother's influence on him was amazing. At one point he thought he might not graduate but his grandmother expected him to graduate and so he did. Stan had an advisor he met with frequently who checked on his academic progress and supported him personally as well. She worked with him on his schedule and reviewed his assignments. She made sure that Stan's financial needs were met as well. On one occasion she even had him come over and cut her grass so that he could have some pocket money. Stan knew her family and her daughters told him that he was her favorite student. Years later his advisor's daughters would call upon Stan to eulogize both their parents at their homegoing celebrations.

Supported by his faith, family, faculty, advisor, and the gospel choir Stan managed to graduate earlier than he had originally expected from his undergraduate studies. He credits God and choir for his success at the university. In Stan's opinion, "the gospel choir served as a training ground for many of the members for roles that they would take on during their time in the choir and when they left to serve in their communities." According to Stan, "being in the gospel choir helped him and other choir members develop spiritually, socially, and academically.

He shared that "members of the gospel choir helped each other 1 out their class schedules and advised each other on what professors to take for particular courses. They studied together to help keep each other motivated and encouraged each other when classes weren't going so well

Fellowship was really important because there weren't a lot of groups at that time that were Christian based. Stan told me that he looked into other organizations on campus, but they didn't feel right to him either because they were all white and he was the only Black person in the group or because he did not feel a connection because they were lacking the spiritual element that he needed. Stan said that the choir offered a fellowship that was comfortable, consistent and familiar to what he had when he was at home. He said that the rehearsals was like going to church.

I can remember a time where we would come for rehearsal at 6 p.m., and there were many times we wouldn't leave until 10 p.m., and nobody was complaining 'cause we had church, you know, and for a lot of us, you know myself included, rehearsal wasn't really rehearsal, a lot of time it was our only place to fellowship, it was our only real church, it was, if you will. our spiritual therapy

The gospel choir was a place where you could just come, and it didn't matter what your background was. There were members who were Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, Church of God in Christ, Presbyterians, Catholic, African Episcopal Methodist or not sure of where you were faith-wise, all were welcome to sing. The gospel choir was made up of 18, 19, 20, and 21-year -old. The choir came together because individuals shared the love of gospel music, not doctrines. Stan said that the gospel choir challenged members in many ways but always allowed them their right to be authentically themselves.

The beauty of the gospel choir was that you could be yourself. We had people, you know, from baby Christians to mature Christians, and some that weren't Christian, but through the journey many of them became Christians and I think part of that is the gospel choir culture of accepting people where they were on their journey. We challenge you to get better, we challenge you to be better, we challenge you to get your life better, but no one forced you and no one was condemned

Exodus

Stan graduated from the university in 1976 with a B.S. in Social Work, B.A. in Urban Health, a master's in counseling education in 1978 and a Ph.D. in Christian Counseling. He received his first three degrees from the same university and his doctorate from a theological university. Stan worked for the State of Michigan for 35 years as a social worker and administrator.

Currently, Stan is the senior pastor of a local community Baptist Church. He has been in ministry for over 40 years. Stan is also the founder, and former director, of Career and Life Consultants. He has over 35 years of serving as a Christian counselor specializing in marriage counseling. Stan had the opportunity to counsel thousands of couples and help them bring quality into their marriages. Furthermore, Stan is well known in his community because he hosts a radio program called "Time of Praise" and a television program called the "Faith Hour".

Stan served the Lord in a variety of different ways throughout his career. Early on, students, many of whom were in the gospel choir, asked Stan to become their campus minister, a role he had for over thirty years. After consultation with his wife, they founded a campus ministry called "Just for Christ," a student organization. Stan has served as the moderator for the Central Baptist Association and currently serves as the President of the Michigan African

American Fellowship with the Southern Baptist Convention. He is the proud father of four adult children, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. He is the author of the books "Whatever the Question, the Answer is Prayer", "Meritorious Marriage", and "Time to Pray". Stan has not slowed down. He travels preaching and teaching the word, both domestically and internationally. Given the countless hours he has ministered to people, he has been blessed. Stan has serviced the Lord with excellence throughout his career.

The gospel choir helped Stan stay true to his Christian values because he found a group of people that allowed him to develop his faith. Stan's capacity to build strong lifelong relationships even surprised him. He had no idea that he would find lifelong friends by joining the choir, but that's what happened. "We have been there for each other when the trials of life have come and it's good to know that you have friends who support and pray with and for you." Stan remarked that no matter how strong you think you are, you need someone to lean on who is not going to push you away, but draw you close and pray. He is grateful for the opportunity that he had in the choir to grow as a leader, mentor and as a Christian. I have no doubt that Stan's grandmother would be happy with all that he has achieved and how he has kept God at the center of all that he has done.

Maya's Story

Maya is 5 feet 7 inches tall and has long dark hair, brown skin with a red undertone, and brown eyes. Maya is on fire for the Lord and gifted by him as well. She is a talented piano player, from Mozart to the hymn notes. Maya is an accomplished singer and an amazing choir director. Her singing is inspirational, powerful, and uplifting. Maya is a singer, choir director, and minister. She is one of the few people I know who can play the piano, direct the choir, sing the solo, and minister to three or four hundred people in the audience simultaneously.

It is a pleasure to see Maya taking up space on a stage, asking each choir member to bring their best self to worship and praise the Lord during each concert. When she is on stage, it is hard not to watch her because she is giving you your note and smiling at you to make you feel the sheer energy in the presence of the Lord in any space. Maya is a music minister and faithful to looking out for what God has entrusted her to do. Maya has four children, two boys, and two girls.

Maya is a fantastic mother and grandmother of six. She has supported her children through all their trials and tribulations and has done everything she can to mitigate her complex relationship with her ex-husband for the good of their children. Maya was married for 19 years. She and her husband founded a local church in the early 80s. Maya played a significant role in the church ministry and supported her ex-husband as best she could. During the interview, she mentioned that after she married, her husband said that she needed to think about letting go of her time commitment to the gospel choir on campus. So, they started a family and their journey into church ministry. The university gospel choir was a ministry for Maya, and she gave one hundred percent of herself to the organization since she had discovered it on campus during Welcome Week.

Maya was instrumental in the choir as the director and a member of the executive board. She had to hold the choir together in uncertain times and led it when it met adversity. Maya reminded me that the choir had a split in the 1980s. Some members felt like they needed more control over the direction of the choir, musical selections and how the choir was governed. This was a challenging time. It felt like the family was separating; choir members had to decide whether they would stay in the current gospel choir or join the new gospel choir formed by the members who were dissatisfied with how things were being handled.

When Maya was discussing this with me, I was taken back to that time and remembered how difficult it was for me and others in the choir during that time. As she recounted the situation, I could see she had been transported back in time as well, that her mood changed, and she remembered the names of the individual at the forefront of the split within the choir. Maya has made peace with what happened and recognizes that although quite a few people left, many more stayed in the gospel choir. Moreover, now there were two Black gospel choirs on the same campus, and many of us attended the same Bible study, which made it awkward. But God made a way somehow and love prevailed. There were conversations over what name the new choir would use and when rehearsals would take place. There was also confusion about whom to contact for which choir. Despite all of this, Maya knew that God had a plan, which provided the comfort she needed. One year after the split the second choir dissolved, leaving the original choir which continues to this day.

Maya had nurtured, prayed for, and over the gospel choir for a decade; she was committed to its success and to the ministry it offered its members and the people who heard the choir sing. She was the essence at the heart and soul of the gospel choir. All these things made Maya the woman she is today. She is still growing in the Lord, believing his word, and praising

him in song and prayer. Maya is a phenomenal woman in every respect. She was a faithful leader and continues to fully, unabashedly, and with the help of the Lord, support the choir today. Maya is, without a doubt, the light on a hill that cannot be dimmed by the many complexities of life and the struggles it brings.

Maya is a woman who God uses because when she ministers in music, you feel his presence, whether it is in the airport waiting for all choir members to get on the same plane so they can return to the university after giving a concert in Washington D.C., or sitting on a bus that's run out of fuel in rural New York state and giving an impromptu concert to the state troopers who boarded the bus and asked who we were and helped us get to safety. Maya said that she was amazed that a group of young people from different denominations and doctrines came together at a time and a place at the university to provide a community that, above all, sings to the glory of God.

Genesis

Maya was born in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1950s. Her mother and father were both professionals: her mother was a schoolteacher, her father worked for the US Postal Service. Maya has one younger sister with whom she has a special relationship. Her parents moved from the South so that they could create a better living environment for their children. Maya's parents attended Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Her mother went to Paine College in Georgia and her father attended Florida A&M. Maya remembered when her parents moved out of their apartment and into the house she grew up, a Black middle-class family in a nice neighborhood. Maya was raised in the African Methodist Episcopal church, where her family was active in church functions. Her father was a church steward and was very active on the board. Maya told me that her mother wanted to take piano lessons as a child, so when she and

her sister were old enough, their mother had them sign up for private piano lessons. When we talked about the piano lessons, she remembered her instructor many years later. With a big smile, she shared that her teacher was very strict about hand placement on the keyboard and had a stick that she used to remind her about hand position. Maya chuckled a bit as she reminisced about her piano teacher. I did not understand how good a pianist Maya was until I went home with her because we would be singing at her family's church, which we did on many occasions.

I remember visiting their home several times, staying over, and being delighted by her mother's southern cooking and hospitality. Maya's mother was a talented cook, and I was always happy to get an invitation to their home. I knew that somehow her mother would prepare meals that resembled dining at a buffet. I remember telling Maya and her sister that I did not care for ribs because at my house there wasn't enough meat to feed our family of 10. That following day, there were three or four slabs of ribs at the breakfast buffet, and her mother looked at me and said something to the effect of "baby is that enough ribs for you?" All I could say was "yes, ma'am". Maya's dad was a wonderful soft-spoken man of few words. I remember when he had to referee a disagreement between his two daughters. He would enter the room to get their attention, would stand in the doorway, and give them a look of disapproval that made Maya and her sister stop. If he did speak, he never used many words.

During one of the visits to their family home, I noticed all of the trophies that Maya had on display. Both Maya's room and her sister's room were filled with all the trophies, plaques, ribbons, and medals they had won in piano competitions. I knew that Maya was naturally gifted when it came to playing the piano, but until that visit, I did not know how hard she had worked to learn the classics and win those competitions. I also noticed that while Maya was going by her

middle name, all of her trophies had her first name on them. I believe she did not like her first name.

Maya said she was an above average student during her K through 12 schooling. When she reminisced about how she ended up at the university, she said that her mother knew someone who had heard about a summer program that helped students get a better academic footing, so she applied and was accepted into the program. Maya shared that she had only applied to one university. After her summer orientation Maya went home to start preparing to return to the university in the fall. She remembered going shopping with her mother and sister to purchase all the things she would need. That summer, she also confirmed her housing assignment and was ready to go. She thought she had three roommates.

Maya's mother and father supported her during her time at the university and while she directed the gospel choir. They attended most of the concerts and were also thanked for their generous financial support of the gospel choir. Maya's younger sister came to the university and joined the choir a few years later.

Psalms

In the fall of 1973, Maya's entire family moved her into her dorm room. Her family got her moved into her space and then went home. Maya acclimated herself to her new surroundings after they left. Even today, she remembered her roommate's name without any prompting or hesitation; although it had been over fifty years since they had lived together. Maya said her roommate's boyfriend was a football player and that she was very happy to be living with an African American woman. Originally, she was assigned to a room with two White women which she had some concerns about. Maya said that she had not had anyone from her high school that she had talked about rooming with or anyone from her church. She also shared that most of the

black students who attend the university believed themselves to be cool, but she shared that in order to get to the university they had to be nerds pretending to be cool. According to Maya all the cool people didn't come to college except for a few whose parents pushed them to come because they believed that education was the road to success like so many other African Americans families. She did share that coming to the university really gave her a different perspective about other people's lives being different from hers. She had grown up in a middle-class black family. Her mother and father had saved money through investments to send her to college. She didn't have to work and she left college with no debt. But she did meet people who didn't have the same opportunities as she did, who needed money and may not have had the same support system at home. That gave her an opportunity to understand how her peers were different but in the same sense had similar struggles that she had academically.

Maya had planned to major in public health and minor in music; she intended to run a hospital one day so she could help people. She changed her major to education early in her college career. Maya shared her struggles academically. One of the things she shared was that she should have gotten her academic footing before joining the choir. Maya found out about the choir during a Welcome Week event.

During her childhood, Maya played piano and sang at her family's church. As she got older, she had numerous opportunities to play at other churches and work with their choirs, where she observed and learned a great deal about leading a choir and teaching gospel music. All these opportunities helped prepare her to take on the role of director of the university gospel choir during her second year on campus.

You could get very involved and consumed with what the choir was doing. Moreover, we had rehearsal for two nights, relationships, and going here and getting together. We had

engagements on the weekends, not necessarily every, but weekends are when you are supposed to study. If you end up having an engagement in the week, you are getting back late because, typically, most of them are not local. So, I definitely could have done a better job of getting my academic footing under me in terms of discipline and study.

When you are doing things, and I did not know that I felt so much "whoa, I am doing this for the Lord; it is more important". But it was just very easy to spend a lot of time doing choir things

Maya's involvement in the gospel choir evolved in terms of its importance to her the longer she participated in the choir. She thought the choir made the campus environment more hospitable to Black students. The gospel choir created an environment where Black students could find support, nurturing, and community. "I think I can say it this way. I did not feel like we were at the White university." She referenced the amount of time the choir spent together and talked about:

Black campus Bible study that most of the choir members attended. It gave them another opportunity to fellowship with students like them who were also there to continue their faith journey because many of them came to the university from homes where the church was a place that enhanced their bodies and their souls and allowed them to be in a community with other Black people.

I found it interesting that Maya compared the environment that the gospel choir created and the Black Bible study on campus to being like a Historically Black College University (HBCU). She said she wanted to visit an HBCU to see if her comparisons were accurate. Maya said:

members of the gospel choir spent quite a lot of time together given the number of rehearsals and engagements, along with spending time together at meals, in class, going

to the mall, singing engagements, and going to Bible study. I cannot imagine how much different an HBCU would feel because, I mean, here's when you go up to eat, you're looking for each other. That's pretty much somebody's and everybody's dorms, or not necessarily, you know, in class, but twice a week and weekends you're together

Maya did mention that she was, and other choir members were, keenly aware that they were in a PWI. She knew that there weren't a lot of Black students in her classes, and she also understood there were not a lot of Black faculty at the university when she arrived in the 1970s. Maya told me that choir members studied together and would let each other know if a particular professor was good or not. During my conversation with Maya, we laughed a lot and validated each other's experiences during our time at the institution. For her the choir made a difference in her life and all its intersections.

Maya shared that during her first year in the choir no one knew that she played the piano until someone heard her play at the music practice building on campus. Maya sang in the Alto section of the choir but if needed she could sing all three parts. During her second year she became the director of the choir because the previous director had not returned. Maya said that becoming the choir director really changed a lot of things for her. Not only was she responsible for her own participation but now she had to take on the task of preparing musical selections for the choir to rehearse. She also worked with the choir's band, altogether it was like having a full-time job. Maya shared that she didn't always know whose roommate was whose, but she always knew who had needs, i.e. someone who needed money or they weren't going to return to school the next term, needing prayers for academic excellence because they weren't doing well in the class, the death of a parent or loved ones and also choir members who had their own health issues. As we talked, she shared those things with me.

Just things from family. You know, maybe illness personally or illness back home and how they're affected or somebody's parent or suddenly passing, financial aid was a big item, money or grades was a part of the rehearsal. We had a testimony and prayer requests from choir members at the beginning and end of rehearsals

At one point Maya commented on when the choir split. She wished she had been a better leader back then. Maybe she could have kept the choir together. It was a challenging time for her, she said. Maya is a very compassionate, caring person. I asked her about the split and wanted to know if it had anything to do with religious doctrine and she said no, it had to do with people wanting more control over the trajectory of the music the choir sang. Maya felt like she had done everything she could to support choir members and their need to have control over decisions that were being made, because there were voting procedures built into the bylaws of the choir.

Exodus

Maya graduated from the university with a degree in 1979. She told me she would have graduated sooner had she not been involved with the choir and its members so profoundly. Maya continued to work with the choir for a few years until it became more complex with her having young children. Maya, and her husband at the time, went into a joint ministry and founded a church in the local area. They ministered together for several years, spreading the love of God throughout their community. When she divorced her husband after 20 years of marriage, Maya continued to do the work the Lord had called her for by ministering in song at different events. She occasionally returns to the gospel choir on campus for guest appearances and works with the choir. Maya is a leader in her community and has, when asked, led praise and worship in other

churches and directed other choirs. She has faith in God that is unshakable and authentic, and the relationship she has with God has grown deeper and deeper over the years I have known her. Maya my sister in Christ. I stood up at her wedding. I was a poor college student, so Maya's mother kindly purchased my dress, which was no small feat. The dress did not come in my size, so the only way that they could get me the same dress was to take two dresses and use the material to make my one. Her mother said, "that is okay; I will take care of it". Furthermore, we would go to Detroit for choir engagements and stop by her mother and father's house to get groceries; their door was always open, and I will never forget their kindness.

When Maya was pregnant with her first child, because I was rooming with her sister, she would come over and just hang out and try to relax and get in a comfortable position after choir rehearsal. When my mother and father, or other choir members' parents passed, Maya always made it a point to be there whenever possible, still offering love and support for as long as needed. If called upon, Maya would sing and minister the gospel of the good news to encourage the brokenhearted and those in deep sorrow; she was there to comfort them with a kind word or a song.

Most recently, she had the opportunity to reunite with members of the gospel choir from the 1970s to perform at a homecoming weekend celebration for a Black alumni association. People flew in from across the country. Some of us had not seen each other for two decades or more, but we came together to sing the gospel, which means the good news. We took time to reacquaint ourselves and reminisce about our past and present lives. One of our choir members who is the pastor of a church offered to prepare a meal our first evening together so that we could catch up. So, like the choir rehearsals, we prayed before the meal, and at the end of our time together, we fellowshiped and said we would see each other the next day for rehearsal.

There did not seem to be enough time, but I remember Maya saying we had been called together so that we could do the work of the Lord, and we needed to make sure that the current choir had our support. Maya has always believed that the choir accomplished something unique. All these young people, from all these different churches, got together and put doctrine aside and just sang for Jesus. She said we did something many churches do not even do. We did not worry about who was in charge, and which doctrine was better than the other, we just kept our eyes focused on singing to Him.

Maya said that she couldn't imagine being at the university and not being involved in the gospel choir. "I think that is why many of us ended up graduating." Maya said that choir members made a conscious effort to understand that God was watching them. There were members who just came to sing because they liked gospel music, who in due season, found that they had a personal relationship with the Lord that prepared them for life at the university. Maya believed that the university benefited from the choir being there as well, because it was a positive influence over students' lives.

You know, there is a scripture that says Righteousness exalts a nation, or if that's the case, and one can chase 1,000 and two will chase 10,000, then being in that MSU setting, and being, and not that we were trying to be, "a light for," you know, the campus but you're just there. And just like any one person it just represents the Lord makes a difference to anyone he or she touches is the same thing. If you have a bigger nucleus, I think there were people that had no intention toward God, but they liked to sing gospel music, then the music just helped push them in the right way

Today, Maya is still ministering in music and bringing people to the Lord. She looks forward to what God has for her next so that she might continue to be that light on the hill that draws people in to be nurtured, understood, and find community with her in God's house.

Tank's Story

Tank is in his fifties, stands 5 feet 6 inches tall and has a medium build. He has medium brown skin with red undertones, brown eyes, and wears his hair short. He is a God-fearing man who is devoted to his family and church. He was raised in the church, and it still plays a prominent role in his life today. Tank loves to sing, direct, and worship the Lord in all His glory. He is outgoing, energetic, passionate, and engaging. When he walks into a room, you cannot help but notice him. Tank is one of the most inspirational individuals that I've had the pleasure of knowing over the years.

Tank is a father of two daughters who he loves unconditionally. They are pure joy for him. After he and his wife divorced, Tank shared joint custody with his ex-wife so that he could be an integral part of his daughters' lives. He is an amazing father to his two children. Tank has been there for his children every step of the way and has been there for every milestone: the first day of school, daddy daughter dances and encouraging them along their musical journeys as well. He shared his love for music with his daughters and they've sung together in church and at concerts over the years.

I was so happy that Tank decided to participate in this study. He has maintained contact with many of the choir members that he sang with at the university. When I was thinking about people that I wanted to include in this research project, I thought Tank would be perfect because of his connection to many other choir members over the years and his ability to articulate how important participating in the gospel choir was for him.

I am grateful that Tank trusted me enough to let me retell his story. His dedication during the time that he served as a member and choir director was amazing. Tank said that he was drawn to the university by divine intervention. I remember Tank being an energetic and talented

director of the gospel choir. I believe that people came to see the choir when he was directing and found themselves captivated by the passion with which he directed the choir, all eyes were on him. When Tank directed, he took up the whole stage bouncing back and forth between the Alto, Soprano and Tenor sections, asking each section to give their all to the glory of God.

Genesis

Tank was born in Lexington, Kentucky where he lived with his mother and father. Both of Tank's parents graduated from college. His mother graduated with a degree in vocal music teaching, and she taught for 35 years, and his father graduated with a math and science degree. The family moved to Lexington because Tank's father got a job working for IBM. Tank's parents divorced when he was two years old. He and his mother moved back to St. Louis, Missouri where she was from. Tank's mother and father remarried when he was four. The family moved to Detroit, Michigan because his father's job transferred him there. Tank grew up on the northwest side of Detroit, in the Rosa Parks area. Tank's mother and father divorced again when he was twelve years old. From the age of 12 he was raised in a single parent household. Tank grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and was very active in the church choir. Tank shared that he had been singing in the church choir since he was two years old.

Tank attended elementary school from the 1st to 8th grade and then he went to Cass High School. Tank was a dedicated student in high school. He took computer classes, accounting, cost accounting, and typing. Tank decided to take four years of math even though his program didn't require a fourth year. Tank said his computer program in high school was very structured. During his senior year of high school, Tank was in a high school Co-Op program at General Motors (GM) that summer. Tank also lined up a paid internship for the summer following his first year in college.

Tank sang in one of the performing choirs at Cass called the Magicals which went to the district and then state level of vocal competition. In his senior year of high school, he started looking into colleges he was interested in attending. Tank applied to seven colleges. His mother was not happy about all of the application fees. Tank was accepted to all seven schools but chose to attend a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest. Tank said that he was a good student academically during high school but did not do well on standardized tests. He was admitted to the university through the College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP) program which provided additional support for him to be successful.

Tank also shared that he wanted to get out of his mother's house. His mother had wanted him to go to a university that was in town. Tank told his mother that he did not want to attend the local university. He shared that he prayed that even if he had to scrub toilets, "Lord, I need to get out of this house. I did not want to stay at home and go to school." We both laughed a bit after he told me that. Tank loved his mother, but she was protective, and he was her only child who she loved very much. He had a couple of other reason for choosing the university. One reasons was that he a had a good friend in high school who was already attending and she told him how nice the university was. The other reason was that a lot of people from his school were going to be going to the same university. Tank said "I knew some of my friends were going and I wanted to at least if I was gonna go away from home at least know somebody."

Psalms

Tank moved into his residence hall in the fall of 1986 with the help of his mother and found out that he would rooming with someone with whom he had graduated from high school. Tank said that after their parents left, they looked at each other and said "what are we gonna do now? What are we supposed to do?" It was their first time being away from home. Tank shared

that it was to be the first of many culture shocks being around so many White people coming from Detroit. They started walking around the hall and started running into all these people they knew from high school. Tank felt that this was how he was going to start building community at the university, with people he already knew from back home. He met his Minority Aide who he said was cool and she was always looking out for him. Tank joined the choir and then got involved with a campus Bible study. He visited local churches for his spiritual needs. He shared that these were the things that he did so that he would find community and he felt like he fit.

His roommate and he got along because they both liked gospel music and singing. In fact, it was Tank's roommate that started going to gospel choir rehearsal and one day he invited Tank to go to rehearsal with him. Tank said that he wanted to get involved in an organization at the university. Tank said that he had been in choirs most of his life and that he believed that the gospel choir was just the right fit because he knew what was expected of him. He met some of the choir members that first night and really enjoyed the people he met, so he joined the gospel choir his first year at the university. By joining the choir Tank was able to connect with people like himself with similar interests.

First of all because this was a predominantly White institution, it was nice to be able to congregate with other students of color. You know, that also had a similar love for singing. You know, you're also meeting other, you know, African American students that were from different cities, not just Detroit, and different denominations. I grew up African Methodist Episcopal. I grew up in the AME and then to meet people who came from different walks of faith, and we were able to still come together even though we had denominational differences and theologies of who was saved and who was not saved and

why you say that you got saved. That sort of stuff. But again, gather and sing under the common umbrella that we all love Jesus

Tank shared that going to rehearsals was a lot of fun for him. Even though rehearsals and practices were hard work it was still fun because it wasn't just about practice. It was also about fellowship and being in community with your friends. He shared "one of the best things about rehearsals was at the end when we prayed for one another, for various things that we were struggling with or going through." Tank said that there were a lot of spiritual breakthroughs and a sense of belonging. "It was going knowing that you had a group of people who cared and understood about what you are going through."

Although Tank was struggling academically, he stayed in the choir because he needed the support that the choir members offered. He almost got kicked out of the university when he failed all but one of his classes. Tank was placed on academic probation his second term at the university. At this point Tank decided that he was in the wrong major, so he went to the counseling center to meet with an advisor who had him take personality and career interest assessments to help him decide on a different major. Tank's advisor reviewed the assessments that he had taken and shared the results that showed that he had a strong interest in teaching. Tank worked with his advisor at College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP) to navigate through this very stressful time at the university. In his struggles Tank told me about his placement exams during his orientation, and he was surprised that he ended up in remedial math and English courses that made feel that he was not smart." I thought I was or something like that". He shared that he advocated for himself at the university. Tank did several things to help him succeed at the university: he engaged with his professors by going to office hours and making sure that he understood the lesson plans and they are pointing out things as well; he set

up times to talk to his math and writing tutor in advance of assignments that were due so that he could be prepared; Tank took advantage of counseling services to deal with the stress of being a Black student at a PWI to help him make needed cultural adjustments. He also used other coping mechanisms to help him as he struggled academically, such as relying on his friends for support and encouragement, prayer, and the choir engagements because they were singing about faith.

The CAAP program supported underrepresented students, first generation students and students with disabilities and helped them access resources that would allow them to be academically successful. Once Tank changed his major, he felt like he did not know what to do even though he knew it was the right decision to make. He went into a depression, and he wanted to give up and wasn't sure what he was going to do. He felt completely lost and he shared that he didn't know what he was going to do with his life. As he struggled with his life and what he was going to do, he also was planning to get married to someone he met in the choir, but his mother decided to stop supporting him financially because she believed he was too young to get married at 21. Tank told his mother to go ahead and cut him off and that he would be fine, but he was going to get married. Tank said felt like he had something to prove because neither their parents thought they could make it and that they would drop out of school and not graduate, and he wanted to prove them wrong. So, he applied for financial aid and received it, but he had to sit out one term because he needed to wait for the money to be dispersed. It took Tank six and a half years to graduate. He was working and going to school full time along with being a newlywed. Tank told me that he had to graduate from college because both of his parents had graduated from college, and his friends graduated, and all these things fueled his determination to graduate. Furthermore, Tank said that he "started this thing and that he was going to finish it."

Tank worked with his support system that helped him develop his study and time management skills. The network of support that Tank built included an institutional advisor, counselors, and extracurricular support from the choir. He fully utilized the services that the CAAP program offered to support his academic success. Tank appreciated the help that he received from his CAAP advisor so much that in his second year he was helping other first year students navigate through the university and get the support they needed by working for the CAAP. It was his way of paying it forward because he knew what students were going through because he had struggled himself.

Tank's second year at the university was still a struggle, but he continued to participate in the choir throughout. He enjoyed the community support and praying for each other's needs to be met. During his second year in the choir, Tank became a co-director and member of the executive leadership team, which added more responsibilities. Tank told me that he could have had better grades during his college career, but that his commitment to the choir was his priority because it gave him so much in return for being a part of a spiritual organization. I asked him to tell me more about why and how his grades suffered. He shared that he went to rehearsals twice a week that could last two to three hours. In addition, on quite a few weekends, the choir traveled to sing throughout the state, which made it difficult to study as much as he needed. Tank just figured out a system that worked for him academically so that he could continue to participate in the choir for as long as he could.

During his third year at the university Tank applied for both Minority Aide (MA) and a Resident Assistance (RA) position in the residence halls. Tank received the RA position, but wondered why he had not gotten the MA position which he would have preferred. He told me that the one time that he knew he didn't feel like he fit was when he had the RA position. He felt

like he didn't have much in common with the White students on his floor and he was having problems with the Black students as well because when things would happen on the floor, they wanted Tank to support them even if they were the ones who were at fault. He said he was very happy when he no longer had that position. He said there was a party at the Kellogg Center for one of the fraternities and that someone had been shot and died. It wasn't a student but a friend of someone that lived on the floor that he was an RA on. Furthermore, he had to write up one of his fellow RAs and he said it was very awkward for the rest of the year and that he felt like they were being pitted against each other. Tank utilized his social network friends in the choir and Bible studies which helped him through these very difficult times.

Tank was very aware that the university was predominantly White and even though he only had a few White friends who belonged to the choir, he felt that it was very important that he assimilate into the university White culture, because he was going to be working with a lot of White people when he entered the workforce. He shared that there were only a few Black men in his education class the year he graduated. Moreover, he told me that he felt like a token because he had been the only Black male teacher in the school that he currently teaches in for over 29 years. Tank said that the university needed to recruit and retain more African American teachers in general. He believed that the university needed to take a more active and intentional role like companies who go to where Black students are - large urban area high schools and Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) - to do their recruiting.

The year before he graduated Tank knew that he could not continue participating in the choir the way he had in the past because he had two internships to do the following year for his program, which meant that he would have to come up with a succession plan so that the choir would seamlessly continue under new leadership. He worked with the co-director and musicians

to make sure that everything was in place. Tank chose to tell the choir during one of the last rehearsals before the spring concert. He hoped that the choir members would be understanding of his decision to step down as co-director of the choir and continue to support him with their prayers.

Exodus

Tank graduated from the university in 1992 with a degree in Human Ecology, Child Development and Elementary Education. He immediately got hired by Lansing Public Schools in December of 1992. Tank has worked in the district for almost thirty years. He teaches and encourages his students so that they can be academically successful. Tank has a large Facebook following of previous students he's had the pleasure to work with who have come back and told him how important he was in their development as adults. He has attended countless graduations and weddings for previous students throughout the years. Tank has truly been an inspiration to the students he has had in his classrooms all these years.

Tank is active in his church and community and is always willing to help whenever he's called upon. He has directed church choirs throughout his community which has led to the development of a sophisticated network that supports the community that he lives in. Over the years Tank has been involved in music ministry at all the churches that he has attended and in his community. He has been in music ministry as part of the praise team or as one of the assistant choir directors at church.

He shared that he got divorced after almost 12 years of marriage. He said this was one of the darkest times of his life. Tank was in grad school at the time working on a master's thesis when his wife asked him for a divorce. He continued to work full time and study, all while dealing with the emotions of going through a divorce. Tank again utilized his support system to

help him through this difficult time by encouraging him that he could do it. His advisor, professors, and his therapist told him not to quit, that he was too close to the finish line. And on the day that he graduated from his master's program, as he walked across the stage and then back to a seat his adviser was standing there in the aisle waiting to congratulate him. When Tank saw her, he broke down and cried. Tank said that he always knew he would graduate from the university even though his struggles there were numerous, but he advocated for himself and with determination, the support of his friends, choir, advisor, counselor and God he did it.

Tank had joint custody of his two daughters. He is very proud of the fact that they have both graduated from college. Through it all, Tank's personal relationship with the Lord helped him weather the storms in his life. He believes that if it were not for the gospel choir, he would not have developed the close relationship that he has with the Lord and may not have graduated from the university. Tank's enthusiasm, energy, and passion for ministering in song continues to make him a leader in his community and a gospel choir supporter. If the gospel choir is ministering in song singing locally, Tank is usually there singing and worshipping along with them.

Ruby's Story

Ruby is 5 feet 6 inches tall, has chestnut colored shoulder length hair, brown skin with yellow undertones, light brown eyes and an athletic build from her many years of playing a variety of sports of which she loved basketball the most. She met and married her husband of 26 years through mutual friends who introduced them while they both worked in a hospital. Ruby worked as an MRI tech and her husband worked as a Certified Nurse Assistant. They both graduated from the same college and were both members of the gospel choir. Ruby's husband is also an educator and served as a women's coach at a junior college. Ruby and her husband are good friends and excellent co-parents. They have supported each other and encouraged each other to follow their dreams. Ruby and her husband have two children, a daughter and a son whom they love and adore. Ruby has done everything a mother can do to help her children feel loved and become self-reliant adults. She also gave them every opportunity to be successful. Her daughter and son will both graduate in 2023 from college. Ruby is the kind of person that you want to get to know. She is a loving, kind, compassionate, friendly, outgoing truth-telling individual who loves the Lord with all her heart. Her faith journey came with as many complexities and struggles as her personal and academic life during her years at the university, and after.

Ruby told me that she did not grow up going to church and that she didn't really understand what the importance that having a personal relationship with the Lord would come to mean until she went away to college. Ruby got connected early in her college life to people who would encourage her to give her life to the Lord. On her first visit to the university Ruby met a student who was a member of the gospel choir. The student told Ruby that she had been saved. The student witnessed to Ruby, meaning that she told her she had given her life over to the Lord

and that she was living for Jesus. Ruby told the student that she wasn't saved and was going through some things in her life. Ruby shared that by the time she had gotten home she had made her decision to attend the university and that was it. The one student she met during her campus visit had been pivotal in her decision.

Genesis

Ruby summarized her academic journey by saying;

there were so many different facets to my life in terms of the whole academic journey. I almost feel like I must build like a back story to get to the front story, but then that will take up the 90 minutes, right? So, I'm going to do the very short version of it. So basically, when we lived in the Midwest me and my parents, so things happened where my parents went through a very tumultuous time in their marriage which directly affected me and lasted for like seven or eight years

She remembered that she spent a lot of time by herself because of what was happening with her parents. Ruby said that her parents loved her very much and provided well for her. When Ruby was in fifth grade her mother took a job in the Southeast and the family moved from their home in the Midwest. Ruby shared that the move to the Southeast was difficult for her and that she struggled to fit in. Ruby was a four-point student until the move. When she got to her new school, they put her in a classroom that did not challenge her academically. The school was three years behind what she had been taught in the Midwest. Ruby's parents requested that she be tested and placed in honors level classes. Ruby was tested but was not placed into the honors classes and her parents were not allowed to see her test scores. She shared that a man from the North came to her school and tested all the African American students. At this point, Ruby was finally placed in honors classes, and "I then understood that I had been discriminated against".

But by that time, Ruby said that she had lost interest in her education. She said that "I was just cruising along. I was doing basically B's; I never failed a class, but I was no longer academically driven." This happened in the seventh grade. Ruby told me that in the grade school she attended in the Midwest that she had five friends with whom she used to compete for grades. At her new school because she spoke with a Midwestern accent, was a person of color and academically talented, she did not fit in and was not accepted by the African American students. Ruby shared that the only thing that saved her in school was the fact that she was good at all of the sports she participated in. "That is how I made friends". Sports became more important than her academics, because she could fit in better with the other students. She developed great relationships with her coaches. "I had become quite the rebel and so academically, I did not care. I really pushed against the academic part of life in school." By the time Ruby entered high school, and because she was so good at sports, teachers passed her just so she could play. She gave me a couple examples of what this looked like:

So, I mean, I remember one class, one language arts class, me and my friend who played on the baseball team, we didn't even do our research project, you know, we were also supposed to do notecard citations and it was supposed to be like 5 pages or 6 pages long. I think I turned in three note cards and a couple of pages. And not only that, but the day before the test, she and I had skipped class. Because you know, we were all of that you know, we were doing our thing we went on a college campus and hung out.

Ruby continues to rebel into her senior school of high school where she began exploring her sexuality. So, by the time 12th grade came I didn't know where I was going to school I was rebelling and hanging out with friends quite a bit. I had been drinking, you know,

the whole 9 yards. I had entered my first two same-sex relationships, and I didn't know what I was doing.

All of this was happening when her high school advisor told her that she had a certain amount of time to decide when and where she was going to college. That's when she sat down with her parents. "That's when my dad told me about his expectations about where I would be attending college. Ruby told me that at one point she stayed with her grandparents in the northwest for a while until her parents came for her. She shared that she had a complicated relationship with her mother and father that caused her great turmoil at times. Her dad could not find work when they moved to the Southeast, even though he was a college graduate and a highly trained Human Resource manager. As a Black man in the South, he couldn't find a job, so he had to take a job in another city miles away from the family, which was hard on the entire family.

Even though she was homesick at times while she was away at school she struggled with her relationship with her parents and the trauma she experienced. Ruby was an only child for almost twenty years. She received a call from her parents while she was away at college letting her know that her mother was pregnant and that she was going to have a little sister. Ruby loves her younger sister and has been very supportive of her in her academic endeavors as well.

Ruby chose to attend the university, according to her "probably for the wrong reasons". She explained that her father was from up north, and "we moved down south, and I had gone through a lot of types of discrimination because of my color, academically, and being from the Midwest."

Her mother worked as a chemical engineer intern and then she worked in human resources. Ruby's mother did not finish her college degree because she was offered the chemical

engineer internship while in college, so she took it. Ruby told me that her parents were very ambitious and wanted to improve their lives. Ruby said her mother and father often discussed that employees they hired who had attended college in the South did not compare to the employees they hired who had attended college in the North. The employees from the North were better prepared for the workforce than employees from the South.

With that information my father gave me the choice/ultimatum that if he was paying for my college education that I'd have to choose a university that was in the Big Ten Conference

Ruby told me that she challenged her dad about what college she would attend. She had wanted to apply to Georgia Tech, Clemson, Emory, Michigan State University and Boston College. Ruby looked at the application process and found that some colleges required two to three essays. She told me she really did not want to have to do a whole lot of essays and the other reason was that a student was lynched the year before at one of the colleges she was thinking of attending, and there was no way her dad was going to let her go to that school. Ruby also shared that her high school advisor told her that she would not get into the colleges she was thinking about attending. "By the time I had to commit to a university I had narrowed it down to two of them".

Ruby just happened to be watching the Rose Bowl with her family and one of the schools that she was interested in was playing. At halftime the cameras scanned the campus and she remembered how beautiful it was. That helped her make her decision about what university she would attend. "I did think if I was going to have a college experience that this was the most beautiful campus to have it at." She also said that the school only required one essay which made her very happy. Ruby attended the college visit and thought that the campus was just as pretty as

she had seen on the television. It was also close to family that she had in the Midwest, so she picked it. Ruby was also happy to prove her high school advisor wrong because she got into the college that they had told her that she would never get into.

Psalms

Ruby enrolled in the university in the fall of 1988. She moved into her residence hall which also housed her Living Learning College Program specializing in science majors. She had two roommates, one African American and one White. Ruby said she really didn't hang out with her roommates much other than the occasional trip down to the snack shop. Her White roommate moved out second semester and so it just left the two of them. Although she met a member of the gospel choir on her first visit to campus, she didn't become affiliated with the gospel choir until 1990. She stayed involved for six years until 1996. Ruby held two leadership positions during her time in the choir. She was the president of the choir for two years and a chaplain for one year.

During her first two years at the university, Ruby struggled academically. She did not get along with her academic advisor. Ruby said that her advisor was not particularly helpful. She said the advisor did her wrong. She said that she had this "old white guy" who was her advisor and she felt he wasn't really invested in her. Ruby was having problems with remembering the math that she had learned in high school. Ruby took the classes for science majors her first year and did the best she could, but she failed two math classes. She called her parents everyday crying. Ruby told me that she did not think that she was going to make it.

During her second year some of her friends in the gospel choir recommended an advisor in the College of Engineering. The advisor in the College of Engineering was a woman of color that Ruby could relate to better. The advisor worked with Ruby and helped her to figure out what

her struggles were. She shared that she felt like the advisor helped her get in contact with whatever was blocking her from being able to successfully retain the information in her classes. Ruby said that it was the best experience she had with an advisor and so she decided to change her major to engineering. Ruby had planned to go to medical school but at this point engineering seemed more feasible.

Ruby shared her struggles understanding the material in her math class with her teaching assistant. He worked with her and provided her with tips to help her understand the material. Once Ruby started getting 4.0 grades in calculus and science, chemistry became easier.

I don't know how or what he did but whatever he did taught me how to think again. So, I got excited about my homework assignments, excited about math again.

I was not in the College of Engineering for long. I got into engineering, and I was like, what the hell did I do, so I was like, wait a minute, so I went back to biology to pursue getting into medical school

During Ruby's second year at the university, she experienced more personal trauma. Her beloved grandfather, who had almost died two years prior, died. He was an alcoholic and drank while taking his medications. Ruby took her grandfather's death hard.

He had his leg amputated and my cousin and I discussed with him that we needed him to be here for us and so when he died there was a lot of anger and frustration because we felt like he didn't live for us because he could have chosen to stop drinking

Ruby left the university for a semester during the start of her third year. She decided to go home to help her mother with her new baby sister. Ruby also helped her father with some projects he was working on while she was home. Ruby returned to the university during the

second semester and changed her major back to biology. She also took classes during the summer semester to make up for the fall semester when she stayed home.

Ruby joined the gospel choir when she returned to the university. I was the faculty/staff advisor for the choir when Ruby joined, and I had no idea until I interviewed her for this project the depths of her academic and personal struggles. We had met and talked about medical school. She told me she was planning to attend, and we discussed the study strategies that she could use. During the interview things became more difficult for Ruby, right after I asked her why she joined the gospel choir. She said, "That is a big one, so you'll have to give me a second to think about this one."

Ruby met a woman during her sophomore year and started a relationship with her. She shared it was a pivotal relationship that continued when she returned to school. Ruby's relationship eventually ended. During the time it was falling apart, all of her friends were part of the gospel choir, and they were always inviting her to rehearsal, but she would always say no.

But eventually it got to a point where I just almost had to go, because I just needed the support. They brought me to the choir, and it continued from there. By that time some of my friends were in grad school, while I was still finishing up my last year of college, because I had taken time off. That's why I didn't join the choir until my junior year. My friends in the choir "kept me off the ledge by bringing me to choir rehearsals with them" My friends in the choir were the people that I hung out with for a long time, until I became more a part of the choir, and then, it just, you know, it kind of grew from there. They became my support, this amazing group of talented individuals that were so young navigating through the university and figuring out their spiritual lives all at the same time.

Ruby shared that the choir had become the family she wanted, and she said that it was wonderful. They shared each other's life stories along with meals, sleepovers, and a lot of prayer time. Ruby also said that she used this time to explore her relationship with Christ and that her friends were an integral part of her exploration. She also said that she loved building relationships and socializing with people. "I loved them all and at that time we all loved each other and just had a good time." Ruby said that it was a happy place for a while and when she said that she tipped her head to the right side and smiled just slightly. When I asked her about the smile she said "the people just kept me going

Ruby shared that she felt like the interview process was kind of therapeutic, because she did not really have a lot of good things to say about her experiences at the university. Ruby said that she was so honed in on the things that happened that she did not like after she left the choir and the university that she had forgotten about all the good things that had happened during, and "how messed up I really was when I got to the university, and how just those relationships that I had, they really did keep me coming back, because those are the relationships that even kept me in the university and the choir." I thanked Ruby for her response and then I remembered that hers was the interview that I thought would challenge my thoughts about the positive aspects of participating in the campus gospel choir.

As Ruby talked about her experiences at the university and in the choir, it was very emotional for her and for me as well. Even though at times she regretted coming to the university she believes that it was God driven and she honestly believes that God led her to the university and that she probably just stayed too long.

I think I got what I needed when I was there, but then I probably needed to leave to find me. I probably stayed too long, which tainted all my other memories of the university and being in the Midwest

I asked what she meant by "stayed too long" because it sounded like this was a pivotal moment for her. At this point Ruby asked me for some time to verbalize what she meant by staying too long. I told her to take as much time as she needed, because I needed some time so that I could be prepared to hear what she had to say. After a few minutes she was ready to continue with the conversation.

I think based upon the things that I was going through at the time and the things that I was seeking in gaining more knowledge about Christ and what I really wanted my relationship with him to look like or to be. I probably need to explore that kind of as an individual, but because of my immaturity I still probably leaned on others too much and required their support

Ruby thought she leaned on her support system more because she was seeking a family, being so far away from home and because of the trauma that she had been through with her own family. She shared that she had a group of friends in the choir and that the choir was a safe space that she didn't want to let go because it was a good feeling.

So, you just keep holding on and holding on to it and you can see that it's time to break away but you do not and so I think that is kind of when things went awry. I've mentioned this before that choir was great, it was wonderful, awesome; I met some really talented people that ministered to me and witnessed to me and helped me find my way to the Lord. Choir members helped me by nurturing me through some very difficult times

personally and academically. But with everything that was wonderful the choir struggled at times with differences in denominations among choir members

Ruby said that during her time in the choir there was this religious awakening happening in the community at large between different churches and that did have some impact on choir members who attended these different churches within the community. She said it was like some type of a ranking order based on what gifts of the Spirit that you had or should have, and some members seemed to feel like they might have more status in the choir because of their denomination and beliefs, which made it difficult at times. Like a family, there were difficulties but when the choir ministered in song, they all came together and those were the times when she felt that the family was together and able to inspire people, to nourish them and provide that safe space that she had found and didn't want to let go of.

For Ruby, being in the choir was, as she put it "amazing because I had never experienced anything like this before." She told me that she wasn't raised in the church and had not sung in the choir before either, so this was all new for her. Ruby shared one her earliest church experiences. She attended her grandmother's Methodist Church with her. She was amazed by the women who took turns singing gospel songs during the service. She said that during one point in the service one of the "Sisters" in the church started singing and then another "Sister" would pick up where she left off. That early memory has stayed with her all these years later. Ruby also shared a memory about a time that the choir sang at a funeral. She remembered this significant engagement because it was a celebration of the person's life. Because she had never grown up in the church, she hadn't been exposed to this type of celebration of life.

I had never viewed life in that way, or seen people celebrate the way we celebrated that day, nor had I felt what I considered at the time the presence of God in a space. So, it was, and I keep saying this word, amazing

Ruby found inspiration in choir members' renditions of songs that she believed were anointed by God when they sang.

Ruby's time in the choir and at the university were complex and at times difficult for her to navigate. Ruby took on the responsibility of being the president of the choir for her junior and senior years. She had found a group of people in the choir that she had known for some time who were also pivotal in her understanding the role that God played in her life. She ended up going to the church that her friends attended. But something happened along the way and things started to change and there was conflict in the choir. Ruby remembers that as being a time of change in the Black church in general. There was some divisiveness that carried over to the choir and she was concerned about it. In summarizing what she shared there were some people in the choir who believed that you needed to have certain gifts of the Spirit. For one group she said that choir rehearsals became more about preaching than singing and a division was occurring among the two groups. Ruby said that she wished she had spent more time getting to know different people in the choir than her core group. Although she wasn't taking sides, in retrospect she realized that the people she was spending all of her time with didn't have all the answers. She lamented that she hadn't gotten to know the other groups of people. She said that in her walk with learning about who she was as a Christian she believes she should have done more of that on her own. But her need to be supported might have, in hindsight, caused her to stay too long because her friends in the choir were her family. Ruby fell away from the group that she had been so connected to in the choir because of some of the differences in their beliefs. While her friends

presented themselves as Christians and pure, she found them to be judgmental towards other choir members. Even with all that going on, Ruby still credits the choir with nurturing her during very difficult times in her life.

Exodus

Ruby graduated from the university in 1993 with a degree in biology. She returned to the university in 1995 to take the classes she needed to get accepted into medical school. She decided to leave the Midwest in 1996 and returned to the Southeast and continued her education at a seminary. Her family returned to Michigan in 2000. Ruby's husband was accepted into MSU and finished up his undergraduate degree. Ruby has been teaching middle school 8th grade science classes for the past 10 years. She also did some assistant coaching for girls' basketball the team at another school for several years. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in education administration so she can become a school administrator.

During her years at the university, Ruby learned that she could persist in completing her academics even though it was challenging. She found a support network in the choir that created a family away from home. Ruby became a leader and worked to make others feel that they could find the safe space and happy place she had found in the choir. Though Ruby was challenged as the president of the choir not to take sides when there was conflict among members, she was able to acknowledge what was happening, and in those moments, she was able to slowly let go of relationships that weren't working for her anymore. This allowed her to seek God for herself. She found that she was stronger than she ever imagined, and it put her on a path of self-care and understanding how God shows up for all of us, maybe a little differently.

I thought Ruby was going to be the one person who would challenge my research question about the effects of participating in the campus gospel choir on African American

students at PWIs. Although it was hard for her to admit it, Ruby said that she would not have been able to complete her degree if it had not been for the support of choir members.

Toot's Story

Toot is fifty years old, stands 5 feet 6 inches tall and has a medium build. She has light brown skin with red undertones and sports a medium length Chestnut colored Afro. She is a God-fearing woman who is devoted to her family and church. Although she wasn't raised in the church, it plays a prominent role in her life today. Toot loves to sing and worship the Lord in all his glory and magnificence. She describes herself as not being shy. She told me she is more likely to go to the empty table in the room and sit down than join a table that already has people at it. Toot does not mind if people sit down with her at the table, but she is not going to be the one to initiate the conversation. She says that she has been like that since her college days but has improved over the years.

Toot is, and has been, committed to finding her way around unknown places. She talked about her inquisitiveness as she found her way around the university she attended as an undergraduate and in her journey through life. It was delightful to reconnect and go down memory lane with Toot. She talked with me about her many successes and the things that scared her, all of which made her who she is today.

Toot is faithful. Once she commits to a project, she sees it to its conclusion with all her vigor and vibes. She is funny, unassuming, and modest about her accomplishments. If you ever met her, she would not tell you that she's one of the brightest lights in the space.

I am honored that Toot was willing to let me retell her story. Narrative inquiry allows me to bring her to life and helps the reader understand the challenges she faced in and around academia, a space that should have supported her better. Toot shared her story so that someone will stand on her shoulders to reach their goals in the halls of academia where every student's success is intertwined with every other's.

Genesis

Toot was born and raised in the Chicago area in a close-knit family of four, with her two parents and her older sister. She loved singing and dancing, though she did not have much affiliation with her Baptist church in Chicago. Toot's parents moved from Alabama to Chicago in the 1960s, looking for better opportunities for work and education in the North. She said that for the most part they had a normal life with no struggles.

My dad made sure that we had everything that we needed. One of the few things that I've taken away from my father and that I like about him was that he knew how to save money. Some people don't know how to save. Her father would pay the bills and he had money saved up. My dad was not big on using credit cards and all that stuff. He might have had one or two credit cards that he would pay off at the end of each month. We lived in an apartment until I was 16 years old, and my dad said that we needed more space because there were too many adults living here. My dad bought a house right up the street from our school so we could just walk down the street

Toot's mother was actively involved in her daughters' education to the point that one of Toot's classmates asked her if her mom worked at the school. Toot was a first-generation college student, who did well academically in grammar and high school. Toot visited the university and decided that she wanted to attend. She did not have a specific major that she wanted to pursue, she just wanted to attend somewhere that wasn't too far from home. Toot's older sister encouraged her to go to college away from home, although she herself stayed at home. Toot emphasized that this was not done in "a mean way". Toot chose a university that was close enough to get home if she needed to get there quickly. Before leaving home to go to college, she

had not gone anywhere without her family. Although she was scared, it did not stop her from going to the university.

Psalms

Toot spoke about her experience being dropped off during Welcome Week. After her family dropped her off, she was devastated because she felt that she should have gone home with them. However, after her family left, she got to work familiarizing herself with her environment. Toot sought out the buildings for all her classes and mapped out the route on campus that coincided with her schedule.

Yeah, I was like I was scared because I had never been anywhere without my parents. Really, you know, without all four of us. Usually when we went somewhere it was all four of us together. Or sometimes it might be just me, my mom, and my sister. So, you know, it was kind of scary for me to come up here. And I remember the first day they dropped me off. And I was like, okay, I'm good. And I like to know where I'm going before I go, so I didn't get lost. So, I was like I am going to look at my classes and I am going to see how to get to my classes. And so, as they were leaving, I was on my bike and I was like, I am going to go and you know come see and as they drove away, hold on. Oh, wait a minute you guys. I guess I sat there for a while because I was like, okay, what am I doing? They are leaving really. They are leaving. I do not know if I cried, but I wanted to cry so badly, because I was again, they're now gone you know, finally they left, and I went on about my day. I think I had mentioned this before ...looking back now I really believe that ... the Lord led me here and that's how I got here. If I had not come here, I would not have connected with the gospel choir

Toot met some women on her dorm floor during her junior year who told her about the campus gospel choir. Because she liked to sing, she decided to go to rehearsal. Toot had attended a choir concert previously and had planned to just come in and sing. When her family could not be there for her, the choir became her family. After singing with the choir for two years, Toot took on a leadership role as the treasurer. The choir provided her with a community of people that she bonded with. Singing was a way for her to cope with some of the issues she was dealing with in her life; it gave her an outlet.

Toot's original plan was to complete her undergraduate degree and then complete grad school and medical school. However, her plans changed. She decided that she was not going to pursue medical school, so she changed her major from pre-med to microbiology.

And after undergrad I was like okay, I'm done. So, I didn't go to grad school. And then I tried to take a few classes that didn't get finished and then... the medical school thing kind of fell by the wayside.

Although Toot was a good student in grammar and high school, Toot said she felt unprepared for post-secondary education once she arrived on campus. As a first-generation college student, Toot said she did not have anyone before her to lead or guide her in terms of what to look for in a college. She did not know about any of the supports available for first-generation students; she had to figure it all out on her own. Toot started attending the university in 1988, prior to the internet being available, and she had no idea how to research universities. Although her plan was to go to complete her undergraduate degree, go to graduate school, and then go on to medical school, she was unprepared academically for attending the large Predominantly White Institution (PWI) where she had enrolled

Toot visited the campus with her mother, sister and one of her friends. She liked the campus and decided from that one visit that she would attend. She remarked that the tour guides and administrators were very nice to her and that was one of the deciding factors to attend. Given that her parents had not attended college, Toot and her sister had no one in their lives they could talk to who could help them or give them tips about what it's like going to college. She shared that she was not prepared to study the way she needed to for the courses that she had taken. But she figured out new ways of studying to keep up and to pass her classes successfully. After getting a 0.0 grade in her Organic Chemistry class she developed mechanisms to help her build her study skills. Toot also said that it was hard for her to understand the instructor because of his heavy accent. She also mentioned that the class was in one of the large lecture halls. Toot described the class size as "huge". She shared that her sister did not believe her when she told her that she had received a 0.0 grade in a class because that had never happened to her before. She took the Organic Chemistry class again. This time she created flash cards that she used to study daily. The second time she took the class she earned a grade of 3.5. Toot also made a point of meeting with some of her professors to make sure that she was on the right track and was understanding the material that she needed to learn.

Toot mentioned that in grammar school and high school the tests were mostly multiple choice. She had done very well and thought that college exams would be like the tests she was familiar with. Toot came to realize that at the college level she really needed to know the material, which required her to study more and differently. She did try to meet in study groups with classmates and friends, but found it to be burdensome because they did not know the material well enough to help each other. Instead, most of her time was spent figuring out techniques that she could use to remember things better for class. Toot did not mention utilizing

any of the available tutoring services on campus to help her. She told me that she did not know they existed. She didn't even mention her academic advisor. Toot spent most of her years in college attending classes, studying, going to work and church, and singing in the gospel choir.

The campus environment she lived in added to her struggles. At the time, very few African American students lived in the residence hall that she lived in and even fewer were in her classes, given that she was a science major. For the most part she hung out with her friends on her floor and choir members. Toot did not mention that there were any racial issues that she encountered during college with one exception. Her first college roommate was White. Toot mentioned that on her first day she, her sister and another person of color had come into the room. To this day, she has not forgotten the look on her roommate's face when she saw the three of them. She thought that her roommate thought there were just too many Black people in the room. Later the roommate moved out and Toot concluded that it was because too many Black people made her feel uncomfortable or scared. This was the only time Toot remembered that made her feel that her race was an issue.

Toot's job in culinary services was one way to connect with students in her residence hall. Her job helped her structure her day-to-day activities so that she could plan out what she needed to do to be academically successful. Toot shared that she didn't really go to the library and study because she preferred studying in her room. She worked in the culinary services for four years and then she got a job in a lab on campus.

Toot shared that she didn't socialize much in college because when she lived at home her dad did not want her or her sister going out very much. She did try going to parties because she loved to dance but felt left out. She would go to parties and want to dance. The other students were there to drink, but she was not a drinker. She believed that she was not asked to dance

because she was overweight. Her recollection was that "they asked all the little skinny girls to dance," and she felt like she did not fit in. Toot would tell herself it was okay and whatever and would try to figure out where she did fit. She asked herself what she was doing sitting in a corner not enjoying herself at the party. Her first two years, Toot was not really involved in anything other than taking classes and working. Once she started attending choir practice she got connected to a church where she found her fit and family. Toot reflected on her time at the university as being one of growth, awareness, and finding a sense of belonging. She did not attend sporting events or participate in other student organizations.

Toot connected with the gospel choir on campus. When she first started going to rehearsals, she wasn't committed to making every rehearsal or every engagement, but that changed when she committed her life to the Lord. Toot also committed to fully participating in the gospel chorale activities. As she spent more time with the choir, she felt like she had more of a family relationship with the choir members. She began to pray, fast, and attend as many engagements as possible. Toot said the gospel choir played a major role in her figuring out where she belonged and helped her grow and develop in the community and at the university. According to Toot, she had planned to join the group and come in and sing because some friends of hers were in the choir.

She credits the gospel choir with helping her develop spiritually while she was at the university. Her love for singing was one of the reasons she felt like she had found a place where she could be her authentic self and deepen her understanding and relationship with the Lord. Many of the choir members didn't know that she had not grown up in the church, so they made assumptions about her knowing all the old spirituals, which wasn't true in her case. She was developing her understanding of what it meant to have a personal relationship with the Lord. She

said this might have happened if she had not joined the choir, but she assured me that it happened sooner because of the gospel choir.

By the time Toot joined, the gospel chorale had been a registered student organization at the university for twenty years. The chorale had a twenty-year history of being a place where African American students found a community of people who were like-minded. It felt like family. The choir has an open-door policy; anyone who wants to sing is welcome to join as long as they meet the requirements of being a current student or alumnus.

Choir members do not have to audition to become a member. When Toot was a member, the choir rehearsed on Mondays and Thursdays from 6-8 p.m. The choir voted on which engagements they would participate in on campus and around the state. There were many engagements that took place on weekends. The choir traveled to members' home churches to perform concerts. The choir had a faculty/staff advisor who supported them by helping them understand what was required of them as a student organization at the university. The advisor would check in with the choir as needed. The advisor would also make recommendations to the choir about changes in university policies and how those changes impacted the organization. The advisor helped choir members problem solve when there were concerns that were brought forth by the university regarding the choir's activities. Choir members in good standing usually spent four to fourteen hours per week engaged in choir activities depending on the engagements the choir scheduled on weekends. Additionally, members spent time in section rehearsals. The Altos, Tenors, and Sopranos would rehearse their parts at different times during the week, especially in preparation for major concerts.

Students like Toot, who were part of the of choir, made commitments to be there for each other to sing and minister the good news to concertgoers. Toot found a community, family, and a

place where she belonged that not only supported her academic success but also her spiritual growth. She talked about the lifelong friends she met, and how some of the choir members inspired her in the way they sang songs that would make people so happy "they'd be up under the pews" from sheer joy. Choir members became her family away from home and helped her become more connected to the university and the surrounding community. When she first joined the choir, her plan was just to sing. Once she committed to the choir and felt that the members were like family, things changed. Toot had not planned on leading any songs. "But then one of the directors asked me to do a solo and that really helped me build my confidence." Her confidence grew a little more each year as she participated in the choir. Toot became a member of the choir's executive board when she ran for the treasurer position that she held for two years. Toot shared that she grew and became stronger as a person because of the relationships she built in the choir. The choir members encouraged her and lifted her up when she sang solos, which also really helped build her confidence.

Even in the most difficult times, Toot never believed that she would not graduate from the university. A combination of her faith, finding the gospel choir and never giving up, led to her successfully graduating. Toot had a plan and she followed it. The skills she learned in college have made her very successful in her life and a contributing member of her community.

Exodus

Toot successfully graduated in 1993 but continued to participate with the gospel choir until 1995 while she worked in the microbiology lab, where she still works today. She met and married her husband of twenty-five years and raised a son and is the proud grandmother of four. Toot said her husband played a big part in keeping her together and that she loves him. She, on the other hand wasn't so sure about it being love at first sight and shared that he had to ask her

father for her hand in marriage. That process took five years, and it is a story that he tells people about, that "she made me wait for five years to marry her". Toot continues to have relationships today with the men and women she sang with in the gospel choir.

After completing her undergraduate degree, she continued her education and took classes. I took a few classes but during that time my mom passed. I wasn't sure if I would be able to concentrate on my class, so I dropped it. I was doing very well in it and I didn't want to end up failing. My plan was to start taking classes again later but as of today I still haven't

Toot also said that "she found the Lord" participating in the campus gospel choir. Her relationship with God was also significant in her perseverance throughout her academic career. Having not been raised in the church as a child, Toot credits members of the choir with helping her find a church home, one that she still attends today.

I only attended a handful of churches, most of them were during choir engagements. One choir member invited me to the church I call home. I didn't meet my husband at church; someone my friend met at Sensations (club) introduced me to him. We have been together for about thirty years

She misses the choir although at times it was hectic getting ready for major performances such as College Night and the Spring Concert, that involved staying up late rehearsing and sometimes fasting, which made choir members irritable. Today she still enjoys friendships with choir members that have lasted for over three decades and looks forward to catching up with folks at concerts and reunions. She committed her life to the Lord and found a church home which also gave her a sense of belonging. Furthermore, she believed that the Lord directed her steps even when she did not know that he was

directing them. She believes that the Lord has kept her from some dangerous things that she didn't know about.

Jasper's Story

Jasper is forty years old, stands 5 feet 8 inches tall and has a medium build. He has brown skin with red undertones, brown eyes, and he wears his dark brown hair very short. Jasper is single without children. Jasper was raised by his mother, and he has an older brother that he is very close to. Jasper said that the relationship with his brother is very important to him and that his brother is his "ride or die" friend. He and his brother shared everything and often they shared the same room because his mother could not afford a place where Jasper and his brother could have their own rooms. Jasper said he knows people who don't have good relationships with their siblings. They like them because they are family, but they do not consider their siblings to be their friends. Because of his special relationship with his brother, he found it very difficult to understand how siblings could be so distant from one another.

Jasper said that he was "brought up in the church and loves the Lord with all his heart and soul." He reminds me of some of the deacons in my church at home when I was growing up in Flint who wore perfectly tailored three-piece suits and shoes as a statement piece, not an accessory. Every Sunday morning at a Black church reminds me of New York Fashion Week. It is something to behold. I think on Easter Sunday New York Fashion Week would be put to shame. Men, women, and children sport their Sunday best. Jasper reminds me of the time when families gathered in churches that fed their spirits and souls and nourished the surrounding communities. He is passionate, caring, trustworthy, and giving of his time. I would be remiss if I did not say that interviewing him was pure joy, even when we discussed the difficult things that happened to him. He has a laugh that is so authentically him that I would know who he was in a crowd of hundreds of people. Over the years that we have known each other, I always enjoy our times catching up. Jasper is without a doubt one of the brightest lights in the lives of people he

has touched. To this day, he continues to keep up with friends from his high school and college years.

It is my pleasure to retell his story so that others might come to understand what a blessing he has been and the trials that he has overcome. Jasper has always understood that God was there for him and would grant him the desires of his heart. Jasper is a larger-than-life individual who has been called into service. He answered the call by advocating for social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in all the spaces he occupies. His goal is to create environments that treat all people with dignity and respect, to illuminate where this is not occurring and then take corrective action.

Genesis

Jasper was born in Detroit, Michigan into a family that was steeped in religious faith. He was raised by a single mother with the help of his grandmother, aunt, and uncle. He never mentioned his father but did say that his uncle was the father figure in his life. On occasion, when Jasper was younger, as his mother was pursuing her social work degree, she was able to lean on her family members to watch Jasper and his older brother. Jasper shared that he spent time living with his grandmother because his mother was working and taking classes. Jasper also spent time staying with his favorite aunt and uncle who also took care of him.

Well, I grew up in a religious home. My grandmother was a pastor. I have lots of family members and friends that are like family. Like a lot of my family were either deeply religious or in ministry in some capacity. As a child I was always getting taken to a church service and those types of things

Jasper told me that he was a "city boy" who grew up in Detroit. Some of his family members were well off and many were not. He said that he was sheltered by his family from how

dangerous it was where they lived. He said that he didn't understand how dangerous it was living where he was living until he got older.

Jasper shared that his aunt lived in a less dangerous area, but his grandmother lived in an area that was more dangerous because of the location of her church. His mom wanted to live closer to the church so that's where they lived.

Jasper said that the rules for going outside to play were dependent on where they lived. Where his aunt lived, he was able to hang out with his older cousins and friends and they could go up and down the block. But when he was at his grandmother's house, who lived in the rougher part of town, there were times when they were told not to leave the grassy area in the front yard. The rules for being safe and being outside were very complicated but they were put in place to keep Jasper, his brother, and their cousins safe. Sometimes the rules would be more relaxed even at his grandmother's house. If they were together, they could go and see their friends on the block and even ride their bikes. But the rules were very clear, they needed to stay together. Jasper would ask "what is the big deal?" still not truly understanding how dangerous it was.

Jasper became more aware of the dangers when he went on a shopping trip to pick up some supplies that he needed for a class project around Christmas. As fate would have it, his aunt needed to stop by a drive-up ATM machine to get some money. Jasper was in the car with his brother, his sister (cousin), and his two aunts, in the aunt's part of town. They believed the drive-up ATM was safer, but someone tried to rob them at gunpoint when his aunt was about to put her debit card in the ATM machine. The card wasn't accepted so the robber got upset. The robber asked for the purse he saw in the back seat. A car pulled in with the lights on and he ran off. When the family went to the police station to file a report, they all gave a different

description of the robber. The police explained that it wasn't unusual for something like this to happen in this situation.

Jasper told me that years later he and his brother were reminiscing about their childhood and all the things that had happened. They realized how sheltered they were and believed it was a miracle that they managed so well during those times. Jasper shared that there were many different directions his life could have gone in, but he believed that he had a really good life. Life was difficult at times for Jasper, but he had his faith and his family. As a child he never had a bad Christmas or birthday. He and his brother would get the things they wanted. Jasper said he wasn't teased in school because he always had the right clothes and the right shoes, whether they were real or knockoff brands.

Jasper said that his mother was able to move the family into a different neighborhood that would allow Jasper and his brother to attend school in the Southfield School District, in a suburb outside of Detroit.

Jasper and his brother arrived at the new grade school and his mother was informed that they could be moved up two grades, if she wanted them to, because of their test scores.

His mother asked Jasper and his brother if they wanted to be moved ahead of their peer group in school and both Jasper and his brother told their mother no

Jasper shared that he had known students who were moved up grades but didn't fit in with the other students. So that was the determining factor in choosing to stay with their peer group. While talking, Jasper reflected that maybe he should have told his mother yes. Jasper told me that he was a good student academically from kindergarten through 12th grade. We continued to talk about his family and what being in a family that really works together means to him.

I felt like there was something more Jasper wanted to tell me about his life growing up in Detroit. I asked him if there was anything he wanted to share that would allow me to retell his story in a way that would people would understand who he is. Jasper thought about it for a while and then remembered there was something that happened when he was about 11 years old that was a defining moment for who he would become.

Jasper told me about the death of his uncle, who was more of a father to him than his biological father. His uncle took Jasper and his brother camping and fishing when they were younger. Jasper's uncle was a police officer. He was off duty when he and his partner responded to a jewelry store robbery. His uncle was killed.

Jasper remembered the funeral in great detail, to this day. He spoke about the music that was playing as the officers from other units paid their condolences. Jasper also remembered the varying styles of uniforms that the officers wore. As each officer walked by the coffin, they left a different color rose. Jasper remembers the mayor being at the service.

I just remember it was like a big deal, it was all over the news for a couple of weeks. But yeah, I do remember that I felt like that was a change in just how things were because it was one of those great losses. And I think that was one of the things that kind of changed the course of it because I started staying with my aunt a lot. At first, more family were just there all the time. Yeah, but then as family started to leave, me and my brother and my mother at first stayed and then my brother and I still kind of regularly checked in on her. Yeah, went over there. I was around 11

Jasper had many stories about challenging times he experienced as he was growing up. At one point someone attempted to abduct him. At another point his stepsister had her brothers beat him up to get back at his mother for putting her out of the house, which eventually ended his

mother's marriage to his stepfather. At one point during all of this he decided that he had lost his faith because he couldn't understand why these things had happened and then one night, he was watching a television ministry that ministered to his heart and answered his question about why me?

But then who else would it happen to, and it happens to everybody that way, but you know I, just went through this whole thing, which then kind of broke something inside of me and I was able to regain my faith. Yeah, I mean, I don't think it had fully left

Jasper shared that he was committed to his faith, and it was at this point he started to see things fall into place. His faith was at a new level, and this was another pivotal moment in his life. All of this was happening a short time before Jasper was going to college. He was finishing high school and had started his college search. Jasper had applied to several universities including Prairie View, University of Michigan, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, and Michigan State University which he finally chose to attend. He shared that the other universities did not get back to him in a timely fashion with their financial aid packages. Jasper also told me that he had a campus visit to the university he finally selected and that they had a nice campus. He really enjoyed the student panel that he got to speak with while on the visit and the visit left him with the impression that university felt "homey". The student panel was made up of students who had graduated from his high school. Jasper received an acceptance letter and made a commitment to attend during his senior year of high school.

In high school, Jasper was a good student who was able to maneuver between the smart and the popular people in his school.

I was smart enough to kind of be in with the smart crowd, but I was you know connected enough to be in with some of the more popular people because even if I wasn't friends with them

directly, I was friends with a lot of the people that they were friends with. And then I was involved so I was on. There was like a religious group in high school like a group like I didn't even know what it was. We didn't really do religious, but I mean, it had a religious title to the group. It feels like a Bio-Christian group. I don't know. But I knew them and there were quite a few folks from different paths. And then we had this band director who was like from down South. So, he would have the band do those moves that you would see at the HBCU schools. Like we would do those crazy marching in 90-degree angles and do dance routines. So, I did the band for a year my last year, but the band was more popular than the football team was because they were not that good so people would go there to see the band

Jasper enjoyed high school and was someone other students could come to for support. I asked Jasper what instrument he had played in the marching band in high school, and he shared he had played the drums. He grew up playing piano by ear as a member of his church and he learned to play drums the same way.

When Jasper returned to his high school on a recruiting trip from the university that he graduated from, things had changed drastically at his high school. He said it was like day and night. When he attended the school, it was very open and light. The school and grounds were well maintained. When he visited, he had to go through a guarded gate to enter his high school property. He said it felt like a prison and that people were locked in. The walls had been painted in dark colors which made it even more prison like. Jasper felt like the changes that were made were intentional because the demographics of the high school had changed from majority White, when he was a student, to majority African American, and the school was not receiving the same level of funding now. Jasper was saddened by the condition of the high school.

Psalms

Jasper moved into his residence hall at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest in the fall of 1997. He moved in without an assigned roommate. Jasper met another African American student who lived next door to him, because they liked each other's gospel music. Jasper's wall mate was a junior and had a single room. At some point Jasper found out that his roommate wasn't showing up, so he was living in a single room as well. He and his wall mate decided that they would be each other's roommates. The two of them seemed to hit it off and even went to church together from time to time.

They both liked gospel music and wanted to find a place to go to church while they were attending the university. His roommate said that there was a church that met across the street from their building called Change of Life and the two of them went to check it out. According to Jasper this was his second weekend at the university. He and his roommate ran into some of Jasper's friends from high school that he had not connected with since he arrived at the university. They happened to have gone to the earlier church service that Jasper and his roommate were going to. Connecting with his friends from high school was very important for Jasper; it helped him to cope in the university environment. Jasper said that a lot of people from his high school had come to the university and lived in the same residence hall he did. Others lived in residence halls across campus. Jasper said he connected with students from his high school for support. He shared that a lot of people looked to him for support during high school.

Jasper was a psychology major and was interested in pursuing a law track during his first year at the university. Jasper decided after he had investigated the law track more that he was no longer interested because that wasn't exactly what he wanted to do. He spent time trying to get his bearings. He also tried to make sure that he could still spend time on his hobbies and the

things he used to do. So, he would go to the music practice building at the university and play the piano. He also took a piano class as an elective.

I play by ear, but the class was like teaching how to play more of the formal thing. And even though I knew about how to generally do it, I was working on practicing more stuff. So, I took the opportunity to try to practice a little music reading

Jasper used music as a way of connecting with people he knew. He was part of a small singing group that would get together and hold jam sessions. Jasper ended up in another singing group on campus. He also connected with the Psychology Scholars' Association, and he was for a time involved with the Connection Program. The Connection Program connected first year students with a faculty member. The faculty member would share resources with the student, and they would get to know the student and the student would get to know them. The program allowed students to socialize with faculty at the university as well. Jasper remembered fondly that he and his faculty member were both into jazz. So, she got tickets to a concert and invited Jasper to go. Jasper was excited and wanted to go. He remembered something happening to her and she was not able to attend. The faculty member told Jasper to go to the concert without her because she had heard about this artist, and he was supposed to be good. Jasper invited a friend to attend with him. He was amazed at how good the artist was. Jasper thoroughly enjoyed the performance and found himself being very moved by the guitar playing.

Jasper looked for ways to get connected to other students at the university and find support. He would talk to students living in his residence hall about the different activities that they were participating in and on occasion he would go out and visit these groups to see if they could meet his needs.

Jasper connected with a Bible study group that was being held in his residence hall. It wasn't the best fit for him. He felt the message was watered down and most of the students who attended were White. Jasper was brought up in the Apostolic Full Gospel Church. He was looking for that feeling that he had gotten from his church at home. Jasper attended a few times and then decided that he would not be joining the Bible study group but would check out different events that the group held.

After meeting up with his African American friends Jasper commented that it was good to see everyone because you can see the network and there were a lot of Black people. Jasper made this comment a few times during the interview. It was his way of acknowledging that there were other Black people at the university. Even though Jasper went to a predominantly White high school he had a group of people that supported him that included his family of origin, his church family, and the people he connected with in high school, who were mostly African American. When he arrived at the predominantly white university it was a culture shock. So, he had to find ways to navigate the new environment with less support than he had in the past.

Jasper and his roommate went to a church service and decided it was okay but still not the right fit. He said that the pastor of the church said at one point I know some of you are here thinking that this may be the right place for you and some of you are thinking this is not quite you and that's fine. I encourage you to find what works for you.

Jasper and his roommate compared notes about the service, and it was not quite right for them. So, his roommate mentioned that he had gone to a church in a town 30 minutes away. Jasper had heard of that town and was willing to go. Jasper really enjoyed the church service, because it was like being back home at his church in Detroit. The music was wonderful and played a major role in that it helped him let go and let God's good news fill him up. The service

was so good that Jasper started attending the church regularly for about half the semester before he decided to check out the campus Bible study.

Jasper said that he also dramatically decreased the amount of time he spent watching television. He only watched a couple of shows and listened to BET.

And that was mainly because I was trying to make sure I had like a handle on my classes.

I was really nervous when I came up here. I used to play video games with my brother and stuff back when he was in high school with me, then he left. I didn't play them as much, but I still played them like pretty heavily. Once I got up here, I stopped cold. I didn't even pack the system. I was like, I cannot afford to get in the habit of video games. Going into that for hours and hours and then fail out here. It cost too much to come here. So, I cut out video games completely

He continued his workout program in his room. Then his roommate introduced Jasper to another Bible study, the Young Apostolic Students for Christ. He made a lot of friends, that he still has contact with today. Jasper shared that his roommate invited him to go to a gospel choir concert during his first year at the university and he was excited for two reasons. One, he loved gospel music and two, he knew there would be "a whole lot of Black people there". Jasper told his roommate that he was surprised that the university had a gospel choir. Jasper said that going to the concert that night was a life changing experience for him. So, whenever the choir was singing Jasper made a point of going in listening to them this first year. Jasper was very excited about the sheer numbers of African Americans that came to the concert that night. Jasper said:

It was just cool to connect with, like, just see other Black faces and just people in those numbers. Yeah, but then to see them from other colleges too and people who still have

the same kinds of religious systems, and values systems as mine was really okay. I felt more connection

During his second year at the university one of his friends in his Bible study group decided to become a member of the gospel choir. Jasper decided to join the gospel choir in his second year at the university as well. He said that he knew that being a part of the choir is what he needed to do. When he first joined the choir, he felt a spiritual calling and that he needed to be a part of it because it put him in touch with what it was like at his home church in Detroit. Jasper said that being a part of the gospel choir helped him to minister to people and also be ministered to as well. He shared that he had witnessed at concerts how many people had turned their lives over to Christ when the altar call was given. According to Jasper, choir rehearsals were more like actual praise and worship services, and they could give off enriching energy and that's what he shared with me. Jasper really enjoyed his first year in the choir and he enjoyed choir members that he knew and he said that it always made him feel happy, because it would bring back a great experience in rehearsal or something that happened when they had gone out and done a concert. When he was in the choir there were at least 150 choir members and when they would go on engagements about 120 would participate. He felt that he had had an overall good experience as a choir member. He shared that the choir provided him with a good network and that it was motivating and that being around choir members put him in a good mood. Jasper was a member of the choir until 2002 but just before he graduated, he was not participating as much as he had the year before. Some of that had to do with his impending graduation. The other part had to do with some of the leadership changes that had happened in the choir that made rehearsals different for him than when he had first started.

In his first year at the university Jasper did a lot of things to help himself maneuver in this new environment. He sought support from his friends from high school. He joined extracurricular activities like the Bible study and found a church home. Jasper also joined the Connection Program which gave him an opportunity to get to know a faculty member who could provide him with resources and be a mentor to him. He gave up video games altogether and curtailed the amount of television he watched.

Jasper faced some challenges that he didn't expect. One of those challenges was not having enough money to pay for all his college expenses his first semester. Jasper was concerned about having enough money to pay for college for much of his undergraduate work. Jasper usually held two to three jobs during college to help pay for his education. He really did not understand the financial aid system even though his mother and brother had both attended college. He shared that he had never sat down with his mother and talked about how the system worked.

After my first semester I got a bill, and I didn't know how I was going to pay it because I had already maxed out my financial aid package and everything. I had been working so I could earn money to put towards it too. And I was still like, short, you know, a few hundred. Like they don't say \$300 or something. Wasn't a lot. But it was enough because they were sending me messages about you know, you know, this isn't gonna happen. I didn't know if I was gonna be able to make it back up, you know, but I was praying that something would happen. My grandmother overheard me on the phone talking to someone in the financial aid office. I don't know. I was talking to somebody. But she overheard me because I guess she had picked the phone up, but I picked it up first. Yeah, and it was for me anyway, but after she overheard, like I hung up at that point. She was

like, hey, how much do you need? I was like, well, I need about 300 dollars. And so, one of my uncles ended up giving me the money for it. But I don't know what would have happened had she not overheard the call. And maybe I wouldn't have been there because I didn't understand the system

Jasper remembered that somebody in one of his many informational meetings at the university told him that students that worked tend to manage their time better and graduate, so he worked. Most of the time he worked at least two jobs and sometimes three. He had a lot of jobs on campus within culinary doing general kitchen work. Jasper worked in the cafeteria in his hall, the conference center on campus, and the campus bakery. One of Jasper's friends sent him some information about working at Student Athlete Support Services, so he ended up becoming a Student Athlete Support Services tutor. During the summer of his third year, Jasper was a Summer Resident Assistant for summer school. Jasper also worked as a Multicultural Aide during his fourth year at the university and he worked for facilities in the residence halls. Jasper was also able to do a summer internship at Six Flags in Illinois.

Jasper did receive financial aid but it did not always cover all his financial needs while he was at the university and so he worked. He did not come from a family that had a lot of resources although some family members had more than others and shared what they had at times.

Jasper was a talented student who did well academically. Because of his ACT/SAT scores he was able to opt out of some of his math courses. He was also a gifted writer which served him well in college. Jasper was a solid student while attending the university. One thing he learned was that the professor can make a huge difference in what and how you learn. He did not realize that until he experienced the difference between a great teacher and a poor teacher. Jasper had a very positive experience with his biology professor. Jasper said that she really

helped him understand biology, so he did very well in the class. He did so well that he ended up tutoring some of the student athletes. Jasper took a second biology class and this time the professor was not as good as his previous professor. The professor was not helpful even when Jasper went to his office hours for help. He basically told Jasper to read the assignment. Jasper asked him questions and he kept saying "read the book". This was one of the times Jasper struggled to understand how different professors could be in helping students to be successful at the university.

There were some things that Jasper had not been exposed to at home because it was not part of his culture, like tailgates. During his time at the university there was student unrest about where people were allowed to tailgate on campus. Students wanted to tailgate on restricted areas that the university had said no to. The only thing Jasper understood about tailgating was that his White counterparts went there and celebrated prior to the football game starting. He did tell me that he was curious about what the big deal was about tailgating and if he had some Black friends who wanted to go, he might go and check one out.

I know that like there was when I first came in 97 there was a lot of issues about people using Johnson field and all that. And I remember when I was an RA that summer, we kept having to make statements about Johnson field and not going there and stuff about the riots or whatever is happening with the tailgates. So that stuff was like kind of going around and they were like saying people couldn't tailgate in certain areas. When I came to the university, I didn't know anything about the whole tailgate culture

The campus environment was challenging because of the limited number of African American students who were attending the university. In many cases, Jasper was the only African American student in his class. Students in his classes would look at him for the answers

when topics dealing with the African American experience were discussed. Jasper said those times were very awkward. He said that in some of his classes the professors would ask that African American students not sit together which made him feel singled out. Jasper said that the professors in his classes never asked the White students not to sit together.

If it was a small class I was pretty much going to be the only one maybe one other person but with a large lecture there might be five or seven of us in the class, but you still felt like you can only look at everybody because we were so spread out and sometimes when we would sit near each other to connect with each other the professor would intentionally split us up. But we would get together after class and talk about our experiences in our classes. Classes would be awkward for me and my African American friends when Black subject matters would come up and all eyes turned to the African American students in the room. The White professors and students would look to the African American students to answer for all African American people This happened to me and my friends in classrooms. We were being asked to give some commentary on behalf of all Black people

I asked Jasper if that was consistent with his experience at the university during the time that he was here, and he said "yes". It was even more disheartening when he explained to me that in the department where he currently works, eighty-five percent of the professors continue to split up ethnic minority groups in their classes.

Jasper described an incident that happened his second year. He was off campus on a Sunday morning going to the bank to withdraw money to pay his tithe to the church and he was stopped by a police officer. Jasper said it was one thing to have people think that you speak for all African Americans but being stopped by the police because you are wearing a black jacket

and jeans, that is a whole different dynamic. Jasper shared that he felt "not only is your mental health threatened but your physical safety is hanging in the balance of a conversation with someone who believes that you have committed a crime and already has their hand on their gun."

During my second year at the university one Sunday morning, I got pulled over while walking to the ATM to get money to pay my tithe for church by a police officer. They pulled me over and the officer called me back and put his hands on his gun. He called me over and he told me to put my hands out slowly and then patted me down. The officer grabbed my wallet out of my pocket. I tried to let him know that he had the wrong person, but he told me not to speak and that I was being difficult. Then he ran my information, and I came back hundred percent clear that's what the voice over the radio said and he told me there had been a robbery and the suspect was wearing a black jacket and blue jeans and that's why he stopped me

As Jasper and I discussed each of the situations that happened to him while he was an undergrad, our stories seemed very similar. At this point in the interview, I felt anger and sadness rising in my body for what happened to Jasper. As the interviewer, I could not say a word out loud but felt his pain in my heart and to the very core of me. I have been told this story by countless African American men who have come to this university and all I can do when they share their story is to sit there with them offering as much support as I can.

I had culture shock when I got to the university and looked for support and comfort from people who looked like me. I had no idea what a tailgate was either and to this day I have not gone to one. I remember being the only Black person in many of my undergrad classes as well and how isolating it was and just hoping that someone else Black would show up in class, so I would not feel so alone in a room of fifty White people.

Exodus

After completing his undergraduate degree in Psychology in 2002 Jasper continued his education and completed a master's from the same institution in 2005 in Human Resources and Labor Relations. Once he completed his master's degree, Jasper held several positions at the institution he graduated from. Upon leaving his alma mater, Jasper worked at other institutions including one Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and a few other Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Jasper returned to his alma mater and currently he works as an assistant director for one of the living learning programs on campus that helps students prepare to be leaders. Jasper encourages students to develop professionally throughout their college experience. In this community living experience students acquire the skills necessary to succeed and lead in today's global society. Jasper continues to provide safe spaces so students can bring their whole authentic selves to the living learning program.

Jasper is still sustained by his faith in the God that he serves, and he continues to enjoy the music that allows him to express how God has blessed him over the years. He has had challenges in his life and in his career, but he's been able to overcome all of them. Jasper was raised in the church and continues to thank God for how far He has brought him. He has been able to utilize his experiences to help other students, friends and family understand the importance of not giving up because you're challenged but to seek help to go through them. Jasper has been an inspiration in his community by supporting students' success, particularly helping African American students find spaces that support their academic endeavors as well as finding out where they fit and feel that they belong at the institution.

Jasper said that the gospel choir played a major role in his staying at the university, because it provided him with a community of like-minded God-fearing people that helped him

navigate through the institution physically, mentally and emotionally. He shared that there were stressful times at the university and that being a member of the gospel choir helped him through those times because it inspired and motivated him. Jasper shared throughout the interview how important connecting with other African American students was to him along with how important finding a place where he could be fully himself spiritually.

APPENDIX C: FIRST SET OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did you choose to attend MSU?
2. Why did you join the MSUGC?
3. What did/does it mean being a member of MSUGC?
4. Tell me about rehearsals and engagements for MSUGC.
5. Tell me about your experiences with other choir members.
6. What types of gospel songs did you like to sing in the choir and why?
7. Do you see MSUGC did/do you see choir members outside of rehearsals and events?
8. What would your college experience have been like if you were not involved in the MSUGC?

APPENDIX D: SECOND SET OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your life story.
2. What mechanisms did you use to help yourself persist to graduation from MSU?
3. Was there ever a time that you felt like you would not graduate from MSU?
4. What was the environment like when you attended MSU in terms of finding a place where you felt like you fit on campus?
5. Did you have any academic struggles when you've attended MSU?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

(Briefly describe the project)

1. Opening Questions:

- I started with general and easy-to-answer questions to ease the participant into the conversation. The questions were more nuanced than I asked them. In the first interview there was a total of eight questions and in the second interview there were five questions.
- First interview question number 1: Why did you choose to attend Michigan State University?

2. Grand Tour Question:

- I posed a broad, open-ended question to encourage a narrative response.
- Second interview question number 1: Tell me about your life story.

3. Probing and Follow-Up Questions:

- I used follow-up questions to explore details, emotions, and perspectives within the participant's narrative.
- Examples:
 - Can you describe the setting and context of that particular moment?
 - How did you feel during that experience?
 - What were some of the key challenges or highlights for you?

4. Eliciting Descriptive Elements:

- I encouraged participants to provide vivid details and sensory elements to enrich their narratives.
- Examples:
 - What did you see, hear, or feel during that time?
 - Can you describe any specific conversations or interactions that were memorable?

5. Reflection and Meaning-Making:

- I asked participants to reflect on the meanings they attributed to their experiences.
- Examples:
 - How do you make sense of that experience now?
 - What did you learn from that situation, and how has it influenced you?

6. Inviting Multiple Perspectives:

- I encourage participants to consider different viewpoints or perspectives within their narrative.

- Example: Were there other choir members involved in this experience, and how do you think they perceived it?

7. Closing Questions:

- I summarized key points discussed.
- I provided an opportunity for participants to add anything they felt was important just in case the questions they were answering did not give them an opportunity to express other feeling, experience emotion that the question did not elicit.
- Example: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences related to the meaning of family?

8. Debriefing:

- I thanked each participant for their time and contribution after each interview, and every encounter we shared.
- During each interview I reiterated the importance of confidentiality.
- I provided information on the next steps if applicable.

I used this protocol outline to help me during the interviews to keep track of my role as researcher during this process. It also served as a checklist and a way to nudge them if their conversation lagged in storytelling.

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT DATA CODING

Table 4

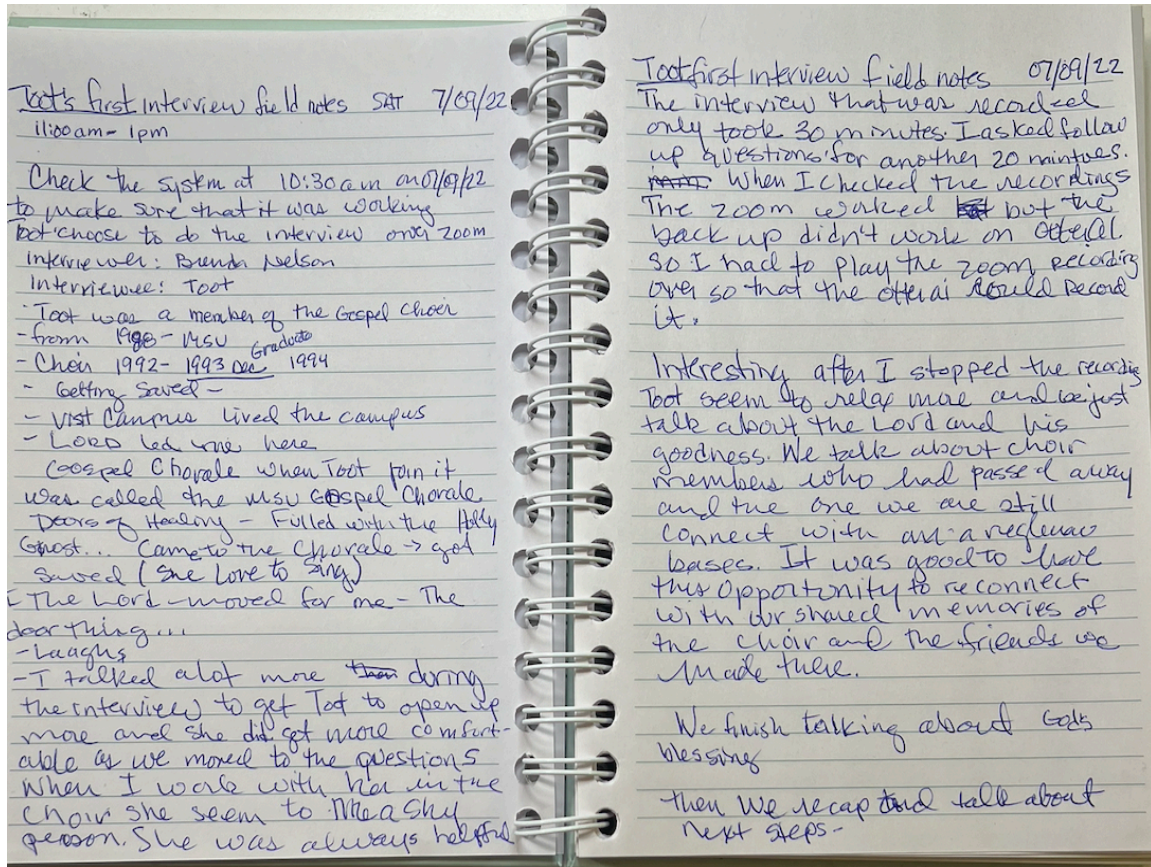
Participant data coding

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Tank's 1 st interview 1. to 3 and 2 nd Interview My office 12:30 pm	CODES	Family	Faith	Friends	Fit	University
wed, june 29 10:38 41:08 minutes Brenda's office in Akers	COLORS					
First Interview 1 of 3	COUNTS	1	5	6	1	3
Part 1 Nelson, Brenda 00:03 Testing 123 testing 123 Testing 123 testing 123. All right, so we're going to do Otterbox two. Now what I like about Otterbox This is great. It actually at the end of every conversation, you can put in the name of the person. And it will actually say the words that you said most frequently, which for me, I'm going to have to do that anyway. Because I'll come up with themes and then that'll be the data. So literally conversation is the data when you do this kind of narrative research. And the reason I want to do it is because we as black people, we have a history of, of coming here slaves and then coming here having church and so when you think about gospel choirs, you can't really think about not thinking about church. You really can think about the black church and then if you talk about the black church, you get into the whole history of how the black church came about and how and all the schisms that there are in the black church too. But one of the things that I have enjoyed about it, and I'm not going to show me so let me let me we're going to share that. So I'm gonna have you go to that side. Yeah, if you can move over that way so I can get						
Tank 01:23 Do you want me to? you to be in this chair because Oh, me I start rocking.						
Nelson, Brenda 01:30 Yeah, you know, you know, that chair is a friend of mine. And when she leaves, she's going to take her chair whether it's like an NPR interview and I want to see more you than me. So let me see I do that. Yeah. I don't need to really be on camera. So I'll be taking notes. We'll be recording and I'll be on occasions when we need to stop. You can see how it's going. Yeah, and so when it it'll take a pause and then we'll take a pause but at anytime to write anything you don't want and this whole process will be taken out. You'll get a copy of the transcript. After it's finished. It'll come to you you tell me that go does that sound right? Does that not work? Because sometimes these technology will not						
Tank 02:17 pick up your words,						
Nelson, Brenda 02:18	14:22:47					
this is to test the system for live transcription during the interview with Nicki Basal.	14:22:55					
Do not you? one by those fields. Nobody wants you.	14:27:26					
Light, be saying, don't know. Come on wow one my your and now, digit nobody. don't you?	14:29:00					

APPENDIX H: FIELD NOTES

Figure 4

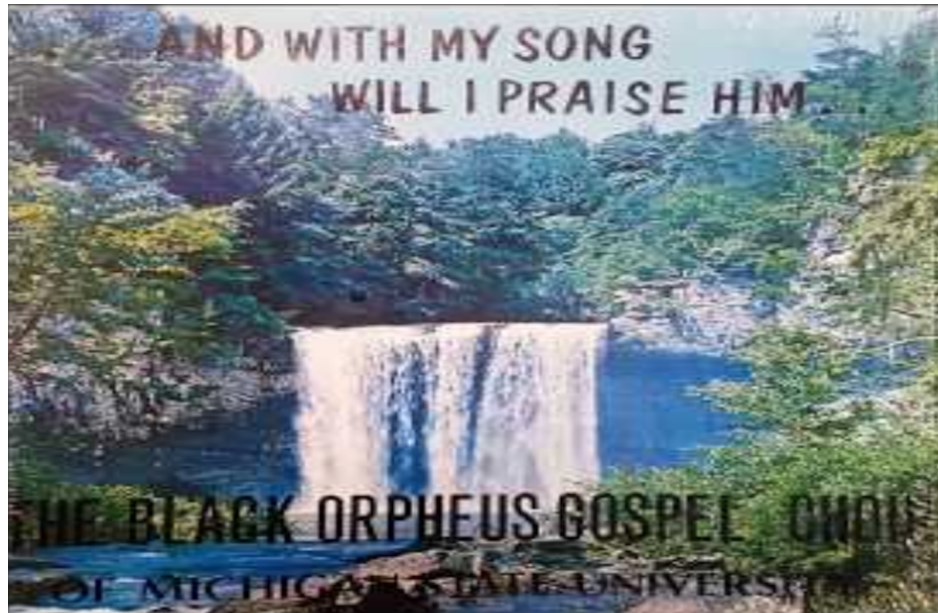
Field notes



APPENDIX I: MSU BOGC FRONT OF 1978 ALBUM COVER

Figure 5

MSU BOGC front of 1978 album cover



APPENDIX K: FIRST BOGC CONCERT 1972 ERICKSON KIVA

Figure 7

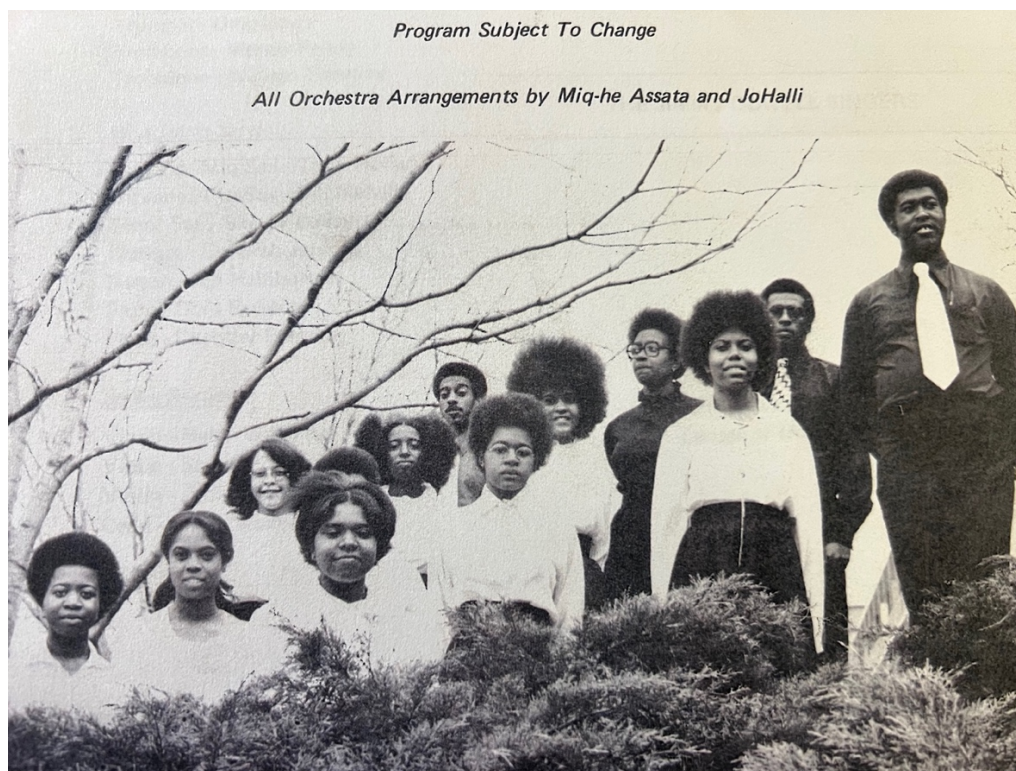
First BOGC Concert 1972 Erickson Kiva



APPENDIX L: BOGC MEMBERS 1972

Figure 8

BOGC members 1972



APPENDIX M: BOGC MEMBERS 1977

Figure 9

BOGC members 1977



APPENDIX N: BOGC REHEARSAL CASE HALL 1979

Figure 10

BOGC rehearsal Case Hall



APPENDIX O: BOGC SPRING CONCERT 1979 ERICKSON KIVA

Figure 11

BOGC Spring Concert 1979 Erickson Kiva

